

Parashat Behar 5784, 2024:

*The Path to Awe for Hashem*

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*Sefer Vayikra* is the sole book in Tanach wherein the phrase “*v’yarata m’elokecha*” (“and you shall demonstrate awe to your G-d”) is found. It appears three times in Parashat Behar and twice in Parashat Kedoshim:

- 1) You shall not curse a deaf person. You shall not place a stumbling block before a blind person, and you shall demonstrate awe to your G-d. I am Hashem. (19:14)
- 2) You shall rise before a venerable person and you shall respect the elderly, and you shall demonstrate awe to your G-d. I am Hashem. (19:32)
- 3) And you shall not wrong, one man his fellow Jew, and you shall demonstrate awe to your G-d, for Hashem, your G-d. (25:17)
- 4) You shall not take from him interest or increase, and you shall demonstrate awe to your G-d, and let your brother live with you. (25:36)
- 5) You shall not work him with rigor, and you shall demonstrate awe to your G-d. (25:33, these and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, with my emendations)

Our five verses refer to: the prohibition of purposely misleading someone to your own financial advantage (*lifnei ivare*), the obligation to rise before and treat the elderly with respect (*mipnei saivah takum*), the injunction against vexing your fellow Jew through painful words (*ona’at devarim*), the ban against charging interest to a fellow Jew (*rivet*) and the sanction against mistreating Jewish slaves by forcing them to perform worthless and unpleasant work (*avodah b’farech*). At first glance, these *mitzvot* appear unrelated to each other. Rashi (1040-1105), however, basing himself upon the *Sifra*, teaches that the phrase, “*v’yarata m’elokecha*,” links these *pasukim* together:

**and you shall demonstrate awe to your G-d:** [Why is this mentioned here?] Because this matter [of misadvising someone] is not discernible by people, whether this person had good or evil intentions, and he can avoid [being recriminated by his victim afterwards] by saying, “I meant well!” Therefore, concerning this, it says, “and you shall demonstrate awe to your

G-d,” Who knows your thoughts! Likewise, concerning anything known to the one who does it, but to which no one else is privy, the Torah says, “and you shall demonstrate awe to your G-d.” (Commentary to *Sefer Vayikra* 19:14, underlining my own)

In sum, Rashi notes that the underlying intentions inherent in these behaviors are hidden from all observers, and only the active party knows whether they are performed for the benefit of others or to their detriment. Moreover, since nothing is hidden from the Almighty, including our very thoughts, we must ever be in awe of the Master of the Universe and meticulous in our *mitzvot* observance.

Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter *zatzal* (“Sefat Emet,” 1847-1905) expands upon Rashi’s gloss in this manner:

It is obvious that through awe [of G-d] one is able to properly fulfill those matters that are not visible to others. [What is less evident,] however, is that these *mitzvot* that are solely contingent upon one’s private intentions, will, through their proper performance, enable one to acquire awe [of the Almighty]. This is the case, since when each *mitzvah* is fulfilled, it alters a person’s actions in a positive fashion. Therefore, these *mitzvot* that depend upon a person’s innermost thoughts, [when performed correctly,] will repair [any negativity that lurks] in the mind ... (Translation and brackets my own)

The Sefat Emet’s presentation parallels the words of the Rambam (1135-1204) in *The Guide for the Perplexed*:

This purpose to which I have drawn your attention is the purpose of all the actions prescribed by the Law... I refer to the awe of Him, may He be exalted, and the awe before His command... For it has already been made clear that this refers to actions prescribed by *commandments and prohibitions*... *awe* is achieved by means of all actions prescribed by the Law... (*The Guide for the Perplexed*, III:52, translation, with my emendations, Shlomo Pines, pages 629-630, brackets and underlining my own)

In sum, for both the Rambam and the Sefat Emet, *mitzvot* actions enable us to acquire the *middah* of *yirat Hashem*. May it be His will and our fervent desire that our heartfelt fulfillment of Hashem’s *mitzvot* will lead us to hold Him in awe and bring us ever closer to Him. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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\*\*\* I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav](#)