



The Root of Fearing Hashem

Re'ah

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Introduction: What Is Yirah?

The *Rambam*¹ writes that the *mitzvah* to fear Hashem is that “We are commanded to have a belief in *yirah* (fear) of Hashem and to have a sense of dread (*pachad*) of Him, and we should not be like the disloyal heretics who deny G-d.”

What is the definition of *yirah*? Is it the same thing as *pachad*, “fear”? Also, why is being disloyal to Hashem an absence of *yirah* (fear of Hashem)? What does a lack of *emunah* – heresy - have to do with a lack of *yirah*?

And, why is the Rambam saying that the *mitzvah* to have *yirah* of Hashem is included in our beliefs of *emunah*? What does being afraid of Hashem have to do with *emunah*? We know that the opposite of *emunah* is to deny Hashem’s existence - if a person doesn’t fear Hashem, then it shows he doesn’t have *emunah*, because he is denying Hashem’s existence. But why indeed is a lack of *yirah* considered to be like denying Hashem?

Two Levels – Fear of Punishment and Fear of Hashem’s Exaltedness

When a person doesn’t fear Hashem, the Rambam equates this with denying Hashem. This is a new kind of denial towards Hashem which differs from the regular kind of “denial of Hashem” that we are more familiar with. We will try to understand the Rambam’s words.

The *mitzvah* to have “*yirah*” of Hashem, itself, is a matter of debate. Some opinions say that the *mitzvah* to have *yirah* is to have *yiras ha’onesh*, fear of punishment. Others say that the *mitzvah* of *yirah* is to have *yiras haromemus*, to be “in awe of the exaltedness of Hashem”. The Rambam’s language implies the first opinion, that the *mitzvah* to fear Hashem is to have *yiras ha’onesh*, to fear punishment, and in addition to this, the Rambam also writes that the *mitzvah* to fear punishment applies at all times.

What about *yiras haromemus*, being in awe of Hashem’s exaltedness? When does it apply? How often should a person make use of *yiras haromemus*? The Ramchal writes in *Mesillas Yesharim* that *yiras haromemus* applies only at certain times.

As for *yiras haonesh*, the Rambam is saying that *yiras haonesh* applies at all times. The Rambam maintains that *yirah* is one of the six *mitzvos* which applies at all times, and since the Rambam is of the opinion that the *mitzvah* of *yirah* is *yiras ha’onesh* (fear of punishment), that would mean that

¹ *Rambam Sefer HaMitzvos: 4*

fear of punishment applies at all times. Therefore, *yiras ha'onesh* is not only a concept that should be used when a person feels like committing a sin, so he awakens fear of punishment in order to prevent himself from the sinning.

The Rambam's View - Fear of Punishment Is Part of Having Emunah

According to the Rambam, a person needs to use fear of punishment all the time. Why, then, is there a special obligation on a person to awaken fear of punishment when he feels like sinning?

It is because there are two categories of *mitzvos*: an “obligatory” *mitzvah* and an “existing, but non-obligatory *mitzvah*”. Fear of punishment is an “obligatory” *mitzvah* upon a person when he feels like sinning, but during all other times, although fear of punishment is not “obligatory” upon the person, there is still a *mitzvah* to fear punishment.

When the Rambam says that one should have *yirah* at all times, can this mean the non-obligatory *mitzvah* to fear punishment at all times? Simply speaking, *yirah* is a means by which a person can avoid sin. However, the Rambam says that we must fear Hashem all the time, and that this is part of having *emunah*. Thus, *yirah* is more than just avoiding a sin. It is so that we shouldn't turn into deniers of Hashem, who are disloyal to Hashem. By fearing Hashem we can avoid sinning, but it is also about being loyal all the time – so having *yirah* is part of our *emunah* in Hashem.

The first aspect, fear of punishment so that we should avoid sin, is the lower use of *yirah*. The second aspect, fear of punishment so that we should increase our *emunah* in Hashem, is the higher purpose of *yirah*.

Thus, according to the Rambam's view, the *mitzvah* of *yirah* which we have on a constant basis is essentially to be in awe of Hashem for the purpose of maintaining our *emunah* (belief in Hashem) at all times, whereas the *mitzvah* of *yirah* when we feel like sinning is only for the specific purpose of avoiding sin [but such *yirah* only serves to prevent one from sinning, and it does not bring a person to increased belief in Hashem].

When one sins he doesn't get punished right away. If people would get punished right away when they sin, no one would sin (because everyone would lose their free will). So there must be a higher function of *yirah* other than fearing punishment. By having *yirah* even when we aren't tempted with sin, we gain *yirah* at all times, not just during a time of temptation. That is why we have an obligation to have *yirah* constantly, even when we aren't tempted with a sin. It is so that we should maintain our *emunah* in Hashem.

Therefore, according to the Rambam, we can understand that the concept of *yirah* includes being afraid of Hashem when we are tempted with a sin, as well as during all other times. That is the obligatory *mitzvah* that the Rambam is speaking about, of having *yirah* at all times. According to the Rambam, *yirah* is a part of having *emunah* in Hashem's Divine Providence, and this is an obligation that applies at all times.

