Torah From a Mussar Perspective
***Parshat Vayishlach* – Genesis 32:4-36:43**
Rabbi Eric S. Gurvis

In the Northern Hemisphere we are heading into the darkest time of the year. At the same time, we are drawing closer to our Festival of Lights which will arrive next Sunday evening, as we light the first candle to celebrate *Hanukkah*. No matter where we live, it is clear that many are feeling added anxiety in this season of darkness given the various tensions of our time.

Darkness is not merely a physical reality. For some, perhaps many, it is also a spiritual and emotional reality. Darkness also plays a role in our *parashah* this week as we read of Jacob's fateful night before he encounters his brother Esau after two decades of separation. *Parashat Vayishlach* opens as we read:

> Jacob sent messengers ahead to his brother Esau in the land of Seir, the country of Edom, and instructed them as follows, "Thus shall you say, 'To my lord Esau, thus says your servant Jacob: I stayed with Laban and remained until now; I have acquired cattle, asses, sheep, and male and female slaves; and I send this message to my lord in the hope of gaining your favor.'"
>
> The messengers returned to Jacob, saying, "We came to your brother Esau; he himself is coming to meet you, and his retinue numbers four hundred."[1]

Jacob's reaction to the news of Esau's approach evokes both fear and anxiety. In Genesis 32:8 we read:

וַיִּירָא יַעֲקֹב מְאֹד וַיֵּצֶר לוֹ וַיַּחַץ אֶת־הָעָם אֲשֶׁר־אִתּוֹ וְאֶת־הַצֹּאן
וְאֶת־הַבָּקָר וְהַגְּמַלִּים לִשְׁנֵי מַחֲנוֹת׃

> Jacob was greatly frightened; in his anxiety, he divided the people with him, and the flocks and herds and camels, into two camps.

No doubt, some of us can understand Jacob's anxiety. Many of us experience our own sense of tension in various relationships along life's journey. In *Da'at Chochmah U-Mussar*, Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz comments on Jacob's emotional state as described in verse 8:

> When Jacob heard that Esau was coming toward him with four hundred men, he was greatly alarmed. It is simple to understand that Jacob's fear of Esau was not like the fear of a weak man before a violent one. Scripture does not speak of such a kind of fear, and the Patriarchs were not praised for such fear.

[1] Genesis 32:4-7.

> Perhaps Jacob's fear was that he had become sullied by sin (as Rashi explains in relation to verse 11).[2]

In verse 11 we read: "I am unworthy of all the kindness that You have so steadfastly shown Your servant: with my staff alone I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps." Rashi comments:

> I AM TOO UNWORTHY OF ALL THE MERCIES - My merits are diminished in consequence of all the *hasadim*/kindnesses and *emet*/truth which You have already shown me. For this reason, I am afraid. Perhaps, since You made these promises to me, I have become depraved (or "tripped up")[3] by sin, and this may have caused me to be delivered unto Esau's power (*Talmud Shabbat* 32a).

Rav Yerucham continues:

> In the end, this fear is expressed as fear of Esau and his four hundred men — a natural form of fear that is implanted in every person, the instinctive fear of a robber or evildoer.[4]
>
> This natural fear truly stemmed from Jacob's deeper anxiety as he likely thought "perhaps I have sinned." Hence, the fear Jacob felt toward Esau, which is by nature found in all human beings, in Jacob's case was actually *Yir'at Shamayim*/Fear of Heaven.
>
> It follows from this that the attainment of *yir'ah*/fear (of God) comes precisely through one's natural emotional faculty itself, even without any external consideration, inspiration, or theoretical contemplation.[5]

We know from our study and practice of *Mussar* that *Yir'ah* is viewed as both fear and awe. Ideally, we lean more into *yir'ah* as awe of the majesty of the Holy One's Creation as well as God's *hesed*/kindness towards us, in spite of our shortcomings and failings. Yet, this *middah*, viewed as a core *middah* by the classic *ba'alei Mussar*, is often a challenging one for many contemporary students of *Mussar*.

