

**A Moral Virtue for a New Year – by Rabbi Daniel Alexander  
[Abridged from remarks delivered Rosh Hashanah 5761]**

“Suppose there is a heaven. When you arrive, what would you like to hear God say to you?” That is the concluding question Professor James Lipton asks each guest on the television program *Inside the Actor’s Studio*. With greater immediacy, the Hasidic Master, Reb Zusya of Hanipol, contemplated a similar question shortly before his death. As he tearfully told his disciples: “when I appear before the Kaddosh Baruch Hu, the Holy One of Blessing, I will not be asked why I was not Abraham. And I will not be asked why I was not Moses. But I will be asked why I was not Zusya?”

On this day, neither the scene nor the questions are hypothetical for us. For this is Yom Ha-Din, the Day of Judgement, the day when we contemplate our lives in the light of our deaths, when we readjust our vision, redirect our paths, consider who we have become. On this day, we approach the Holy One, each of us imagining: what reception will I receive? Am I the person I ought to be? What teshuvah, returning to the path, do I want to do in the days ahead so that I get the heavenly reception for which I yearn?

Usually, when we Jews think about the development of moral character, we think in terms of behavior: the performance of mitzvot, which are not only desirable but also sacred and obligatory. While some mitzvot seem to be purely ritual (like inaugurating holidays with the lighting of candles) and a few seem completely inexplicable (not mixing wool and flax in a single garment), many mitzvot have moral dimensions: refraining from the shedding of blood, avoiding gossip or other hurtful speech, giving tzedakah, visiting the sick, respecting the elderly, and many more whose performance we regard as solid responsibilities. However, with all due respect to the cogency and value of an ethical system built on mitzvot, I would propose for our consideration at this auspicious season another, equally Jewish model: that propounded by the *Middot* literature, the Medieval literature of Jewish virtues.

Virtue literature assumes that, just as people develop physically and intellectually, they also develop morally, which implies we ought to nurture within ourselves the moral qualities we desire with as much intent as we do the physical or the intellectual. This approach to moral formation begins not with mitzvot but with virtues essential to moral character. The idea is that moral behavior will necessarily follow virtuous character. The question then becomes: with which virtue should we begin to construct our moral selves?

There are many virtues; Classical Christian texts speak of four cardinal virtues (Prudence, Temperance, Justice, and Fortitude), all of which have fine, Jewish equivalents, but none of which strikes me as the core virtue for our purpose. In their recent book entitled *The Jewish Moral Virtues*, Eugene Borowitz and Francine Schwartz highlight twenty-four moral virtues with which they would construct a program of Jewish moral formation, based on the work of a 13<sup>th</sup> century Roman Jew, Yechiel ben Yekutiel HaRofeh. At this time of beginnings, I would propose that we begin with what I regard as the primary Jewish virtue, the one without which the others will not stand, namely *Yirat Shamayim* (or *Yirat Ha-El*).

*Yirat Shamayim*, in its most blunt translation, “fear of Heaven”, is the rabbinic term for the disposition of character that acknowledges the greatness of God and the

relative smallness of humans. I select it even though many of us recoil from the language of “fear”, which implies a childlike impotence and dependency before an authoritarian, parental God, because the term *Yirat Shamayim* has richer dimensions. It also connotes “awe”: a sense of wonder and respect--not fear of punishment for sin, but a sense of inexpressible awe before the Holy One. In a state of such awe, one avoids sin not out of self-interest (before the supreme godfather) but out of the shame that would accompany sin, and a simple, powerful desire to do what is right before the Awesome, Holy One. A sense of awe yields an awareness of moral order and a desire to participate in that moral order.

A few weeks ago at the annual retreat of the CBI board, Peter Sheras asked us to recall the first spiritual experience of our lives . The first I could recall was lying in the grass as a 7 or 8-year child at our Westfield, New Jersey home with the sun gently warming my back, leaning on my elbows and staring into the thick world below the grass tops. The awareness of that tiny, jungle-like world of plants and animals, always present but just out of our usual consciousness, filled me with a sense of wonder about other possible complex worlds, both larger and smaller than those I could perceive, and the Grand Architect of it all. Without moving from my front lawn, I discovered that the world I occupied had become very large, very intricate, supremely beautiful, and seemingly reflective of some marvelous design.

What makes an experience spiritual is that it directs one outside of oneself, heightening one’s awareness of the divine reality of which one is a part, and inspiring a sense of amazement and awe-- *Yirat Shamayim*. We all have such experiences, can draw on them to map our spiritual realities, and allow them to nurture our own sense of awe before heaven.

