

**Yirah – Understanding Biblical Fear and
Awe for Today's World**

Ari N. Margolis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for
Ordination

Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion
School of Rabbinic Studies
Los Angeles, California

February 16, 2010

Advisor: Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction -----	p. 1
Chapter 1: Background of <i>Yirah</i> -----	p. 7
Chapter 2: נִיחַ in Leviticus -----	p. 13
Chapter 3: <i>Yirat Adonai</i> – The Source of Wisdom in Proverbs -----	p. 34
Chapter 4: <i>Yirah</i> and the Ten Commandments – Exodus and Deuteronomy -----	p. 78
Chapter 5: <i>Yirah</i> – A Difference Between Ezra and Nehemiah -----	p. 102
Chapter 6: Conclusion – <i>Yirah</i> in our World -----	p. 113
Bibliography -----	p. 124
Acknowledgements -----	p. 128

INTRODUCTION

There are moments in life for which we have no words. In tragedy or triumph, in wonder or detail, in loss or gain, in love or heartache, when overwhelmed by grandeur or the intimate, we can experience incredible emotional depths and heights. But no words can quite convey one's response to the loss of a loved one, the triumph of achieving a goal, the feeling of falling in love, or the sense of connection with God. These types of intense moments pepper our lives with meaning and purpose – helping us to understand what we value, contextualizing our own roles in the world, and inspiring us to act accordingly. But how do they do so? What is the process by which monumental moments can influence us so greatly?

In my search for words to describe such profound moments, the Hebrew word, יִרָא (yirah), has stood out. Though typically translated into English as “fear” or “awe,” the way it is used throughout the Hebrew Bible reveals that it offers insight that goes beyond an emotional response. *Yirah* appears as a part of the experience of intense, paradigm-shifting moments in life that are described in our Torah – from the binding of Isaac to the giving of the Ten Commandments at Sinai and beyond. Moments of realization this deep can change our lives in an instant – shifting our perspectives on life, opening our minds and hearts to new ideas, different paradigms, and deeper understandings. But the magnitude of such moments also has the potential to paralyze us with fear – fear of death, fear of failure, and even fear of where a moment might lead if we open our hearts to it. This is the challenge that *yirah* presents throughout the Hebrew Bible.

The Torah teaches that if we follow up on these moments of epiphany, they can help us to gain new insights and to learn from our experiences. However, such learning is only complete if it inspires us to act, most likely in a way that differs from how we have been

Introduction

acting. In order to persevere through the difficulties inherent in change, it is critical that we choose to take on a perspective of *yirah*. The trickiest part of doing so is that the concept of *yirah* – what it means to have *yirah* and where *yirah* leads – can be difficult to ascertain. In this paper, I explore the Hebrew Bible to further understand and disclose the nuances of the biblical idea of *yirah* in order to set the groundwork for applying this transformative biblical concept to our lives and to our own intense moments of wonder in the contemporary world.

GENESIS OF THE SEARCH FOR *YIRAH*

Because a moment of *yirah* is so difficult to convey with descriptions alone, it is often described through stories and metaphors – the same techniques the authors of the Hebrew Bible used. The genesis of my own pursuit to understand *yirah* came from a story, as well. It goes back to a time during my service as a chaplain at a Children’s Hospital of Los Angeles. There, I had a particular encounter that provided me with an experience that I had no words with which to describe my experience beyond “*yirah*.”

As the chaplain “on call” for the night, I was paged at 2:30AM to come and counsel a young couple who had experienced their deepest fears, the terrible tragedy of the loss of their baby girl. Upon entering the room, I noticed that the husband, who was sitting across the room facing his wife, was not making eye contact with her or acknowledging her presence in any way, but was blankly staring in my general direction. As we began to talk, the husband continually returned to a set question: “Why? Why did this happen to my baby girl?” It seemed as though he had become stuck in this question; it had become his mantra. He ended nearly every phrase of dialogue in this way.

