YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Yishai Jeselsohn**

**PARASHAT YITRO**

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**Dedicated in memory of**

**Avraham Rymald z"l**

**Avraham ben Elimelech Shimon**

**whose Yahrzeit is 21 Shvat**

**by the Horowitz Family**

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**Love and Fear in the Service of God**

**I. "Thus shall you say to the house of Yaakov and tell the children of Israel"**

Before the Israelites received the Torah, God prefaced His words to Moshe with a short introduction:

And Moshe went up to God, and the Lord called to him out of the mountain, saying: Thus shall you say to the house of Yaakov, and tell the children of Israel: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself. Now, therefore, if you will indeed hearken to My voice, and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own treasure from among all peoples; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel. (*Shemot* 19:3-6)

What stands out in this introduction is the repetition in the first verse: "Thus shall you say to the house of Yaakov, and tell the children of Israel." *Midrash Shemot Rabba* sees this repetition as stemming from the difference between men and women and their respective abilities to receive the word of God in the manner that is suitable for them:

"Thus shall you say to the house of Yaakov" – these are the women. He said to him: Say to them the major principles, which they are able to hear [i.e., understand]. "And tell the children of Israel" – these are the men. He said to him: Say to them the fine points, which they are able to hear [i.e., understand].  
Another explanation: Why to the women first? Because they act quickly [lit. zealously] with regard to the *mitzvot.*

Another explanation: So that they will guide their children to Torah. (*Shemot Rabba*, *Yitro* 28)

Rashi adds another layer, which is not explicitly stated in the *midrash*:

"[**Say**] to the house of Yaakov" – these are the women; to them you shall speak in gentle language.

"And **tell** the children of Israel" – explain to the men the punishments and the details of the commandments in words that are as tough as sinews. (Rashi, *Shemot* 19:3)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* has difficulty with this interpretation: Is it indeed possible that Moshe would change his manner of speaking when addressing men and women?

This is difficult, for we do not find that God sent Moshe on two missions, but rather one mode of speech to all of them together, men and women; if His words are harsh, together they will hear Him, and if they are gentle, together they will hear Him. And you cannot say that when Moshe speaks, he should change his mode of speech from how it was said, God forbid, for you find that at the end of His words, God says to him (v. 6): "These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel," and *Chazal* said about this: This is what you shall say, no less and no more. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Shemot* 19:3)

Therefore, the *Or Ha-Chaim* chooses to explain the repetition in a completely different way, according to which God explains to Moshe the thinking and intention behind the precise plan of how the Torah will be given to Israel – in such a way that they will receive the full benefit that can be received from it:

What we understand from the entire Torah is that the Lord, God of Israel, is always concerned with bestowing good on His creatures, more so even than the creatures themselves are anxious to receive the good. This is because of the enormity of His goodness. This principle applies to an even greater degree to the children of Israel. God employs His wisdom in order to increase our reward and good, because that is what He desires. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

**II. Love and Fear**

From this we come to a discussion about the best way for Israel to receive the Torah – out of love or out of fear?

We are commanded in the Torah about both modes of service: "And you shall love the Lord your God" (*Devarim* 6:5), on the one hand, and "And you shall fear your Lord" (*Vayikra* 25:17), on the other. King David as well referred to these two modes of service in almost parallel verses: "Serve the Lord with gladness" (*Tehillim* 100:2), on the one hand, and "Serve the Lord with fear" (*Tehillim* 2:11), on the other.

We find in several places that serving God out of love is greater than serving Him out of fear. The Babylonian Talmud states with regard to repentance:

Great is repentance, for it brings healing to the world, as it is stated: "I will heal their backsliding; I will love them freely" (*Hoshea* 14:5). Rabbi Chama bar Chanina pointed out a contradiction: It is written: "Return, you backsliding children" (*Yirmeyahu* 3:22), you who were formerly backsliding; and it is written: "I will heal your backsliding"! There is no difficulty: in the one case, the reference is where they return out of love; in the other, out of fear. (*Yoma* 86a)

So also in the Jerusalem Talmud:

Religious out of fear, like Iyov. Religious out of love, like Avraham. No one is beloved as much as the religious out of love, like Avraham. (Jerusalem Talmud, *Berakhot* 9:5)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* also proves this from the verses, by interpreting textual allusions (*remez*):

God has revealed that the reward in store for someone who keeps the commandments out of fear is only half of the reward in store for one who observes out of love. We know this from two verses dealing with the reward in store for keeping the commandments. In one of them (*Devarim* 7:9) it is stated: "for a thousand generations," whereas in the other (*Shemot* 2:6), it is stated: "for [two] thousands." The reward for those who observe the commandments out of fear is entrusted to a celestial administrator in charge of a thousand, whereas the reward in for those who observe the commandments out of love is entrusted to a celestial administrator in charge of two thousand. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

The Ramban uses this principle to answer in a single swoop a question connected to both Biblical exegesis and Talmudic reasoning. At the beginning of tractate *Yevamot* (3a and on), the Gemara discusses the question of what takes precedence over the other, a positive commandment or a negative commandment, and famously concludes that "a positive commandment sets aside a negative commandment."

