

“Because I said, ‘(Only) there is no fear of G-d in this place and they will kill me on account of (to take) my wife.’” (20:11)

Horav Elchanan Wasserman, z.l., had occasion to be in Germany a number of years prior to the Nazi implementation of their Master Plan. At the time, Germany was considered among the most progressive and intellectual nations. Its culture and nobility presented a paradigm for others to emulate. As we know, however, it was all superficial. Something was missing from this cold, dispassionate culture. The Jews were an “accepted” part of society. This, of course, led to assimilation. Little did they know the tragic events, the cataclysmic horrors, that were lurking right around the corner. *Rav Elchanan* delivered a lecture to the *Kollel*, post-graduate fellows, of the *Seminar L’Rabbanim* in Berlin.

He began his address by first citing Avraham’s response to Avimelech, explaining why he claimed Sarah was his sister, rather than state the truth that she was his wife. Avraham feared for his life, since he was in a country in which the people did not fear G-d. In making his statement, Avraham said *rok*, “only,” there is no fear in this place. Why does he add the word *rok*, only? This word appears to be superfluous. *Rav Elchanan* explained that Avraham *Avinu* was conveying an important principle/message to Avimelech. He told him, “You have an impressive community, cultured, intellectual; everything for which one can ask, *rok*, only, there is one thing that is clearly missing – *yiraas Shomayim* – fear of Heaven. This is why I had decided that my wife and I are in mortal danger. If the base passions of any of your countrymen becomes ignited for my wife, I am as good as dead.” In such a situation, culture, intellect and breeding have no value. Only one thing can prevent a tragedy: *yiraas Shomayim*.

With these words, *Rav Elchonon* was alluding to the danger lurking under the surface of the progressive and enlightened German culture. No one believed that such a refined nation could descend to the nadir of depravity, to rewrite the meaning of cruelty. The Germans were missing one thing – one thing that distinguishes between a human being and an animal: *yiraas Shomayim*.

We derive from here an important lesson. Fear of Heaven is the key to humanness. It is the only way that one can control his base nature. Man needs discipline. This discipline can only come from a source whom man respects and fears. If there is no fear, there is no man. In his “*Chaim Shel Torah*,” *Horav Yaakov Beifus, Shlita*, analogizes this idea with an example from the world of vegetation. Trees are good for the environment. They provide shade; they enhance the beauty of their surroundings. One can even have fun climbing them. Fruit-bearing trees have an added benefit: they provide fruit, and, thereby, sustenance for us. It goes without saying that the fruit-bearing quality of these trees is not simply just another benefit; it constitutes their essence. Without this quality, they are just plain trees! Likewise, man is comprised of various attributes. The virtue of *yiraas Shomayim* supercedes every other virtue, because, without it, he is not a human being.

Rav Elchanan supplements his thesis, citing the *Zohar HaKadosh* which suggests that Hashem

wanted man to be comprised of all of the creatures in the world. He should be a veritable microcosm of the creations preceding him. This is why when Hashem was about to create man, He called together all creatures and said, *Naaseh Adam*, "Let us make man." He should have a bit of every creature in him. Thus, all the creatures "shared" in the creation of man.

With this in mind, we understand that man is a formidable creature. He is part lion, part leopard, part snake, part vulture, and part insect. He is a conglomerate of every animal, wild beast, fowl, insect, and fish. How is this creation known as "man" kept in check? What chain do we tie on him to keep him from destroying everything around, if he so pleases? Only one thing: *yiraas Shomayim*, the chain of fear, the chain of discipline, the chain of respect.

What is *yiraas Shomayim*? *Rav* Beifus explains that it is the acute awareness that Hashem observes everything that we do. He witnesses every nuance, every movement. He knows every thought. This awareness inspires fear and awe, which in turn, evokes a sense of humility and shame if He sees us doing anything inappropriate. How does one acquire *yiraas Shomayim*? It's simple – by constant awareness and reiteration that Hashem is above us watching at all times. Awareness, however, is not sufficient. One must acquire this awareness and integrate it into his psyche.

A well-known incident occurred concerning the *Chafetz Chaim*, *z.l.*, that supports this idea. The *Chafetz Chaim* was once traveling by wagon. While on the road, the wagon driver noticed a melon in someone's field by the side of the road. He quickly pulled over the wagon and jumped out. He was about to pick it up, when the *Chafetz Chaim* shouted, "They are watching!" When the driver heard this, he quickly returned to the wagon. Upon noticing again that no one seemed to be around, he made another attempt to retrieve the melon from the person's field. Once again, the *Chafetz Chaim* shouted, "They are watching!"

This happened a few times, until the wagon driver gave up trying to "appropriate" the melon for himself. As they continued their trip, the driver turned to the *Chafetz Chaim* and asked, "To what do you attribute the fact that each time I went to take the melon you saw someone watching while I saw no one?"

The *Chafetz Chaim's* response is something which should catalyze within us a heightened sense of awareness in regard to our daily endeavor. He said, "I also did not see any man. I meant that they are watching in Heaven!"

Shivisi Hashem l'negdi tamid, "I place Hashem before me constantly," should be the catch phrase by which we live. Our function is to remain resolute, so that when the *yetzer hara*, evil inclination, begins with its blandishments, we respond, "They are watching!" This defines *yiraas Shomayim*. Thus, it is the essence of man.