So, I asked this man a question that I would not normally have thought of asking from my own rational, scientific sensibilities: “If you could talk to God right now, what would you

Introduction

say?” In response, the husband began to tense-up, and as he spoke, his voice became louder and louder, more forceful and angrier at the same time. His fists clenched, his nose wrinkled-up, and his shoulders lifted into his neck as he began to demand answers from God. “Why did you do this God? Why me?” “God, this is not fair – this is not fair, you should not have done this!” “Where are you, God? Where are you?” As his crescendo of questions continued, he built up to a primal eruption of emotion in what I could best describe as a roar. But upon release, his shoulders started to lower, his fists opened slowly, and his face relaxed.

As he calmed, the husband suddenly snapped back into a connection with the present moment. It seemed as if a cloud had lifted from in front of his eyes, and he looked at me, noticing that I was kneeling on the floor. He leapt up and offered me his chair, went over to the sofa upon which his wife was sitting, sat next to her, took her hand, and looked her in the eyes, acknowledging her. It was as if he had gained a new perspective and, though still pained, was going to be able to continue on. This was *yirah*.

But this is not a story of the husband’s *yirah*, for I cannot speak to that. I cannot be sure whether or not he had gained new insight. What I do know is that I accessed a new paradigm of experience – one that helped me to make it through months of working with children who were dying. In my experience with this husband, I realized that the moment was not about me in any way, shape, or form. I was there to be a part of healing, which was larger than myself, and not in my own hands to determine. My role was to be a vessel through which this man could access what he needed in order to move past his overwhelming pain and do what he needed to do. He needed to talk to God. And while I experienced a mixture of fear of failure, anxiety about what he might say or do to me, I realized that it was my challenge to look past these fears. I was there to be open to the awe of healing, the

Introduction

reverence of redemption, the motivation for helping, and the inspiration for asking questions. In doing so, I aligned my will with that of the source of healing, and it allowed me to ask a question that would not have worked for my own process of grief, but seemed to be exactly what this individual needed in order to establish his own divine connection. I gained new perspective that has helped me to be present for other people in situations of pastoral care. As a result, I also have been able to more fully experience and be changed by the intensity of my first child's birth that occurred during my writing of this work, another true moment of *yirah*.

And while this description of *yirah* – a moment of connection with that which is bigger than oneself to which one must open oneself in order to gain insight and wisdom – may sound a bit “new-age” or esoteric, especially to a rational-based scientifically-minded individual like myself, it is not far from the notion of *yirah* that the Hebrew Bible describes – as access to God's wisdom and potentially a form of ongoing revelation. This is why I have set out to nuance *yirah* beyond merely “fear” and “awe.” As I will show in what follows, a deeper analysis of this Biblical concept will produce more concrete language with which to apply to moments of awe, understanding of what it means to have reverence and where it leads, and an appreciation for dedicating oneself to God.

Yirah demands not only an intellectual exploration, but also an emotional, experiential approach, which is why I have shared my own story – to convey that *yirah* requires more than the logical rationale that comes from an academic analysis. As we deepen our understanding of *yirah*, I invite the reader of this text to merge the intellectual conception of *yirah* that will be presented with one's own emotional responses to one's intensely defining moments. Doing so will allow us the opportunity to apply our new insights on the Biblical concept of *yirah* to our experiences in the contemporary world.

METHODS OF EXPLORING *YIRAH*

In order to further develop an understanding of *yirah*, I have keyed in on four different core sections of the Hebrew Bible for comprehensive analysis: the books of Leviticus, Proverbs, and Ezra-Nehemiah, and the episodes of the giving of the Ten Commandments found in both Exodus and Deuteronomy. These works have been chosen because each one elicits a new perspective on *yirah* through its fairly consistent usage. The slight differences in how this concept is used throughout each book allow us to further nuance our understanding of its application.

After an initial overview of the semantic range of *yirah* throughout the Bible, we will explore every use of יָרָא, the root from which *yirah* derives, in the books of Leviticus and Proverbs. Each book is consistent in its application of the concept of *yirah*. Proverbs applies *yirah* as the beginning of wisdom, while Leviticus applies it as the start of holiness. However, each use of the term reveals a significant new insight through its context or application that helps us to further our own understanding of this complex subject.