Two central approaches have been suggested to understand this rule. Rav Nissim Gaon, in his commentary to *Shabbat* (133a), understands that by definition, negative commandments do not apply when in conflict with a positive commandment, and thus there is no contradiction between the negative commandment and the positive commandment. The Ramban in our *parasha* adopted a different approach, in his attempt to explain why it says in the first set of the Ten Commandments: "Remember (*zakhor*)the day of Shabbat," a positive commandment, and in the second set of the Ten Commandments, it says: "Keep (*shamor*)the day of Shabbat" (*Devarim* 5:12), which is understood as a negative commandment:

It is also true that the dimension of "remembering" alludes to a positive commandment, which issues forth from the attribute of love, which relates to that of mercy, for he who does his master's command is beloved of him and his master shows him mercy. But the dimension of "keeping" is regarding a negative commandment, which relates to the attribute of justice and issues forth from that of fear, for he who guards himself from doing anything which does not please his master does so out of fear of him. It is for this reason that a positive commandment is greater than a negative commandment, just as love is greater than fear, for he who fulfills and observes the will of his master with his body and his possessions is greater than he who guards himself from doing that which is not pleasing to him. This is why the Rabbis have said that a positive commandment sets aside a negative commandment. (Ramban, *Shemot* 20:8)

The Ramban teaches us a great foundation regarding the love and fear of God, in addition to his technical explanation as to why a positive commandment is given preference over a negative commandment. First, love of God is expressed with a positive commandment, whereas a negative commandment gives expression to fear of God. The Ramban goes on to explain that this is the reason a person is punished only for negative commandments – because they constitute an insult to God, whereas the violation of a positive commandment, which involves only the failure to do good, is not sufficient cause for punishment.

Ostensibly, then, God should have tried to give the Torah to Israel in the midst of a revelation of the great love between Him and them, so that Israel would indeed worship Him out of love and thus merit the great reward that such service earns.

**III. The Problem with Love**

It turns out, however, that things are not so simple.

There is, however, a side to the dimension of love that can cause evil. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

What about love can cause evil? The Jerusalem Talmud highlights the challenging aspect of love, which makes it necessary to find a careful combination of love and fear:

Act out of love and act out of fear. Act out of love, because if you are tempted to hate, know that you love, and one who loves does not hate. Act out of fear, because if you are tempted to rebel, know that you fear, and one who fears does not rebel. (Jerusalem Talmud, *Berakhot* 9:5)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* explains this idea with practical examples:

For [love] will not suffice to prevent a person at all times from violating a commandment at some point, for he will say that owing to his closeness to God and intimacy with Him, He will not be particular about this with him, as is the common and ordinary way among people. If we take Moshe as an example, we see that owing to his great closeness to and intimacy with God, he inadvertently said to Him: "Send, I pray You, by the hand of him whom you will send" (*Shemot* 4:13), "Why have You dealt ill with this people" (*Shemot* 5:22), "You have not delivered" (*Shemot* 5:23). Because he was so close to God, his fear of Him waned, for it is obvious that a person who was not so close to God would have been overcome with fear and dread. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* understands the love of God in its plain sense – like the feeling of love that one has for parents, friends, or a spouse. Such a feeling of love is liable to cause a person not infrequently to act in a careless manner, precisely because of the special closeness and openness that accompany that love.

It seems that this is not how everyone understood the commandment of loving God. The Rambam in his *Hilkhot Teshuva* implies that we are in fact dealing with the simple feeling of love with which we are familiar from the language of our daily lives:

What is the proper [degree] of love? That a person should love God with a very great and exceeding love, until his soul is bound up in the love of God. Thus, he will always be obsessed with this love as if he is lovesick. [A lovesick person's] thoughts are never diverted from the love of that woman. He is always obsessed with her… This is what Shlomo stated: "I am lovesick" (*Shir ha-Shirim* 2:5), and the totality of *Shir ha-Shirim* is a parable describing [this love]. (Rambam, *Hilkhot Teshuva* 10:3)

In his *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, however, when the Rambam defines the mitzva, he takes a slightly different approach:

The third commandment is that He commanded us about loving Him. And that is that we should think about and contemplate His commandments, His statements, and His actions until we comprehend Him and derive the greatest pleasure from that comprehension. And that is the love that is obligated. (*Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, positive commandment 3)

The love referred to here involves the desire and longing to know God in the best possible manner. According to such a conception of love, it seems that the fear that a person might allow himself to utter unbecoming remarks about God and even spurn His commandments is more remote.

