

A Hellfire Sermon – On the Fear of Sin

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The Me Too Movement against sexual harassment and assault is one of the most important and remarkable movements that spread virally last year. In a matter of days, that then expanded into months, we saw the downfall of one man after another.

During this period, we became aware, perhaps in ways some of us, especially men, could never imagine, of the prevalence of abuse and harassment women often endure in social settings and most specifically in the workplace. Men whose power and status remained unchecked for years, saw their tenure, as it were, end abruptly.

This watershed moment stirred different feelings and produced many responses.

On a personal level, I felt relieved to raise a daughter and sons in a society that now seemed to fear this grave sin.

In general, I was glad to see light being shed on these dark corners of society. I imagine that men guilty of abuse began living in fear. And that similarly, any people in positions of power were hopefully forced to rethink their actions and or check their privilege.

Intellectually, I understand that many of us would prefer that men, and for that matter women as well, would approach repentance, be it for sexual misconduct or any other civil crime, religious sin, or social offense, through a process of self-reflection, education, and enlightenment. And yet, I would argue that somewhere along the way, we've probably short changed the crucial role that fear plays in curtailing our misguided actions and setting us on the right path. It seems like in modern times we've developed a sort of fear of fear.

Two American social historians, Peter Stearns and Timothy Haggerty, offer the following insight in their analysis of social changes that were brought about by 19th to 20th century capitalism:

“A fearful individual was no longer appropriately pious but rather risked being incapable of taking the kinds of initiatives, of displaying the kinds of confidence, desirable in the new world shaped by republican optimism and business dynamism. Fear was dangerous, and the individual who deliberately sowed it was abusing authority.” (Peter Stearns and Timothy Haggerty, “The Role of Fear: Transitions in American Emotional Standards for Children, 1850-1950”, *American Historical Review* 96, 63-94, 67)

In a similar vein, the prominent German Orthodox rabbi, Rav Yaakov Ettlinger counselled against hellfire sermons in the 19th century. Already then, R. Ettlinger warned that “Mentioning the punishment of hell and other... (rebukes...offends the audience)” and that “these things provoke hatred.” (Minhat Ani, Jerusalem 1966 to Vayelekh 129b)

This sort of concern is also hinted at by our Talmudic rabbis.

In Tractate Megillah, the rabbis discuss whether the curses, blessings, and warnings found in chapter 26 of the book of Leviticus should be translated into the lingua franca to facilitate

understanding by the masses during communal readings of the Torah. The rabbis explain that focusing on such matters could discourage the masses or alternatively provide them with a faulty basis for religious observance. Ideally, we reason, our obedience to the Torah's commands should be motivated by our love of God or truth rather than by our fear of punishment and divine retribution.

The Orthodox thinker, R. Shalom Carmy, whose work on this topic heavily influenced the writing of this sermon, points out that this very Talmudic discussion, and its attempt to "curtail exposure" to the fear of punishment, "implies that the concerns expressed are, in principle, legitimate." (Shalom Carmy, "Yet My Soul Drew Back" Fear of God as Experience and Commandment in an Age of Anxiety", Tradition 41:3, 2008, p. 16)

Nevertheless, R. Shalom Carmy also warns that neglecting the fear of sin and punishment in our religious life could become just as problematic.

R. Carmy explains that "because fear of punishment is unpleasant and because we are so desperate to think well of ourselves, we are often tempted to ignore the fear of divine punishment. We rush ahead, organizing an accelerated graduation from the unsophisticated category of retribution-fear into the ranks of the elite whose experience of God is identical with a profound reverence. Apart from the likelihood of self-deception about our own spiritual state, there is also a danger that such easily achieved claims to reverence may remain little more than an aesthetic affair...where we reminisce or fantasize about reverence for God instead of fearing Him in the here and now." (Carmy, pp. 7-8)

In truth, I imagine that we can all conjure up moments in our life in which fear helped to set us on the straight and narrow path or even inspired us to go beyond ourselves and grow in ways we could not previously fathom.