From there, I have analyzed the role of *yirah* in the pinnacle moment of revelation at Mount Sinai as God gave the Ten Commandments to the Israelites and Moses. Since this episode is repeated in both the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy, it offers an opportunity to nuance the concept further by comparison and contrast of its role in the two accounts.

Finally, I have put together an analysis of *yirah* in the book of Ezra-Nehemiah, categorizing its application throughout the work. Because of the uniqueness of its style, the first person memoir, Ezra-Nehemiah offers an opportunity to understand the term from the viewpoint of the individual relating to *yirah* and its ability to help the individual

Introduction

contextualize one's own experiences. Because נָחֵם appears only in Nehemiah's section, not in Ezra's, there is the opportunity to explore the different approaches of each character.

CHAPTER 1: THE BACKGROUND OF YIRAH

Before entering into an in-depth analysis of *yirah* in the Hebrew Bible, it is important to understand the semantic range and forms of the words that are related to its Hebrew root, יָרָא. Though my work is intended to explore the application of the concept of *yirah* in the Biblical texts, other forms and conjugations of its Hebrew root help us to further understand and nuance this key biblical concept.

There are three most common grammatical forms identified by H.F. Fuhs:

יָרָא, *yare'*; יִרְאָה, *yir'a*; and מוֹרָא *mora'*.¹

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, יָרָא and its derivatives appear 435 times; 333 times as a verb. Of the three major forms of this root, we find it 45 times as a verbal adjective, יָרָא, 45 times as a nominalized infinitive, יִרְאָה, and 12 times as a *maqtal* noun, מוֹרָא.² Below is a distribution of the root in various forms, based on the analysis of Clines. I have sorted the data so that it is listed in order of the books that include the highest frequency of יָרָא.

TABLE 1: Distribution and Form of יָרָא in the Hebrew Bible:
Sorted by frequency of how often the word appears³

BOOK:	<i>qal</i>	<i>niph+nora'</i>	<i>piel</i>	<i>yare'</i>	<i>yirah</i>	<i>mora'</i>	Total
Psa	30	1 + 15	--	27	8	2	83
Deut	32	6	--	1	1	4	44
Isa	22	4	--	1	5	2	34

¹ H. F. Fuhs. “יָרָא *yare'*; יִרְאָה *yir'a*; מוֹרָא *mora'*.” Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament. Eds. G. Johannes Botterwick and Helmer Ringren. Trans. David E. Green. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990. p. 290

² Fuhs, p. 292

³ H. P. Stahl. “יָרָא *yr'* To Fear.” Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament: Volume 2 תסד Hesed – ציין Siyyon. Eds. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann. Trans. Mark E. Biddle. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997. pp. 569-570. The chart from the article is sorted by book of the Bible. Here, I have sorted it by the frequency in which יָרָא appears in each book, starting with Psalms. Note that he includes one additional use of this root in a *niphal* tense than does Fuhs.

Chapter 1: The Background of Yirah

BOOK:	<i>qal</i>	<i>niph+nora'</i>	<i>piel</i>	<i>yare'</i>	<i>yirah</i>	<i>mora'</i>	Total
Gen	20	1	--	1	1	1	24
Jer	21	--	--	--	1	1	23
1 Sam	21	--	--	1	--	--	22
Prov	5	--	--	3	14	--	22
2 Kgs	19	--	--	--	--	--	19
Job	8	1	--	3	5	--	17
Exod	11	2	--	1	1	--	15
Neh	6	3	3	--	2	--	14
Josh	11	--	--	--	--	--	11
2 Sam	6	1	1	--	2	--	10
Mal	2	2	--	3	--	2	9
Eccl	7	--	--	2	--	--	9
Lev	8	--	--	--	--	--	8
Judg	6	1	--	1	--	--	8
1 Kgs	8	--	--	--	--	--	8
Ezek	5	1	--	--	2	--	8
2 Chron	6	--	1	--	1	--	8
Jonah	4	--	--	--	2	--	6
1 Chron	3	2	--	1	--	--	6
Num	4	--	--	--	--	--	4
Joel	2	2	--	--	--	--	4
Zeph	3	1	--	--	--	--	4
Dan	3	1	--	--	--	--	4
Zech	3	--	--	--	--	--	3
Hab	1	1	--	--	--	--	2
Hag	2	--	--	--	--	--	2
Hos	1	--	--	--	--	--	1
Amos	1	--	--	--	--	--	1
Mic	1	--	--	--	--	--	1
Ruth	1	--	--	--	--	--	1
Lam	1	--	--	--	--	--	1
TOTAL	284	1 + 44	5	45	45	12	436

