

Awesome Isn't Awe for Some

PARSHA INSIGHTS - VA'ESCHANAN (5759)

“FRIGHTENED OF HASHEM” DOESN'T ALWAYS MEAN G-D FEARING

After hearing Hashem's awesome voice at *Har Sinai* [Mount Sinai], *Bnai Yisroel* [the Children of Israel] requested that from then on, Moshe *Rabainu* [Moses our teacher] would transmit all Divine messages to them. They were overwhelmed by the experience of *Matan Torah* [giving of the Torah], where they received direct communication from G-d (5:20-24). Moshe recounts to the second generation that Hashem had approved of this request which their parents had made nearly forty years before (5:25-26). Rather than being “disappointed” that *Bnai Yisroel* were too frightened to listen to His voice anymore, He was delighted that they feared Him so much. This indicated reverence for Hashem, a sentiment that would increase their loyalty to Him for generations to come. “If only this heart of theirs would be to them (remain with them), to fear Me and to keep all My *mitzvos* [commandments] all the days...” (5:26).

We see that fear of Hashem was a desirable trait, even though it manifested itself in an entreaty to no longer hear the actual voice of G-d. Notice how the *pasuk* [verse] is worded— Hashem says it would be magnificent if only they would FEAR ME and KEEP MY *MITZVOS* forever. The *Or Hachaim* wonders: Why are two separate terms utilized? Doesn't FEAR of Hashem guarantee OBSERVANCE of *mitzvos*? Why the repetition?

He answers that in fact, FEAR does NOT ALWAYS insure that people keep *mitzvos* properly. There are times that fear is misplaced, misused, and leads to tragedy. We need fear of Hashem TOGETHER WITH keeping *mitzvos*. What is an example?

The reason *Bnai Yisroel* created the golden calf, says the *Or Hachaim*, was because of fright. As it says in *Parshas Ki Sisa*, they saw that Moshe was not coming back down when they thought he should be returning. They thought that in Moshe's absence, there would no longer be an intermediary between Hashem and the Jewish people. In that case, perhaps Hashem would go back to speaking directly to them, as He did at *Matan Torah*! This was exactly what they had requested should never happen again, since it was too awe-inspiring. For that reason, they hurried to build the golden calf, thinking that somehow, through *kabbalistic* [the sublime dimension of Divine wisdom] powers and/or magic, this image would be a tangible spokesman for *Bnai Yisroel* to Hashem.

Or Hachaim cites the *Midrash Tanchuma* 19 on *Ki Sisa*, that the golden calf actually possessed the faculty of speech. (It is proven elsewhere that it “ate grass” as well, based on a *pasuk* in *Tehillim* [Psalms] and analyzed by *meforshim* [commentators]. See much detail in *Oznaim L'Torah* on *Ki Sisa* 32:4.) *Bnai Yisroel*, having been raised in the paganistic, Egyptian society, and still under the influence of the *airev rav* [insincere converts], entertained the notion that somehow, it might represent their interests before Hashem.

This proves that fear of Hashem's voice, taken too far, led to catastrophe. Because of this extreme trepidation, *Bnai Yisroel* created the golden calf! All this was to “prevent” Hashem from being the One to speak directly to them. Thus, FEAR **alone** is not always a positive approach to serving Hashem. It must be accompanied by unfaltering dedication to *SHMIRAS HAMITZVOS* [observing the commandments]. For this reason, Hashem told Moshe that it would be fabulous if *Bnai Yisroel* would always fear Him AND observe His *mitzvos* properly. Let us always check on our own emotions and feelings, directing them toward constant improvement in our *avodas* [service of] Hashem.

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