

Fear

A D'var Torah on *Parashat M'tzora* (Lev. 14:1 – 15:33)

By Brendan Howard

“Zot tih'yeh torat ha-m'tzora b'yom tahorato...”

“This shall be the law for a leper on the day of his purification....”

Fear. Fear of illness. Fear of childbirth. Fear of breaking the law. Fear of crossing God.

We can see them all in the *Parashiot Sh'mini*, *Tazria*, and *M'tzora*, which tumble together in order as Leviticus rolls on.

“... Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu each took his fire pan, put fire in it, and laid incense on it; and they offered before Adonai alien fire, which He had not enjoined upon them. And fire came forth from Adonai and consumed them; thus they did at the instance of the Lord.”¹

“... As for the person with a leprous affection, his clothes shall be rent, his head shall be left bare, and he shall cover over his upper lip; and he shall call out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ He shall be unclean as long as the disease is on him. Being unclean, he shall dwell apart; his dwelling shall be outside the camp.”²

“... You shall put the Israelites on guard against their uncleanness, lest they die through their uncleanness by defiling My Tabernacle that is among them.”³

Fear of infections in a time of no great medicine. Fear of moldy growths in the walls of the home in a time of no science. Fear of bloody childbirth, women's menstruation, and men's discharges, awake and asleep.

The Torah, of course, transmutes those fears, those uncertainties about life, into a fear of God. The world left many questions unanswered, and God was the answer.

Rabbis tell us the leprous infection was caused by *lashon ha-ra*, “evil speech,” because Miriam was struck with a similar disease after talking badly about Moses. It was a disease brought on by wrongdoing.

¹ From Parashat Sh'mini, Lev. 10:1-2.

² From Parashat Tazria, Lev. 13:45-46.

³ From Parashat M'tzora, Lev. 15:31.

Rabbi Ovadiah Sforno tells us the disease in a home “is to arouse the owner to examine his conduct and repent his sins.”⁴ Walls colored in frightening, unnatural brilliance? It’s a disease of the soul, not just the physical world.

What of the rules of cleansing oneself after illness; after contact with contaminated food, clothing or people; after menstruation; after childbirth; after sexual intercourse; after nocturnal emissions? Why should the Israelites be careful to be ritually clean? To keep God from striking them dead, as Nadab and Abihu were killed in a blaze of fire at the altar of the Tabernacle? To keep from being punished?

But do we fear God today? Many of us Jews in the so-called modern age don’t believe in an extra-earthly place of punishment in the afterlife. We don’t believe that good deeds are always rewarded and bad deeds punished in this world. And in an age of science, medicine and learning, most of us don’t believe that a woman’s menstruation or childbirth or a man’s emissions are something to be feared.

Once we’ve let these fears go, do we still fear God? Must we?

It is true that the Hebrew word for fear, *yirah* (yud-reish-heh), can also mean awe or reverence. We can all certainly be in awe of God’s immensity, the idea that God is beyond all things, the idea that where our answers about life and science and the universe end, there begins God. And we can be reverent toward God, honoring God’s commandments, seeking to grow closer to God through ritual and ethical mitzvot, and putting God before material desires and animal wants. But translators translate *yirah* in most places in the Tanakh as fear, not awe or reverence.

In Proverbs is written: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.”⁵ How then do we learn if we don’t fear God? When we don’t believe God controls our well-being and protects us from sickness and pain and death if we do God’s bidding, why should we fear God?

We fear death in war and sexually transmitted disease and old age. We fear sadness, we fear loss.

The Torah and the Holy Writings tell us to fear God:

“You who fear the Lord, praise Him!
All you offspring of Jacob, honor Him!
Be in dread of him, all you offspring of Israel!”⁶

⁴ *Sforno on Torah*; Translated and edited by Rabbi Raphael Pelcovitz; Artscroll; 1997; p. 554.

⁵ Proverbs 1:7.

⁶ Psalms 22:24.

I want to fear God. Tell me why I should.

Questions for Discussion

- 1) What does it mean to fear God today?
- 2) Is fear of God today less an immediate fear (like the potential for contracting a contagious disease or a bad season for crops) and more a “sublime” fear, a sense of awe (like the sense of fear at confronting a massive mountain range or contemplating infinity or the size of the universe)?
- 3) We talk a lot about the “God-wrestling” that Jacob did as he contended with a divine being, almost as an equal, ultimately besting the divine being. But what about “God-fearing” — that sentiment the Israelites felt when, at the foot of that rumbling mountain in the wilderness, they begged Moses not to make them face the fiery cloud of God’s presence? Should we, too, be “God-fearing”? Or has the ancient fear of God been transformed into awe of God or reverence for God or respect for God, and do we lose something with those translations of the ancient *yirah*?