SEMANTIC RANGE

The definition of יָרָא remains elusive because it has such a wide range of meaning along a spectrum from “fear” to “awe,” concepts that do not always have clear-cut or uniform meanings in English and that do not correspond exactly to how the word is used in the Bible. Fuhs claims that it covers “almost the entire semantic range of ‘fear.’”⁴ However, despite his

⁴ Fuhs, p. 293

Chapter 1: The Background of Yirah

focus on the word “fear” as a part of his translation of נִי, Fuhs reveals that this root has a potential to represent transcendence, as well.

When humans encounter the divine, commonly referred to since Otto as the “numinous,” one effect is fear. Fear of the numinous embraces an inner polarity: terror, retreat, and flight on the one hand; attraction, trust, and love on the other. In Otto’s terminology, the numinous appears as *tremendum* but also *fascinans*, revealing itself in concrete personal form as God or as a divine incarnation, for example in the person of the king (Egypt). Thus the numinous can be experienced as a powerful helper and a guarantor of life. *This internal polarity and dynamic gives rise to a semantic development in the fear of God: when the element of literal fear recedes, “fear of God” becomes tantamount to “religion” or “spirituality”;*⁵ i.e., fear of God becomes synonymous with reverence, worship, and obedience to God’s command.⁶

Though “fear” is used to describe *yirah*, it is clear that נִי does not convey an ordinary, everyday anxiety. The “fear” implied by *yirah* has a transcendence to it as a response to the divine. It is this expansion of the concept of “fear” that the English translation usually finds lacking, even though it is a critical component of religion and spirituality. Abraham Joshua Heschel helps clarify the important difference when he writes,

Fear is the anticipation and expectation of evil or pain, as contrasted with hope which is the anticipation of good. Awe, on the other hand, is the sense of wonder and humility inspired by the sublime or felt in the presence of mystery . . . In a sense, awe is the antithesis of fear.⁷

Maintaining a narrow perspective on this word, “fear,” leaves an individual without adequate language to describe religious and spiritual dimensions of experience, which makes it challenging for a person to grow and learn from such opportunities.

⁵ J. Becker. “*Gottesfurcht im Alten Testament.*” *Anbib* 25. Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965. p. 75

⁶ Fuhs, pp. 297-298

⁷ John C. Merkle. “Worship, Insight and Faith In the Theology of Abraham Joshua Heschel.” *Worship* (49), December 1975. pp. 583-596. p. 589

STANDARD DEFINITIONS

Fuhs breaks down the uses areas of fears into categories: fear in everyday life, (e.g. Gen 31:31, Job 5:22); fear of an enemy (e.g. Ex. 14:10; Judges 7:10); and fear of God. He further divides “fear of God” into six different categories:

- 1) General (e.g. Isa 41:10, 23)
- 2) Fear of God as fear of the Numinous (e.g. Ex 15:11, Neh 4:8)
- 3) Loyalty to the God of the covenant (e.g. Deut 5:29, 2 Kings 17:7)
- 4) Fear of God as moral response (e.g. Ex 18:20, 1 Kings 18:3)
- 5) Fear of God as obedience (Lev 19:14; 25:17)
- 6) Fear of God as devotion to Torah (Prov 1:7, Ps 119:63).⁸

The most common application of **סָּוֵא** is in relation to God. Its nuanced definitions reveal that this type of feeling is a constructive emotion, leading to loyalty, morality, obedience, and devotion – not the paralyzing fear of sheer terror, which is why translating as “fear” is a problem.

