

# “Surely, there is no fear of God in this place!”

Parashat Vayera  
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“Surely, there is no fear of God in this place!” – This verse cries out from this week’s Torah portion. We live in a time of great fear and panic and these powerful emotions dominate the public square, our political discourse, and our thinking. We fear the spread of the virus and the collapse of the economy. We fear political personalities and parties. There’s a fear bias, and a fear of militia mobs, and a fear of mob mentality.

Thank God, we don’t lack for fear, except for maybe, the fear of God.

In our Parsha, Abraham asks Sarah to pretend to be his sister when they arrive to Gerrar. After getting confronted by Abimelech for this apparent lie, Abraham explains that he feared for his life on account of Sarah. Abraham tells Abimelech, “Surely, there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.” With these words, Abraham describes fear of God as a cultural phenomenon, definitive of the moral actions of a society’s members.

On numerous occasions, the Torah makes a strong argument for the connection between the fear of God and moral comportment. Notably, in the book of Leviticus, the Torah’s command to fear God is always appended to prohibitions with moral content.

Consider these examples:

"You shall not curse a deaf person. You shall not place a stumbling block before a blind person, and you shall fear your God. I am the Lord." (Leviticus 19:14)

"You shall rise before a venerable person and you shall respect the elderly, and you shall fear your God. I am the Lord." (Leviticus 19:32)

"And you shall not wrong, one person their fellow, and you shall fear your God, for I am the Lord, your God." (Leviticus 25:17)

"You shall not take interest or increase [from your brother], and you shall fear your God, and let your brother live with you." (Leviticus 25:36)

"You shall not work [your servant] with rigor, and you shall fear your God." (Leviticus 25:43)

R. David Zvi Hoffman, the noted German scholar and thinker, writing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, suggests that “these sins involve the abuse of people who cannot defend themselves and thus depend on divine protection.”

In *Hilkhot Brakhhot*, the Rambam’s legal treatise on the recitation of blessings, the Rambam explains that the main impetus to recite blessings of pleasure and gratitude as well as blessings over the mitzvot is to “remember the Creator always and to fear Him” (Rambam, *Hilkhot Brakhhot* 1:4). In other words, according to the Rambam, each and every time we say a *brakhah* (a blessing) during the day, we are

meant to arouse our fear of God. Given the numerous occasions in which we recite blessings each day, this specific instruction seems to really point us towards leading lives filled by the fear of God.

To be sure, in his writings, Rav Kook cautions against a fear of God that is debilitating: “Sometimes... [the idea of the fear of God] stands as a symbol of panic, causing weakness, despair and impotence. This effect is very bad, and when it spreads, it leads to revolt against the yoke of the kingdom of God among the young who had a taste of vigorous life, who rightfully seek a life that is free of fear and horrors, and full of faith and courage.” Still Rav Kook notes that in its true form “the idea of the fear of God adds strength and courage to the soul of man who understands it in its purity; it fills life with interest, great aspirations, and lofty spirituality.”

Rav Kook’s definition of the fear of God “in its purity” resonates for me. This fear of God invites humility, perspective, and introspection while also providing a basis for hope and faith. By cultivating this sort of consciousness in our midst, we might come to realize our errors, our shortcomings, and limitations. At the same time, we might also draw strength and courage from the presence of God in our lives. May we make it so.