However, even according to the Rambam, it is important to balance these two modes of God's service:

What is the path [to attain] love and fear of Him? When a person contemplates His wondrous and great deeds and creations and appreciates His infinite wisdom that surpasses all comparison, he will immediately love, praise, and glorify [Him], yearning with tremendous desire to know [God's] great name, as David stated: "My soul thirsts for the Lord, for the living God" (*Tehillim* 42:3). When he [continues] to reflect on these same matters, he will immediately recoil in awe and fear, appreciating how he is a tiny, lowly, and dark creature, standing with his flimsy, limited, wisdom before the One who is of perfect knowledge. (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 2:2)

It seems that the *Or Ha-Chaim* and the Rambam share the concern that a person may come to excessive love of God at the expense of fear, though they relate to that love in different ways.

The *Or Ha-Chaim* sees the love of God as similar to the natural feeling of love that a person has for his friend, and thus he is concerned about coarseness, or a lack of commitment, should this love decrease or stop. This where fear comes into play, as a binding mode of Divine service.

The Rambam, on the other hand, sees love as knowledge and recognition, and thus the fear is of arrogance; therefore, fear comes to balance matters and remind the person of his rightful place.

It seems that also with regard to fear, they relate to different types. Whereas for the *Or Ha-Chaim*, the fear that is needed is the fear of punishment that will prevent a person from spurning the commandments, the Rambam describes “fear” that is more a matter of awe at God’s loftiness, that highlights one’s smallness in relation to Him.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**IV. The Winning Combination at Mount Sinai**

The *Or Ha-Chaim* continues:

Therefore, when God was about to give the Torah to the people, He thought how to make that event one which would bestow the maximum merit on them. He had two options. 1) To address them with words of love and fondness. The result of such an address would be that they would accept the Torah and qualify for double the reward… 2) God's second alternative was to address the children of Israel in His capacity as a King speaking to His servants. The advantage of such an approach would be that the Israelites would not dare take any of the commandments lightly. On the other hand, such an approach would make it impossible for them to merit the greatest reward possible.

Keeping all this in mind, God opted for a method which would combine both approaches, the approach of love and the approach of authority and fear…. "Thus you shall **say**"… involves gentle speech, reflecting an approach of love and fondness, "and **tell**," employing also words tough as sinews, reflecting an approach of instilling fear and fright. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

In his customary way, the *Or Ha-Chaim* goes into the details of the precise wording of the verses, proving in a most meticulous manner that this indeed is their intent:

God was precise when He addressed "the house of Yaakov" with "**saying**" and "the children of Israel" with the harsher "**telling**," informing them of what was missing in each of these two groupings. For "the house of Yaakov" refers to the lower level of our holy nation, who do not reach the service of God out of love, but only out of fear. Therefore, He commands them that they must add service out of love that is alluded to in soft speech, as we have mentioned. And to "the children of Israel" who are the elite who reach the aspect of love, He said "**tell**," for love will not suffice for them, and they need fear *and* love, for the reason that we have written above. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

The name Yaakov reflects the dimension of "heel" (*akev*). This name indicates the smallness of Yaakov in relation to Esav. To this name, which is full of fear, one must add the dimension of love found in "saying." On the other hand, the name Israel, "for you have striven [*sarita*]with God and with men, and have prevailed" (*Bereishit* 32:29), indicates Yaakov's might and his closeness to God, that God agreed to the blessings of Yitzchak.[[2]](#footnote-2) Thus, this name must be joined to the dimension of fear for the sake of balance, and therefore it is associated specifically with "telling."

These two dimensions are also expressed later in God's words to Moshe, within the preface with which we opened: "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians." Ostensibly, it would have been more appropriate to say "what I did for you," for Israel. Why does God choose to note specifically the punishment inflicted upon Egypt?