Rav Yerucham goes on to teach that *yir'ah* is a natural part of our human experience. And we all have had our own personal experiences with fear and anxiety! He references Deuteronomy 10:11 where we read:

וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל מָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ שֹׁאֵל מֵעִמָּךְ כִּי אִם־לְיִרְאָה אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ

[2] *Da'at Chochmah U-Mussar*, part 1, page 23.
[3] Another version of Rashi has נתלכלכתי, I have become defiled by sin.
[4] *Da'at Chochmah U-Mussar*, part 1, page 23.
[5] Ibid.

לָלֶכֶת בְּכָל־דְּרָכָיו וּלְאַהֲבָה אֹתוֹ וְלַעֲבֹד אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל־לְבָבְךָ וּבְכָל־נַפְשֶׁךָ׃

> And now, O Israel, what does your Eternal God demand of you? Only this: *l'yir'ah et HaShem*/to revere your Eternal God, to walk only in divine paths, to love and to serve your Eternal God with all your heart and soul . . .

In his translation of Torah, Professor Everett Fox renders *yir'ah* as "hold YHWH your God in awe." The Koren Jerusalem Bible translates this as "fear the Eternal Your God." Indeed, in his book *Everyday Holiness*, chapter 24, our teacher Alan Morinis leaves *Yir'ah* untranslated, as he unpacks this core *middah*. Without a doubt, *yir'ah* is multifaceted and complex. Not only do our translators and interpreters read it differently, so do we, based on our own spiritual journey, experiences, and soul curriculum.

Returning to Rav Yerucham teaching, he states:

> The level of *Yir'at Shamayim*/Fear of Heaven which we often associate with reward and punishment is the loftiest of levels, as is written in Deuteronomy 10:12, "What does the Eternal your God ask of you except to fear God?"
>
> This level also exists within nature. Beyond this, we see what our Sages said (in *Talmud Berakhot* 5a): "If a person sees suffering coming upon them, they should examine their deeds." At first glance this would seem to apply only to those immerse themselves in Torah. Yet, in fact it is attainable even by those who operate only from their rational awareness.[6]

Rav Yerucham illustrates his point by referring to what we will read in just a few weeks, as we turn to the Joseph cycle of stories. He teaches:

> We find, for example, with [Joseph's brothers as they tangle with the strange Egyptian leader, who is in fact their brother Joseph, whom they do not recognize] stating, "What is this that God has done to us?"[7] Our Sages explain[8] that "their hearts went out," meaning they felt remorse within. Thus, the brothers, even without Torah, recognized and knew the concept of *heshbon ha-nefesh*/self-examination in the midst of one's suffering. [This can bring about] awareness of divine providence.[9]

Rav Yerucham also links this with an incident from earlier in Genesis, stating:

---

[6] Ibid.
[7] Genesis 42:28.
[8] *Midrash Bereishit Rabbah* 91:8.
[9] Ibid.

> Even the ancient nations had knowledge of this matter. As we find with Pharaoh the First, of whom it is written, "And the ETERNAL ONE afflicted Pharaoh with great plagues..."[10] Pharaoh said to Abram, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you say, 'She is my sister'?" Yet Pharaoh did not have prophecy to reveal to him that Sarah was Abraham's wife.[11]

Fear and anxiety are, as Rav Yerucham teaches, a natural part of our human condition and experience. Yet, as he teaches, and as we learn throughout our *Mussar* studies and practice, *heshbon ha-nefesh*/soul accounting is an important part of our capacity for spiritual growth, as well as our general progress along the way to becoming the best version of who we can be.

In this season of growing darkness, and with the approach of our *Chag Ha-Urim*/Festival of Lights, our study of Torah, and our soul work can help identify what forms of "darkness" surround us, and the ways in which we can dispel that darkness, whether it is by kindling lights – a part of many traditions in this season – as well as working on our *middot*, including how we sense, feel, and understand *yir'ah* -- be it fear, awe or reverence.

FOR FOCUS:

- How do you understand *yir'ah*? Is it one or several of those layers of meaning?
- How can you bring light into the darkness – by acts of *hesed*/kindness; by kindling physical and metaphysical light; or by drilling down in your *heshbon ha-nefesh* as you work on learning from how you experience and integrate *yir'ah*, whatever its source, at this time in the year and in your life?

[10] Genesis 12:17.

[11] *Da'at Chochmah U-Mussar*, part 1, page 24.