

Torah Table Talk

The Essence of Religion: What Does it Mean ‘to Revere God?’

Parshat Ekev
Deuteronomy 7:12 – 11:25

As Moses reviews Israel’s recent history, he develops some of the essential them of the Torah: free will, reward and punishment, and accountability. He reminds the people of some of the disastrous events during their sojourn in the wilderness such as the worship of the golden calf and the rebellion of Korach. But he also encourages the people by telling that God will reward them and care for them as he has done throughout their time in the wilderness. He also reminds the people that their relationship to God is based on both love and fear or reverence.

Deuteronomy 10:12

And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you? Only this: to fear the Lord your God, to walk only in His paths, to love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and soul.

1. What is Yirat Shamayim or fear of heaven? Many translators choose to translate the word Yirah as reverence or awe. Do you think this is a better understanding of this word? What do fear and awe have in common and how are they different from one another?
2. Can one both love and fear God at the same time? Who else can we apply both of these emotions to simultaneously?
3. **A Jewish Theology, Rabbi Louis Jacobs** - “In the Bible there are many references both to love of God and the fear of God but nowhere is a clear distinction made between the two. They both seem to express an especially intense relation with God especially realized in terms of high ethical conduct. The fear of God in the Bible frequently refers to an extraordinary degree of piety and moral worth....In Medieval thought a distinction is made between two types of fear. The first is Yirat Onesh, fear of punishment, fear of the consequences of wrong-doing. The second and more elevated is Yirat Ha-Romemut, fear in the presence of the exalted majesty of God, the dread and awe the creature feels when confronted with the splendor of the creator.”

Berachot 33b

Rabbi Hanina said: Everything is in the hand of heaven except fear of heaven, as it says, “And now what does the Lord your God require of you? ONLY to fear...(Deuteronomy

10:12)” Is fear of Heaven such a little thing? * Has not Rabbi Hanina said in the name of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai: The Holy One, blessed be He, has in his treasury naught but a store of fear of heaven, as it says, “The fear of the Lord is His treasure (Isaiah 33:6)?” Yes for Moses it was a small thing; as Rabbi Hanina said, ‘To illustrate by a parable, if a man is asked for a big article and he has it, it seems like a small article to him, if he is asked for a small article and he does not have it, it seems like a big article to him.’

**Moses prefaces fear of the Lord by saying, “God only requires it.” The implication is that it is not such a demanding request. The Talmud is troubled by this since to attain fear of heaven is a great accomplishment.*

1. This statement in the Talmud seems to suggest that most aspects of human destiny are determined by God. The only aspect of life we have full control over is “fear of God.” Do you agree or disagree with this statement?
2. Why does Talmud suggest that Moses considered Yirat Shamayim to be a small thing?
3. What things in life do you think are in the “hands of heaven” and what aspects of life do you feel we have control over?

Moses Maimonides

Free will is bestowed on every individual.... Let not the notion expressed by foolish gentiles and most of the senseless folk of Israel pass through your mind that at the beginning of a person’s existence the Almighty decrees that he is to be righteous or wicked. That is not so. Every human being may become righteous like Moses our teacher, or wicked like Jeroboam; wise or foolish, merciful or cruel, niggardly or generous, and so with all other qualities.

1. What do the qualities that Maimonides mentions in this statement have to do with Yirat Shamayim? Can a person live in awe and fear of God and still be immoral?
2. Do you believe people have free will to choose how they act? To what extent is human behavior determined by genetics, socialization, and family dynamics? How would Maimonides have reconciled the conflict between free will with the forces in the world that influence and shape human actions?

How to use Torah Table Talk

1. *Read the sheet out loud to one another. Discuss what it has to say.*
2. *Focus on the text in the box. It is taken from Biblical, post-biblical and modern Jewish sources. What does it mean? How does it make you feel?*
3. *Try to answer the questions following the text.*
4. *This is not a test and there are many correct answers and interpretations to each question. Share your ideas with one another. Be open and honest in sharing your ideas.*

***“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”***