

## And the midwives feared G-d; they did not do as the King of Egypt told them. (1:17)

The Torah lauds the midwives, Shifrah and Puah, for defying Pharaoh's diabolical decree, maintaining that their inner strength and courage were the product of their profound *yiraas Elokim*, fear of G-d. Two weak, defenseless women stood up to the most powerful despotic ruler in the world and refused to murder the Jewish infants. True, they gave excuses, but anyone with a modicum of intelligence knew that what they claimed could not have been true all the time. Their *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of Heaven, knowing fully-well that Hashem is above everyone and no excuses or mitigating, extenuating circumstances can rationalize transgression guided them. It is either permissible or it is prohibited. There is no gray area. *Elokim* is Hashem's Name connoting Strict Justice – which means exactly what it reads: strict, unembellished, unvarnished justice.

What, indeed, is the essence of *yiraas Shomayim* that grants a person the strength to overcome all obstacles and stand up to all challenges? *Horav Yisrael Belsky, zl*, quotes the *pesukim* in *Yeshayah* (51:12,13), *Mi at va'tiri mei'enosh yamus u'miben adam chatzir yinasein. Va'tishkach Hashem oseich noteh shomayim v'yoseid eretz*, "Who are you that you fear from mortals and from men who will be made as grass? You have forgotten Hashem, your Maker, Who spread out the heavens and set the foundation of the earth. The *Navi* says clearly that a person can only be afraid of another human being if he has *chas v'shalom*, Heaven forbid, forgotten *Hashem Yisborach*. To the contrary, the only way a person can stand fearless before any human being, regardless of his position/station in life, his power and ruthlessness, is if he possesses a strong, uncompromised sense of *yiraas Shomayim*. One who fears Hashem – fears no man. One whose fear of Hashem is deficient – has no limits to whom and what he fears.

To define *yiraas Shomayim*, I would suggest that a person who truly fears Hashem feels His immediacy at all times. Some people are observant and very committed, but do they feel Hashem's Presence in their lives at all times? When the *Gerrer Rebbe*, the *Imrei Emes*, arrived in Vienna in 1923 to attend the *Knessiah Gedolah*, he remained outside the hall, refusing to enter. His *gabbaim*, attendants, explained to the event organizers that the *Rebbe* had issues with the *mechitzah*, separation between men and women. Although the women were seated in the balcony which surrounded the entire room, there were no curtains. Thus, anyone who looked up saw the women. This, as far as the *Rebbe* was concerned, was a breach of Jewish law. He would not enter the room until the breach had been corrected.

When a group of *rabbanim* heard about the *Rebbe's* "stringency," they disagreed; they felt the *mechitzah* was fine and did not require repair. The consensus of opinion ruled that they would ask the *Chafetz Chaim, zl*, who also happened to be attending the conference. They would all abide by his ruling. The sage replied, "According to *halachah*, Jewish law, the *mechitzah* is kosher and does not require any alteration. However, since some Jews have requested an 'upgrade', we should acquiesce to their demands."

He continued with this reasoning (as quoted by *Horav Elimelech Biderman, Shlita*), “When Hashem is with us, we have nothing to fear. David *Hamelech* states in *Tehillim* 23, ‘Even when I go in the valley of death, I have no fear... because You are with me.’ However, when Hashem’s Presence is not with us, we are in grave danger. When there is a lack of *tznius* (moral modesty, chastity), Hashem removes His Presence from within our midst. It is, thus, to our benefit to be *machmir*, stringent, in matters of *kedushah*, holiness, and *tznius*. It will catalyze a higher level of protection and *siyata diShmaya*, Divine assistance.” These *gedolim* felt Hashem’s Presence in their midst and realized the consequences that relaxing a stringency might catalyze.

The *Chafetz Chaim* was wont to say, *Der velt zogt az mir zol zein frum, un frum un klug*. (G-d-fearing, G-d-fearing and wise). *Ich zog, az mir zol zein klug, un klug, un frum*, “The world says that one should be G-d-fearing and wise, I say that he should be wise and G-d-fearing.” (In other words, wisdom should precede his observance, because a person should have sufficient common sense and acumen to determine when it is appropriate to be stringent, upon whose shoulders one is imposing his stringency, and at what expense. Every issue must be carefully weighed and decided appropriately in such a manner that no one is offended. Obviously, this applies only with regard to a stringency. When it involves normative *halachah*, we have no room for compromise. There are no gray areas.)