

Through a Mussar Lens: Understanding and Experiencing *Yirah*

By Alan Morinis



Jerusalem is once again in the news, as it has been for the last 3,000 years. It is an utter mystery why one small little piece of earth located in no particularly dominating location should dominate the headlines generation after generation. Perhaps we get a clue from the name of the city itself — Jerusalem, or Yerushalayim in Hebrew, is derived from the words *yirah* and *shalom*. We are all familiar with the word *shalom*—peace. But what of the first part of the name, arising from *yirah*?

The Hebrew word *yirah* is not an obscure Hebrew term that scholars debate that has no practical importance. *Yirah* is one of the great teachings of Judaism, and understanding it is hugely important to spiritual life.

The final verse of the book of Ecclesiastes / Kohelet (12:13), for example, reads:

The end of the matter, all having been heard, *yirah* God, and keep His commandments, for this is the *whole of man*[emphasis added].

Psalm 112:1 – Happy is the person *l'yirah* the Lord.

Job 28:28 – Behold, the *yirah* of the Lord is wisdom.

Psalm 11:10 – The *yirah* of HaShem is the beginning of wisdom.

That is just a sample to make the point that *yirah* is a quality that is often mentioned in Torah, and that must be very important, since it leads to happiness and wisdom.

In fact, *Yirah* is used to name three different inner experiences: awe and fear, and reverence or piety.



Sometimes it refers clearly to only one of these emotions. When Psalm 23 refers to “fear no evil,” the Hebrew *yirah* unambiguously means “fear.” But unambiguous uses like that are in the minority. Most often when the word *yirah* appears in our teachings, there is room to interpret it as fear or awe or reverence. And so when we are told that *yirat HaShem* will keep us from transgressing, that phrase could mean “fear of God” and perhaps the punishments God metes out for sin, or it could be referring to the inner experience of amazement and dumbfounding astonishment at the majesty of God, which makes sin almost inconceivable.

Hebrew has a lot of words, many of them very specific and making distinctions that aren’t known in English. So why don’t we find Hebrew differentiating fear from awe from reverence, clearly three different emotional realities? Why does it use *yirah* to cover all three?

One answer comes from one of the primary Mussar masters, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, who wrote a classic work of Mussar in Amsterdam in 1740, called *Mesillat Yesharim*, or *Path of the Just*. He writes that there are two levels of *yirah*:

- *yirat ha'onesh*, where *onesh* means “punishment” and *yirah* clearly means fear. What we have here is fear of the punishment that will be leveled against a person for wrongs he or she has done; and
- *yirat ha'romemut*, where *romemut* means “elevated” or “exalted,” and in this case what we have is the “awe of Divine Majesty.”

That’s helpful. Additionally, another reason Hebrew uses a single term for these three emotions is the possibility that we can have an experience where there is no boundary between *fear* and *awe* and *reverence*, all of which show up in one merged experience, an emotional state that does not have an equivalent English word.

You may experience a feeling like that when you look up at the nighttime sky and are awed by the immensity of space and simultaneously terrified by the thought of just how puny you are in such a vast expanse. And as you gaze at the billions of stars reaching millions of light years into the distance of time and space, have you felt that sense of revering the Source of that majesty?

In the book of Jonah, when Jonah sleeps in the hold of the boat and a great storm blows up (1:16), the verse tells us that the sailors, "... had *yirah* for the Lord exceedingly." Do you know the experience of being in the midst of a great storm when what you feel combines awe and fear and an acute awareness of the profound majesty of life?



Or standing at the lip of the Grand Canyon and looking down into the beautiful gorge cut by centuries of water that falls away right before you, and the beauty and immense awe you experience while the sheer drop terrifies you and your heart sings a song of praise?

Those images help us understand the word *yirah* itself and what it is pointing to. But why so much emphasis on this experience in Jewish thought and practice? Why does *yirah* lead to wisdom and happiness, and why does Kohelet say that this is "the whole of man?"

When a human being experiences *yirah*, that experience directly awakens a spiritual consciousness just as an alarm clock awakens a sleeping person. Compared to moments of *yirah*, we may, indeed, be asleep much of our lives. When overtaken by *yirah*, we experience a tremendous spiritual reality that is ordinarily hidden from us. *Yirah* gives us a direct experience of the Transcendent in that very moment, pointing our hearts directly to the divine Presence.



Through the extraordinary experiences that generate *yirah*, you become acquainted with the spiritual charge that is available to you every moment of the day. If you undertake to grow that experience in you, as you become more adept at finding *yirah*, you will find it arising in you not only in the extraordinary like birth and death, great mammals and kaleidoscopic sunsets, but in a cup of tea, a flower, the flow of traffic, the ability to hear, and almost everywhere.

One who experiences the Divine Presence as it infuses this moment has had a direct glimpse of the foundation of Jewish thought and practice, and so *yirah* gives us the strongest insight we can have into what these worlds are all about. No wonder it is called the “whole of man.”