

Parshiot Behar-Bechuchotai 5783, 2023:

Awe Before Hashem

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon HaKohane, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Gittel Malka bat Moshe, Alexander Leib ben Benyamin Yosef, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Sefer Vayikra is the only book in the Tanach where we find the expression, “*v’yarata m’elokecha*,” (“and you shall have awe for your G-d”). 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 have awe for 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 have awe for your G-d. I am Hashem. (19:32)
- 3) And you shall not wrong, one man his fellow Jew, and you shall have awe for your G-d, for I am Hashem, your G-d. (25:17)
- 4) You shall not take from him interest or increase, and you shall have awe for your G-d, and let your brother live with you. (25:36)
- 5) You shall not work him with rigor, and you shall have awe for your G-d. (25:33, these and all Tanach and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, underlining my own)

Our five verses refer respectively 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 a Jewish slave by forcing he or she to perform worthless and unpleasant work (*avodah b’farech*). Although at first glance, these *mitzvot* seem to be disconnected, Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself upon the *Sifra*, the halachic *Midrash* to *Sefer Vayikra*, teaches us that *v’yarata m’elokecha* links these *pasukim* closely

together:

and you shall fear 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 have awe for 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, Scripture says, “and you shall have awe for your G-d.” (Commentary to *Sefer Vayikra* 19:14, underlining my own)

In sum, Rashi maintains that since each of the actions referenced in our *pasukim* is indiscernible by people, their underlying intentions remain unknown to observers. Therefore, only the active party knows the truth as to whether or not they were performed for the benefit of others or to their detriment. Nothing, however, is hidden from the Almighty, including our very thoughts. As such, one must be continuously in awe of the Master of the Universe and meticulous in his/her *mitzvot* observance.

In his trenchant analysis of our verses, the great Chasidic rebbe, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter (1847-1905), known as the “Sefat Emet” after the name of his commentary on the Torah, expands upon Rashi’s gloss with a profound insight into the power of *mitzvah* actions to engender *yirat Hashem*:

It is obvious that through awe [of G-d] one is able to properly fulfill those matters that are indiscernible by others. [What is less evident,] however, is that these *mitzvot* which 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. As such, these *mitzvot* that are contingent upon a person’s innermost thoughts, [when performed correctly,] will repair [any negativity that lurks] in the mind of the one [who performs such a commandment]. So, too, did I hear from my teacher and rebbe [the “Chidushei HaRim, 1798-1866] *zatzal*, on the verse, “And you shall not wrong, one man his fellow Jew, and you shall have awe for your G-d, for I am Hashem, your G-d.” (*Sefer Vayikra* 25:17) As he noted, through punctiliously refraining from vexing one’s fellow Jew, one will merit [the characteristic of] awe before the Almighty... (Translation and brackets my own)

May our heartfelt fulfillment of Hashem’s *mitzvot* lead us to awe before Him, bringing us ever closer to His holy Torah. *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 Ray](#)