David Clines also separates **סָּוֵא** into different specific definitions, depending on the biblical context. He categorized these definitions as:

- 1a) Be afraid, fear, be fearful – e.g. Dt 21:21, Is 41:10
- 1b) Be afraid of (doing), fear (to do) – e.g. Neh 12:8, 2 Sam 10:19
- 1c) Be afraid of, fear someone or something – e.g. Dt 5:5, 1 Kings 3:28
- 2a) Fear YHWH; “revere, be in awe of” – e.g. Lev 19:14, 25:17; Dt 5:29
- 2b) Revere, be in awe of, respect a human or a thing – Lev 19:3, 30

⁸ Fuhs, pp. 296-314

Chapter 1: The Background of Yirah

2c) (Used absolutely), Fear, show reverence to, be in awe of, God, or God's activity –

Jer 44:10, Ps 40:4

3) Fearer, one who fears, one who reveres YHWH – Job 1:1, Mi 3:16.⁹

Clines also specifically addressed *yirah* in its noun construct. He suggested the following three possible definitions:

1) Fear of someone or something; dread, terror – e.g. Dt 2:25, Ezk 1:18

2) Fear of YHWH, reverence, devotion – e.g. Ex 20:20, Job 4:6

3) One who fears, reveres – e.g. 2 Sam 23:3, Prov 23:17

As these descriptions show, the use of the word, “fear” can be misleading. Whether one adds “awe,” “reverence,” or “devotion” to the idea of “fear,” יָרָא does not only connote the primarily negative reaction that most people associate with contemporary Western notions of the word “fear.” But there seems to be a productive side of *yirah*, as well, as shown by the majority of Fuhs' categories. Heschel makes this difference between fear and *yirah*, which he described as “awe,” clear in his writings:

Awe may supersede fear, but it does not remove our blush in the presence of the holy. The type of fear which is the antithesis of awe is that which fills us with horror and despair.¹⁰

The close study of *yirah* is needed in order to fully appreciate the potential of יָרָא when freed of inadequate negative connotations.

OBJECTS OF YIRAH

When the root יָרָא appears, there must be a cause or source of the emotional response being described. In almost 80 percent of the passages the object of *yirah* is God.¹¹ This root

⁹ David Clines. The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew, Volume IV י-ל. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998. pp. 276-279

¹⁰ Merkle, p. 589

Chapter 1: The Background of Yirah

certainly conveys some information about the relationship between God and humans, which also may explain why this root is so difficult to translate into English. The other approximately 20 percent, according to Clines, describe other objects of *yirah* as:

- Fear of things (e.g. Amos 3:8, Prov 31:21)
- Fear of death (e.g. Gen 26:7, Neh 6:13)
- “Uncontrollable feelings of anxiety” (e.g. Exod 2:14, 2 Sam 12:18)
- Fear of enemies in combat (e.g. Exod 14:10, Deut 2:4)
- Fear in the face of the unknown (e.g. Gen 19:30, 42:35)¹²

Often, however, the object of *yirah* has to be surmised from its context (e.g. Gen 31:31, Neh 6:13).

In the following analysis we will focus on key texts that refer to *yirah*. As we will see, *yirah*, overall, typically connotes a positive attitude related to the divine that cannot be reduced to “fear.” And when it does not, this is often a warning against directing one’s *yirah* towards that which is not divine. By exploring the nuances conveyed by this crucial term, it will be possible to identify what the biblical writers are communicating about transformative experiences. In addition, it will be possible to learn from these examples how *yirah* can help us open ourselves to meaningful growth in relation to God and to each other.

¹¹ Fuhs, p. 296

¹² Clines, p. 570

CHAPTER 2: ירא IN LEVITICUS

The Hebrew root ירא has a wide semantic range that often gets oversimplified in translation. Most often, the words “fear,” “revere,” or “awe” are used in an attempt to briefly capture the intent of ירא in any given verse. However, doing so can also limit one’s understanding of the nuanced messages that this root communicates. The use of ירא in the book of Leviticus reveals the need to nuance its meaning beyond any single one of these English terms. This is especially so due to the connections this book makes between the abstract notions of holiness and *yirah*.