About eight months ago I suffered from a debilitating migraine that went on for several weeks. At some point, a suggestion was made that brain cancer could be a possible cause for this prolonged episode. Thank God, a few medical tests quickly revealed the real culprit and, in short order, my full health was restored without any real medical interventions.

Still, for a few days, as we were anxiously waiting to hear results, I was seized by a sudden fear. What if this is really the beginning of the end?

Perhaps not surprisingly, during those few short days, I suddenly became the best spouse, the best parent, the best son and son-in-law, the best sibling, the best friend, yes, I was even the best rabbi. My fear translated into patience, and gratitude, and appreciation, and yes, even love.

Now I'm being a bit facetious. But still, in retrospect, this very fearful episode did in fact force me to take a step back and examine my life, my relationships, duties and responsibilities through a new lens. My fear did prompt me to better my life and better my way of being in this world.

Undoubtedly the fear of dying has led countless individuals to examine and redirect the course of their life. Similarly, the fear of failure can push us to great achievements. In addition, the

fear of losing a relationship with a loved one can deepen our ability to forgive or expand our capacity to love.

To be sure, in each of these cases we can point to the problematic side of fear, mainly that it oftentimes cannot serve as a sustainable motivator. At the same time, it seems utterly counter intuitive to ignore these very human and natural experiences. It is therefore incumbent upon us to learn to channel these experiences and take advantage of the potent power of fear, while cautiously remaining aware of the potential pitfalls of basing our actions or life decisions on fear alone.

Perhaps surprisingly, the Rambam, whose philosophical works exude a passionate love of God, and who elsewhere notes that repenting from a sense of fear is a sure sign of spiritual immaturity, nonetheless saw great value in codifying specifically the fear of God into daily practice.

In *Hilkhot Brakhot*, the Rambam's legal treatise on the recitation of blessings, the Rambam explains that the main impetus to recite blessings of pleasure and gratitude as well as blessings over the mitzvot is to "remember the Creator always and to fear Him." (Rambam, *Hilkhot Brakhot* 1:4) In other words, according to the Rambam, each and every time we say a *brakha* (a blessing) during the day, we are meant to arouse our fear of God. Given the numerous occasions in which we recite blessings each day, this specific instruction seems to really point us towards leading lives filled by the fear of God.

I understand that fearing God, in the here and now, as instructed by the Rambam, might be a stretch for many of us. Still, I do believe that religious growth sometimes requires not a leap of faith, but rather the stretching of our imagination.

Permit me to share a few examples.

If we imagined that each time we bid farewell to a loved one it might be our very last time doing so, how might we comport ourselves differently as we part ways or even while we share time together?

If we imagined that each of our words were recorded each and every time we casually chatted with a friend, how might we learn to speak differently about others or with each other?

If we imagined that the way we conduct ourselves religiously could negatively impact the level of religious and spiritual commitments of those who look up to us within our family or within our community, how might we observe mitzvot any differently?

Finally, if we imagined that the way in which we as Jews participate in the public sphere could have dire consequences on Jews living all over America, or in Israel, and for that matter, all over the world, how might we engage our civic duties differently?

In truth, none of these assertions truly require a stretching of our imagination.

Sadly, when we bid farewell to loved ones, it might actually be our very last time doing so. Life is precious, and behind the veil of everyday certainty, we each remain physically and

existentially vulnerable. Due to social media, our words are often recorded and or get digitally preserved for all to hear and see for time eternal. Studies do show that our own religious actions do influence spiritual choices by others in our life. And history does prove that Jewish engagement in one place could have an impact on Jewish lives everywhere.

Following this line of thinking we might ask ourselves this question: If we truly cultivated a fear of God, of sin, and of punishment as we recite blessings each day how might our lives look differently?