However, the *Sefer HaChinuch* maintains that there is an obligatory *mitzvah* of *yirah* only when one is being tempted with a sin, but during all other times, when one is not being tempted with a sin, there is a non-obligatory *mitzvah* to have *yirah* at all other times. Thus, according to the *Sefer HaChinuch*, the *mitzvah* to have fear Hashem is solely for the purpose of avoiding sin, and it is not for the purpose of increasing one's belief in Hashem.

In summary, the Rambam's view is that fearing punishment is for the purpose of increasing *emunah* in Hashem, while the view of the *Sefer HaChinuch* is that fear of punishment is for the purpose of avoiding sin.

Yiras HaRomemus – Awe of Hashem's Exaltedness and Fear of Angering The King

The Rambam also describes a higher level of *yirah*, which is *yiras haromemus* (fear of Hashem's exaltedness): "One should fear transgressing Hashem's will, so that one shouldn't make Hashem angry, and also because one should feel the embarrassment and lowliness of being a mere human being, in front of the King of all kings."

The *Mesillas Yescharim* describes the level called "*chassidus*" (piety), which is loftier than fear of punishment. It would seem that *chassidus* is synonymous with *yiras haromemus*. However, the Rambam's description of *yiras haromemus* is a loftier level than the *Mesillas Yescharim*'s description of *chassidus*. This is because the Rambam explains that there are two parts to *yiras haromemus*: to fear sin because I am in awe of Hashem [which would be equal to the Ramchal's description of *chassidus*], and also to fear sin because one does not want to "anger the King". When one is afraid of angering Hashem, it is a higher level than just being afraid of Hashem's exaltedness.

Thus, *yiras haromemus* includes feeling embarrassed in front of Hashem, and it includes fear of angering Hashem. [We will return to discussing this in a later lesson.]

Fear of Hashem's Name and Fear of A Torah Scholar

The Rambam says that the *mitzvah* to fear Hashem also includes not saying His name in vain, and the Rambam brings proof to this from a teaching of the Gemara², that fear of Hashem means that one is afraid of uttering His Name in vain. The *Rishonim*, however, define the very *mitzvah* of *yiras Hashem* as "to fear His Name", by not uttering His Name in vain. In the view of the *Rishonim*, not saying Hashem's name in vain is more than just an example of the *mitzvah* to fear Hashem – it is the very definition of the *mitzvah* to fear Hashem. What does fearing Hashem's Name in vain have to do with fearing Hashem?

Also, the *Rishonim* include fear of a Torah scholar in the *mitzvah* to fear Hashem's Name. The Rambam does not mention anything about fearing a Torah scholar. What is behind this dispute?

² *Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin*

Furthermore, the Rambam explains that fearing Hashem includes not saying Hashem's name in vain, because if one says His name in vain he doesn't fear Him. Why isn't saying avoiding saying Hashem's name in vain considered part of fearing Hashem, and how is it different than any other sin? Why aren't all other sins included in the *mitzvah* of fearing Hashem?

In order to know the answers to this, we will need to know: When the Torah says “Fear Hashem your G-d”³, does this refer to fearing Hashem or fear from uttering His Name?

The Rambam defines *yiras Hashem* as “fearing Hashem”, to fear Hashem Himself, and as a result of fearing Hashem, one should not say His name in vain. According to the Rambam, the *mitzvah* of *yiras Hashem*, in essence, is to fear Hashem Himself, and the *mitzvah* is not defined as fearing His name. (It is similar to the Gemara that says that the *mitzvah* to fear the *Beis HaMikdash* is not to fear the *Beis HaMikdash*, but to fear Hashem.⁴)

There are many different terms of *yirah*, such as *yiras Hashem*, *yiras shomayim*, *yiras havayah*, *yiras Elokim*, etc. But what is the simple meaning of *yirah*? What is the simplest definition of fearing Hashem? The Rambam is saying that it is defined as a fear of Hashem Himself, while the other *Rishonim* are describing it as a fear of Hashem's Name.

The *Rishonim*'s view is that fearing a Torah scholar is a result of fearing Hashem's Name. This is because the letters of *havayah* of Hashem's Name are on a Torah scholar. For this reason, one should fear Torah scholars, because the name of *havayah* is upon them. The Rambam, however, is of the view that the *mitzvah* to fear Hashem is solely because one needs to have *emunah* in Hashem – and this would not include fear of a Torah scholar.

The *Rishonim* are understanding that just as one should fear Hashem Himself, so is there a separate *mitzvah* to fear His name, on the same level of fearing Hashem. The Rambam, however, says that fearing Hashem's Name is a result of fearing Hashem, but it is not on the same level as fearing Hashem Himself. It is an aspect of fearing Hashem, but it is not the same thing as fearing Hashem. The *Rishonim*, however, are understanding that fearing Hashem's Name is on the same level as fearing Hashem Himself.

