

# *The Highest Level of Fear*

PARSHA INSIGHTS - LECH L'CHA (5758)

## **FEAR OF HASHEM: THREE DIFFERENT TYPES**

“After these events, Hashem’s word came to Avram in a vision, saying, ‘**Do not fear, Avram**, I am your shield; your reward is very great’” (*Perek Tes Vav, Pasuk Alef* [chapter 15, verse 1]).

This assurance to Avram came right after the war of the four and five kings, found in *Perek Yud Dalid* [chapter 14]. You might be aware that four powerful kings overcame an army of five kings. Among the cities conquered was Sedom, whose inhabitants were taken captive. Lot, Avram’s nephew, was among these prisoners. Avram ultimately battled the four kings, and Hashem assisted him with miracles. The result was a remarkable victory, and his nephew was rescued as well (14:16).

Following this success, Avram experienced feelings of uncertainty regarding the battle. The *Midrash Rabba* in 44:4 outlines and analyzes these concerns. The *Maharzav* (commentary on the *Midrash*) says that the remarks we are about to see in the *Midrash* stem from the fact that Hashem told Avram: 1) not to fear - He will be Avram’s shield 2) not only should Avram not fear, but his reward is very great. What need was there for BOTH promises?

Avram wondered if there might have been at least one righteous, G-d fearing person among all the soldiers he had killed in the above-mentioned war. Perhaps he deserved punishment for murdering innocent and pious men! That is why he was told not to be afraid, and he was also informed of a hefty reward. In other words, anyone who died at the hands of Avram as he fought the four kings was MEANT to die, and Avram deserved commendation for killing them. To what is this compared? The *Midrash* explains that it is like a person who passed the orchard of the king, and he noticed a bunch of thorns. He entered the royal property, the orchard, and removed them. Suddenly, the king observed what was happening, and the “thief” began to hide when he realized he was being watched. The king asked him, “Why are you hiding? I would have needed to employ many workers to remove this bunch of thorns; now that YOU have removed them, come and accept payment for your services!” This is exactly what Hashem said to Avram. Those soldiers you killed were like unwanted thorns. They were destined to be eliminated, and you came along, in the process of doing the *mitzvah* [commandment/good deed] of rescuing your nephew, and you took care of them. Thank you! Do not fear that you might have murdered *tzadikim* [righteous people]. Not only should you not be afraid, but you can also expect great reward for helping to “clean up” the world. Now we understand the reason for both promises to Avram.

Perhaps you are aware that the *Mesilas Yesharim* cites this episode of Avram and the four kings as a prime example of *yiras chait* [fear of sin]. As we have established, Hashem told Avram not to be afraid, because he worried that he might have killed *tzadikim* in the course of battle. In the end of *Perek Chof Dalid* [chapter 24], the *Mesilas Yesharim* quotes the *Tana D’vai Eliyahu Rabba*, 25, that Hashem does not say the words “do not fear” to a person unless that individual is a TRUE *yirai Shamaim* [one who fears heaven]. If the Master of the Universe finds it fitting to reassure someone in such a fashion, it indicates the person’s genuine reverence for Hashem.

In defining this profound level of *yira* [fear or respect], the *Mesilas Yesharim*, earlier in *Perek Chof Dalid*, states as follows. There is a type of *yira* called *YIRAS HAROM’MUS*, literally fear of the loftiness. This means that a person distances himself from sin because of the great respect he has for the Creator. His motive is NOT because he anticipates punishment for his transgressions; it is a level of reverence even higher than this. (True, it is a worthy achievement if a person abstains from sin regularly because of fear of Divine consequences. If only all people would embrace such a lifestyle! It would be a world full of *tzadikim*. But it is worthwhile to learn about greater accomplishments, more lofty goals, such as avoiding transgressions because of one’s deep love and respect for Hashem, not only his anxiety concerning divine retribution.) The *Mesilas Yesharim* concedes that it “is not so easy to attain” this level of *yira*, because such an appreciation of right and wrong only results from a sophisticated awareness of Hashem’s superiority over humans. This awe for G-d brings a person to intense feelings of trepidation as he *davens* [prays] or performs *mitzvos* [commandments/good deeds]. It is **yiras harom’mus**, a higher attainment than *yiras ha’onesh* [fear of punishment].

The *Ramchal* (author of *Mesilas Yesharim*) continues in *Perek Chof Dalid* [24]: there is yet another type of *yira* called *yiras chait* [fear of sin itself]. *Yiras chait* is a division of *yiras harom'mus*, but it also has its own identity. To summarize:

- 1) the most basic level is *yiras ha'onesh* - fear of punishment. As we mentioned, it is still a worthy goal and accomplishment if one keeps away from sin as a result of this *yiras ha'onesh*.
- 2) But a higher level is *yiras harom'mus*, performing *mitzvos* and avoiding *avairos* [sins] out of a deep respect for G-d's loftiness and superiority.
- 3) A division of number 2 is *yiras chait* - fear of sin itself. This is what we will discuss now, showing the connection to Avraham Avinu [Abraham our forefather].

*Yiras chait* means that a person is **constantly** alert to the fact that some wrongdoing might have been mixed into his or her actions. Another concern is that perhaps his deeds don't measure up to the degree of respect a human being should have for the Creator. Thus, says the *Mesilas Yesharim*, numbers 2) and 3) are closely connected. How so? Because the objective in both of these is not to do anything against the will of the glorious King of the universe. The only difference between number 2) and 3) is that number 2) (*yiras harom'mus*) is at the time of the action being performed. For example, a person who is *davening* [praying] feels profound respect for Hashem, plus he abstains from sins out of this same reverence and fear of doing something disrespectful. This has been compared to the respect we have for *gedolim* [great Torah scholars]. We would never even think of committing transgressions in front of a *gadol hador* [great Torah scholar of the generation]. Is it because we anticipate punishment? Of course not. Rather, we realize the awesome level of a *tzadik* [righteous person] and *gadol* [great Torah scholar] so we act accordingly. This is an example of *yiras harom'mus*, and it applies, on a different level, to Hashem. But number 3) (*yiras chait*) is different from this. Remember, *yiras chait* is fear of sin itself. The *Mesilas Yesharim* points out that this type of fear applies at all times. In other words, the individual is always aware, always calculating his *mitzvos* and actions in general, guarding himself from stumbling in any fashion. This can refer to past as well as present and future deeds.

The *Ramchal* remarks that such was the *yira* of Avraham Avinu. Genuine *yiras harom'mus* and *yiras chait* were his. He had risked all he had to rescue Lot, taking on four powerful kings. Who can imagine the importance of the *mitzvah* of redeeming captives? And yet, our father Avraham was CONCERNED after the war - maybe his deeds were NOT totally faultless. May this serve as an inspiring lesson for all of us.

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