I believe that using our imagination in this way while reciting blessings could become an important tool in our lives, even a source of blessing on its own, as a means that propels us to consider the potential impact of each and every one of our actions.

In fact, our liturgical tradition also views the fear of sin and the fear of God as a blessing on its own.

During the monthly *Birkhat Hakhodesh*, the blessing for the new month, we ask God to grant us a “life marked by reverence for heaven and dread of sin” – “*Chayim sheyesh bahem Yiraat Shomayim ve’Yiraat Chet.*”

Furthermore, a review of any of the Amidah prayers recited over Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur quickly reveals that “fear” is very much a central component of the High Holiday services. Indeed, “fear” is the very first request we make of God in every one of those prayers. Immediately after the Kedusha, in the evening, in the morning, during Mussaf, as well as in the afternoon, we plead with God:

ובכן תן פחדך ה' א-להינו על כל מעשיך ואימתך על כל מה שבראת

“And so place the fear of You, Lord our God, over all that You have made, and the terror of You [God] over all You have created.”

Beyond being a source of blessing, it seems that the Torah itself views fear as a healthy means to developing moral obedience.

On numerous occasions, the book of Leviticus warns us to fear God, while using the trope, “and you shall fear your God, I am the Lord.” A close examination of each of these instances reveals that the Torah’s command to fear God is always appended to prohibitions with moral content.

Consider these examples:

"You shall not curse a deaf person. You shall not place a stumbling block before a blind person, and you shall fear your God. I am the Lord." (Leviticus 19:14)

"You shall rise before a venerable person and you shall respect the elderly, and you shall fear your God. I am the Lord." (Leviticus 19:32)

"And you shall not wrong, one person their fellow, and you shall fear your God, for I am the Lord, your God." (Leviticus 25:17)

"You shall not take interest or increase [from your brother], and you shall fear your God, and let

your brother live with you." (Leviticus 25:36)

"You shall not work [your servant] with rigor, and you shall fear your God." (Leviticus 25:43)

Rashi explains that in each of these cases one can disguise their motives and that this verse therefore reminds us that nothing is ultimately left unobserved.

R. David Zvi Hoffman, the noted German scholar and thinker, writing in the early 20th century, suggests that "these sins involve the abuse of people who cannot defend themselves and thus depend on divine protection." (Carmy, p. 4)

These interpretations are particularly apt in our time.

In the age of Facebook, Tweeter, and Instagram, it is so easy to be pious and righteous through our digital persona. Sadly, the courage we so easily display online is often completely lacking when we're offline. Rav Shalom Carmy notes "that our community is so fixated on moral reinforcement through public display that we are untrained in private struggle. None of our institutions confer honors on people who make the best of an intolerable job or make a blessing of an unmanageable family situation." (Carmy, pp. 22-23)

Cultivating an *emunah pshutah*, a simple faith, and stretching our religious imagination to inspire a bit of fear in our midst, might go a long way in introducing God's presence into our hearts and into our private lives with the ultimate hope of compelling us to endure difficult situations and inspire us to make decisions that reflect a true commitment to a life of righteousness, Torah, and mitzvot.

In a number of moments, we all join together to hear the call of the Shofar. Sound the Shofar any other day of the year and oftentimes it will fail to arouse fear and trembling in our hearts or bring tears to our eyes. There is an almost playful make believe quality to this moment. Childlike, we forget the constant reasoning of our hearts and minds as we truly welcome the presence of the King of kings.

Indeed, for a moment in time, the King is here. The Judge is sitting on the throne. And a decree for good or evil is being issued for the coming year.

The choice is in our hands. The decision is in our heart.

Will we allow this fear to quickly pass or can we cultivate a place for it in our hearts?
Will we be moved for just a moment or are we willing to be moved for all time?

The prophet Amos once declared, "The lion has roared, who does not fear?" (Amos 3:8)
Indeed, the Shofar is about to be blown, do we dare not fear?