The *Or Ha-Chaim* answers as follows:

According to our explanation that God was referring to two dimensions, that of love and that of fear, therefore He included the two of them in this statement. The fear, in His words, "what I did to the Egyptians," that is, that I inflicted revenge on those who refused to do as I had said, countless evil plagues on those who refused to do as I had commanded to send you out. And this was a sign for you, to those who transgress My commandments, that I will take revenge from them by way of many troubles, as you have seen, so learn a lesson… He also demonstrated here the dimension of love and fondness, that He did all this *on our behalf*, changing the laws of nature and destroying a nation for us. Therefore, a person should become enthused with the love of the Creator who marvelously bestowed His kindness upon them. This is the dimension of love of the Lord our God. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, *Shemot* 3:20)

It is possible that only the combination of these two dimensions can lead to the desired result:

Now therefore, if you will indeed hearken to My voice, and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own treasure from among all peoples; for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. (*Shemot* 19: 5-6)

**V. Fear out of Love**

It seems that God’s words were realized in a most precise manner. For future generations, regarding the mitzvaof remembering the assembly at Mount Sinai, it is explicitly stated that the main thing the people of Israel were to "learn" there is the fear of God:

Only take heed to yourself, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes saw, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life; but make them known to your children and to your children's children; the day that you stood before the Lord your God in Chorev, when the Lord said to me: Assemble the people to Me, and I will make them hear My words, that they may learn to fear Me all the days that they live upon the earth, and that they may teach their children. (*Devarim* 4:9-10)

It is also possible to explain in this manner why God overturned the mountain above the people of Israel like a tub, despite their having already said: "We shall do and we shall hear." This is the explanation provided by the *Tosafot*:

Lest they retract when they see the great fire which caused their souls to depart. (*Tosafot*, *Shabbat* 88a, s.v. *kafa*)

The Maharal chooses another approach, that emphasizes the necessity of the Torah for the world:

That which He overturned the mountain above them like a tub, this was so that Israel would not be able to say they received the Torah of their own volition, and had they not been willing, they would not have received the Torah. This would not be in keeping with the loftiness of the Torah, for the existence of the entire world depends on it, and if there were no Torah, the world would return to chaos and formlessness. Therefore it would not be appropriate that acceptance of the Torah should be Israel's choice, but rather that the Holy One, blessed be He, obliged and compelled them to receive the Torah, for it would have been impossible without that for the world not to return to chaos and formlessness. (*Tiferet Yisrael* 32)

According to the *Or Ha-Chaim's* approach, we can propose a third approach – one that connects the great fear that is noted here with the great love that is validated in God's revelation to the people of Israel at Mount Sinai. The Torah emphasizes God's direct speech to Israel at Sinai:

For ask now of the days past, which were before you, since the day that God created man upon the earth, and from the one end of heaven to the other, whether there has been any such thing as this great thing is, or has been heard like it? Did ever a people hear the voice of God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and live? (*Devarim* 4:32-33)

The Gemara in *Shabbat* (88a) describes how with every word that issued from God's mouth, the souls of Israel departed from their bodies, and therefore they asked of Moshe that he speak to them, and not God. We saw above in the words of the *Or Ha-Chaim* that one of the expressions of love involves the removal of barriers and the direct appeal of one to the other. Thus, God addressed Israel directly, but this direct appeal, instead of planting a feeling of love in the hearts of Israel, resulted in the opposite – sowing fear in them.

The *Meshekh Chokhma* notes this point and understands this as the foundation of overturning the mountain above the heads of Israel and removing their free will:

But all of Israel, who were not worthy of such a level and prophecy, but only to uphold the religion, so that nobody come to deny a single thing by way of a sign or a miracle, were forced to rise to such a level to hear the voice of God speaking from the fire… so they would be witnesses to his prophecy… since their free will was removed from them, and their perception was clear without any admixture of imagination or corporeality at all, to the point that they were forced, like angels who are forced by their intellects. About this it is stated: "He overturned the mountain over them like a tub," that is, they were forced by way of their intellects and comprehension to receive the Torah. (*Meshekh Chokhma*, Introduction to *Sefer Shemot*).

According to his understanding, Israel's free choice was not removed from them for even a moment. God did not force them with threats to receive the Torah, but merely revealed Himself to them. Seeing God directly, face to face, is what disabled further choice. Once a person recognizes the magnitude of truth and the power of God, he cannot abandon His words. Thus, it turns out that in the depth of love, there is also fear.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. It should be noted that in his *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot* (positive commandment 4), the Rambam explicitly relates to and recognizes the fear of punishment – but here, as a balance to the love of God, he chooses precisely the awe of God’s loftiness. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Rashi, *Bereishit* 33:29. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)