Going beyond personal experience--what paradigms of *Yirat Shamayim* does the Torah offer? One of the most poignant Biblical portrayals of *teshuvah*, character transformation involving *Yirat Shamayim*, depicts the conflicted character of Ya-acov Avinu, Jacob, the father of the Jewish people. Ya-acov has received his brother’s birthright by stealth and deception; now he must flee for his life into the dry and barren Judean hills. At the moment, his future seems uncertain; Jacob seems to be escaping from any possibility of covenantal continuity with his grandfather Abraham and his father Isaac. As night falls, the pampered Jacob places a rock under his head and dreams about a ladder connecting heaven and earth with angels ascending and descending. He senses God’s presence and evokes the renewal of the covenant first struck with his father and grandfather. Filled with awe and wonder, Jacob awakes and says: “Surely God is in this place and I (Anochi) did not know.” (Genesis 28:16).

David Elcott, a contemporary Jewish teacher, points out two divergent Hasidic understandings of the verse: two attempts to imagine what Jacob did not know, from which we can learn something crucial about the nature of *Yirat Shamayim*. According to the first understanding, the fleeing Jacob is overwrought by fear and anger, plagued by his own deceit and consequent shame. Jacob’s ego is battered; he is weak at the core. When he says “Anochi - I did not know, - I did not know me,” he means that, until that moment, he had not appreciated his own worth-- the divinity lodged within him. With Jacob’s newfound sense of self-worth came the ability to experience the divine presence.

The second, divergent understanding (that of Tiferet Shlomo): just when Jacob

becomes aware of God's immanent presence, he says "Anochi" ("I do not know"), meaning: for God to be present I must not be consumed with my ego. Only by diminishing the ego and by confining one's sense of self-importance, can one allow God-consciousness to enter the heart.

The two contrary understandings yield a harmonious truth: one requires not only a sufficient sense of self-worth even to imagine the capacity to attain this state, but also the ability and volition to reduce one's sense of self--to admit dependence, insufficiency, and relative impotence. In the famous image of Rabbi Simcha Bunim: "Every person should have two pockets so he or she can reach into one or the other according to need. In the right pocket are to be the words: 'For my sake was the world created,' and in the left: 'I am but earth and ashes.'"

For some of us, the greater challenge is to overcome a low sense of self, for others to achieve an adequate dose of humility. More than a few of us face both challenges alternately. When I feel insecure, inadequate, or unimportant, I re-read the first chapter of Genesis. Genesis I reveals nothing about the scientific origins of the universe. Rather, it speaks in deep, resonant tones about the value of human life. It teaches us that – from the view of Torah – human beings were created with the purpose of carrying on the work of a deliberately incomplete creation, each according to her or his capacity. And, lest one bemoan the smallness of one's own capacity with respect to that of others, Genesis I asserts, in its narrative simplicity, that no human can claim superior origins to those of any other.

As for the issue of insufficient humility or modesty, consider a rather different description of human origins by the 11<sup>th</sup> Spanish moralist, Bachya Ibn Pakuda:

We must recall our humble origins. As the Talmud puts it: "Why did God wait so long, not creating humankind until the sixth day of creation? So that if people became puffed up, they could be quickly deflated by pointing out, 'The gnat was created before you.'" (*Sanhedrin* 38a)

Or in the words of the Psalmist: "Lord, what are we that You bother with us, human beings that You involve Yourself with us?" It is only God's involvement in our lives that makes us significant.

Perhaps the virtue of *Yirat Shamayim* is not such a hard sell, certainly not at this time of sober beginnings that is the Jewish New Year. And yet, I must admit I do not easily hold this virtue in my heart as constantly as I might desire. I suspect others have the same problem and that is why above the arks housing the Torah scrolls in many synagogues, including the ark in our small sanctuary, are the Talmudic words, *Da Lifnai Mi Attah Omed – Know Before Whom You Stand*. Whether or not those words grace the space in which I pray, I often imagine them there. *Yirat Shamayim* is the solid foundation upon which a well-constructed system of Jewish ethics should be built.

A story by way of conclusion:

Reb Naftali, the Rebbe of Ropshitz, was taking an unaccustomed way home when he came across a magnificent estate. He approached the man he saw patrolling the grounds, and asked him for whom he worked. The guard mentioned the name of one of the great men of the city and said he was

employed to protect the estate. He then asked Reb Naftali, "And for whom do you work?" That question hit the Ropshitzer so hard that he said to the man, "Will you come work for me?" The man replied, "And what would be my duties?" Answered Reb Naftali, "To remind me."

Because we do not always possess *Yirat Shamayim*, we require such reminders to move us from where we are to where we want to be. Because we do not always sense the reality that there is a magnificent presence in the universe before whom we stand, we require inspiration to help us get in touch with and maintain a sense of awe before heaven. In that spirit do we Jews assemble in congregational communities. In that hope do we pick up books with time-worn prayers, evocations of collective Jewish spiritual encounter; if we allow them to, these become the means for us to know before whom we stand, for whom we work, and from whom we derive the deepest and most abiding meaning our lives can have. God willing, these reminders can help us attain a sense of awe before heaven, the foundational virtue for becoming the people we wish to become and, ultimately, for receiving the heavenly reception we desire. *Ken Y'hi Ratzon*. May it be so.