

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5780  
Fear and/or Awe

“Unetaneh Tokef, Kedushat HaYom. Ki hu **norah** v’ayom. Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day; it is *norah v’ayom*.<sup>1</sup> This word *norah*, in the opening lines of Unetaneh Tokef, has a wide range of meaning. Lev shalem says today is “profound and awe-inspiring”<sup>2</sup> while our New Machzor says it is a day “full of awe and trembling.”<sup>3</sup> It’s an adjective that comes from the word *Yir’ah*, which is what we’ll be talking about for the next several minutes. *Yir’ah* is so difficult to translate because even its English equivalent, awe, has so many meanings. When we stand in awe, are we overwhelmed with fear, or love, or something else? This is not just a question of semantics. It matters to us now, more than ever, because these are the Yamim Nora’im, the Days of Awe. These Yamim Nora’im are, in many ways, the pinnacle of the year, the time at which we are most closely connected with God. The way we relate to God in the next nine days sets the tone for our spiritual lives in the coming year. But that’s so difficult, given that we don’t fully understand what these days are actually supposed to be like. What does it mean to relate to God in awe at this holiest time - with fear that we will be judged harshly? With gratitude that God will forgive us for even our most despicable sins?

We might first turn to the texts of our tradition for guidance about how we ought to relate to the Divine. As Moses prepares to send the

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<sup>1</sup> Machzor Sha’arei teshuvah p. 107

<sup>2</sup> Machzor Lev Shalem p. 143

<sup>3</sup> The New Machzor p. 283

Children of Israel across the River and into the Promised Land, he tells us it is quite simple:

וַעֲתָהּ יִשְׂרָאֵל מֶה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ שְׂאֵל מֵעַמְּךָ כִּי אִם-לִירְאָה אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְלַכֵּת בְּכָל-דְּרָכָיו  
וּלְאַהֲבָה אֹתוֹ וְלַעֲבֹד אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ:

And now, O Israel, what does God demand of you? Only this: to fear God your God, to walk only in God's paths, to love God, and to serve God your God with all your heart and soul.<sup>4</sup>

Again, the feeling of awe seems to encompass many emotions which are inextricably linked. We fear, love, and serve God and we are meant to feel each of these distinct feelings with the entirety of our being. Even in this seemingly simple and straightforward sentence, fear and awe are intertwined. So which is it? Is one better than the others? Are they mutually exclusive?

To help us zero in on an answer, let us each take a moment to remember a time when we felt truly in awe. Perhaps you have been at the top of a mountain or deep in a forest and felt overwhelmed by the magnitude of God's creation. Maybe you have walked away from a dangerous situation and felt a rush of adrenaline during the escape and gratitude that you survived. Perhaps, holding a newborn child in your arms, you have been amazed by the miracle of new life. These are all experiences of *yir'ah*, awe at the mighty and miraculous forces of the Divine. In these moments, we experience so many emotions at once: wonder, fear, love. Rabbi Audrey Pollack explains that it is actually quite sensible for feelings of awe to contain so many varied emotions: "We are fearful of what we experience as wondrous, but cannot understand."<sup>5</sup> In other words, we are

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<sup>4</sup> Dvarim 10:12

<sup>5</sup> <https://reformjudaism.org/fear-and-awe>

so overwhelmed by these experiences that we grow afraid of what might lie behind them.

Is this fear good for us? Is it a healthy appreciation of God's power and an acknowledgement that we can never understand the powerful forces that drive our world? Or is fear getting in our way of deeper connection with God and the created world? Since the biblical texts were so unclear, the rabbis of the Talmud continued to struggle with this question. They ask,

What difference is there between one who performs mitzvot out of love and one who performs mitzvot out of fear? Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar says: Greater is the one who performs mitzvot out of love than the one who performs mitzvot out of fear.<sup>6</sup>

It seems that reverent love is better than fear. However, later in the same text they relate this story:

Rava was speaking with two of his students, who told them of opposite dreams, one who experienced God in love and one who experienced God in fear. Rava said to them, "You are both completely righteous Sages. One Sage, the second dreamer, serves God out of love, and one Sage, the first dreamer, serves God out of fear. Each Sage's dream corresponded to his manner of serving God."

They turn this into a question not of which is the right way, but which is your right way? Which force connects you to God and motivates you to be the best version of yourself?

This is really the crux of the issue. Experiences of the Divine are not clear cut, are not either/or situations. We are complicated beings. God is a complicated being. So our relationship will naturally involve many of our emotions. The trick is to sort out what those emotions are, so that we can

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<sup>6</sup> Sotah 31a

channel them into healthful and helpful behavior. In January I read a fascinating article about how important it is to name our emotions as specifically as possible.<sup>7</sup> The idea is that if we can be very precise in describing our emotions, we will increase our ability to understand and perhaps even control them rather than letting them control us. But the problem is that we oversimplify our emotional labels. We say “I’m sad” when we mean “I’m hurt or disappointed,” We say “I’m happy” when we mean “I’m proud or amused,” and our relationships suffer as a result of our vague communication.

In my experience this is also often true of my relationship with God. I try to capture this complex relationship in a few short words, and it just doesn’t work. This is why I find *yir’ah* such a fitting description, because it contains a lot within it and leaves room for ever shifting emotions of fear, wonder, love, and more. We can continue to use this word, *yir’ah*, knowing that it stands for multiple emotions and that all of those emotions are ways of relating to God. Knowing that will help us explore what these next ten days will mean to us. Do we need the fear of God to push us to finally change our ways? Do we need awe of God’s love and compassion to remind us we are capable of being better people? Which do you naturally feel, and what would it feel like to lean into the other one?

As you enter the Days of Awe, imagine them like the Mount Everest of the year. On Everest, everything would be different. You would breathe differently. You would walk differently. You would go to the bathroom differently. And how would you feel about all of that, as you were ascending the final steps of the world’s highest mountain? I think I would be frightened of falling or running out of air. I think I would also be amazed to

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2019/01/28/688180879/got-anger-try-naming-it-to-tame-it>

see the world from a new height. And how would the experience on Everest change my behavior when I returned to sea level, what would I approach or appreciate differently? These questions are not mere hypotheticals. We are on Everest for Ten Days now. So take time to seriously consider how you are relating to God in these days, and how that will set the tone for the rest of the year. I imagine the answers to these questions will be different for each one of us, so I invite you to enter the Yamim Nora'im with whichever combination of emotions holds the most meaning for you, and leads you toward inscription in the book of life. Shanah Tovah.