Thus, according to the *Rishonim*, the *mitzvah* to fear Hashem, which they defined as fearing His Name, includes fear of a Torah scholar, and this is because the Gemara expounds from the verse “Fear Hashem your G-d” that this includes fearing a Torah scholar.⁵ The Rambam, however, does not discuss fear of a Torah scholar when discussing the *mitzvah* to fear Hashem. This is because according to the Rambam, the *mitzvah* to fear Hashem is defined as fearing Hashem alone.⁶

3 Devarim 6:13

4 Talmud Bavli Yevamos 6a

5 Talmud Bavli Nedarim 32a

6 Editor's Note: Although the Gemara learns from the verse “Fear Hashem your G-d” that this *mitzvah* includes fearing a Torah scholar, the Rambam's view is that the Gemara's intention is not to include fear of a Torah scholar in the *mitzvah* of fearing of Hashem, but that it is an additional *mitzvah*. The *Rishonim*, however, are understanding the Gemara's teaching to include fearing Torah scholars in the *mitzvah* to fear Hashem.

In Summary

Thus, in summary so far, we have explained here that there is an argument between the *Sefer HaChinuch* and the Rambam if the purpose of the *mitzvah* of *yiras Hashem* (fearing Hashem) is for having *emunah* in Hashem, or if it is solely for the purpose of avoiding sin. The Rambam's view is that *yirah* is all about *emunah* in Hashem, whereas the *Sefer HaChinuch*'s view is that *yirah* is entirely for the purpose of avoiding sin.

We have also explained here another dispute, between the Rambam and the other *Rishonim*, if the *mitzvah* of fearing Hashem's name is part of the *mitzvah* of fearing Hashem (the view of the Rambam), or if it is an entirely separate *mitzvah* (the view of the other *Rishonim*).

An In-Depth Understanding of the Argument of the Rambam and Sefer HaChinuch

Now let us consider the two different levels of *yirah*, fear of punishment (*yiras ha'onesh*) and fear of Hashem's exaltedness (*yiras haromemus*), in light of what we have explained here.

According to the Rambam's view, fearing a Torah scholar has nothing to do with fearing Hashem, because the *mitzvah* of fearing Hashem includes fear of punishment, and there is no need to fear being punished by the Torah scholar. This is because fear of punishment can only be for the purpose of increasing one's *emunah* in Hashem, and it has no other role.

Thus, according to the Rambam, when one fears Hashem because he has *emunah* in Hashem's existence, he fears Him not because he is afraid of getting punished for sinning, but because this will serve as a vehicle to bring him to greater awareness of Hashem. The Rambam's description of *yirah* is essentially an intermediate level between simple *yiras ha'onesh* (fear of punishment for sins) and *yiras haromemeus* (being in awe of Hashem's exaltedness), because by having *emunah* in Hashem and desisting from sin as a result of one's belief in Hashem, one increases his *emunah* and he is brought to a sense of Hashem's exaltedness.

Thus, the Rambam's view is that the purpose of *yirah* is not to fear the punishment of sin, but to fear punishment as a result of increasing one's *emunah* in Hashem. Fearing punishment serves to increase one's *emunah* in Hashem, and as a result of increased *emunah*, one graduates from fear of punishment to awe of Hashem's exaltedness.

On a subtler level, the Rambam's definition of *yirah* is really containing three levels: Lower *yiras ha'onesh*, higher *yiras ha'onesh*, and *yiras haromemeus*. The bridging point between higher *yiras ha'onesh* and *yiras haromemus* is *emunah* - to fear Hashem because one believes in Him. And, according to the Rambam, *emunah* is also the root of the ability to have *yiras haromemus*, because the entire *mitzvah* of *yirah* according to the Rambam is to fear Hashem for the purpose of believing more in Hashem.

According to the *Sefer HaChinuch*, however, one needs to fear punishment solely for the purpose of avoiding sin. How would a person come to level of *yiras haromemus*, then? How would a person

rise from the level of fear of punishment to an awe of Hashem's exaltedness? For this reason, the *Sefer HaChinuch* does not include *yiras haromemus* as part of the *mitzvah* to fear Hashem. Instead, the *Sefer HaChinuch* would hold like the other views of the *Rishonim*, that there is a separate *mitzvah* to fear Hashem's Name, and *yiras haromemus* would be included in this *mitzvah*, according to the *Sefer HaChinuch*.

Thus, according to the view of *Sefer HaChinuch*, the *mitzvah* of fearing Hashem includes only *yiras ha'onesh* (fear of punishment), while the Rambam's view is that the *mitzvah* includes both forms of *yirah*, both *yiras ha'onesh* and *yiras haromemus*, as a result of increasing one's *emunah* in Hashem.

In Conclusion

In summation, there are three levels of *yirah*: The lower use of fear of punishment, the higher use of fear of punishment, and the fear of Hashem's exaltedness. Within fear of exaltedness, the Rambam has also said that there are two different aspects (the fear that results from being embarrassed in front of Hashem, and the fear of angering Hashem).