Forms of ירא appear eight times within the book of Leviticus, in two distinct sections: four times in *parashat Kedoshim*, chapter 19 and four times in *parashat Behar*, chapters 25:1 – 26:2. All of these instances belong to the section of Leviticus often referred to as the Holiness Code, Leviticus chapters 17-26. Within this unit, the Israelites learn what God is expecting of them in order to reach a state of holiness, of קדושה. This section includes “a new vocabulary and style,” that serves as part of the transition to the message of this next section.¹ Because of the prevalence of ירא in this section, Hartley connects it with holiness.

The concepts of “fear” and “holiness” are interwoven, for fear is a primary human response to the holy². No wonder the term ירא, “fear,” appears four times: fearing God twice (v 14, 32), fearing or revering his sanctuary (v 30), and fearing one’s parents (v 3).³

¹ Jacob Milgrom. Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004. p. 175

² Rudolf Otto. The Idea of the Holy. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1967. p. 12-24

³ John E. Hartley. World Biblical Commentary: Volume 4, Leviticus. Dallas: Word Books, 1992. p. 309

Chapter 2: ירא in Leviticus

The references in this section illustrates that the biblical authors portray as a key component in reaching קדושה. And while Hartley narrowly renders ירא as “fear” in this particular comment, the verb conveys a range of interpretations each time it appears, which warrants further exploration.

WHAT IS קדושה?

Since Leviticus 19 makes a connection between ירא and קדושה, it is worthwhile to understand the idea of holiness within this unit. One of the most significant developments put forth by chapter 19 is the idea that all people, not just the priests, can achieve holiness. According to Milgrom, the Holiness Code:

proclaims that holiness, hitherto limited by [the Priestly Code] to the sacred sphere (the sanctuary) and its officiants (the priests), is now within the reach of every Israelite provided that he or she heeds cultic prohibitions and fulfills the ethical requirements specified in this chapter.”⁴

Holiness had previously been accessible only to a privileged class through birth alone. Now, in order for non-priests to move themselves into this state of holiness, they would need to conduct certain actions, just as priests had a code of behaviors specified for them to bring about holiness. But they are no longer excluded for not being born to priestly lineage.

The list of laws in Leviticus 19 focuses on those behaviors, mostly ethical ones, that become the prescription for individuals to enable them to become holy. “Developing the idea of holiness as order, not confusion, this list upholds rectitude and straight-dealing as holy, and contradiction and double-dealing as against holiness.”⁵ Holiness then consists of ethical behavior, not just ritual worship; it is required that a person integrates one’s whole self in the

⁴ Milgrom, p. 213

⁵ Gordon J. Wenham. *The Book of Leviticus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979. p. 265, citing M. Douglas, *Piety and Danger*, p. 53f

Chapter 2: יִרָא in Leviticus

enterprise of serving God. As we shall see, *yirah* becomes a part of what is necessary, then, to inspire a person to want to fulfill Leviticus 19:2, which demands, קְדָשִׁים תִּהְיוּ כִּי קָדוֹשׁ אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם “You should be holy, for I am holy, Adonai, your God.”

What does it mean to imitate a deity in holiness? The rest of the chapter sets the people of Israel on the road to holiness . . . Its guidelines, ranging from the mundane to the profound, the obscure to the prosaic, spoke powerfully to the ancient Israelite, enabling the common citizen to achieve the holiness that had hitherto been limited to the priests. Similarly, the directives speak powerfully to us as we wonder how to make our own lives unique and meaningful.”⁶

The ethical laws of Leviticus 19 reveal a path towards holiness. However, there is an aspect of such holiness that involves making our lives “unique and meaningful,” which incorporates one of the more accepted definitions of “holy,” as separate. In Leviticus 19, the separation being made is between behaviors that are not holy and those that are – those that bring order to the world and those that do not. As Wenham claims, in this chapter, “Holiness is expressed in moral integrity”⁷

YIRAH IN CHAPTER 19

Leviticus 19:3

אִישׁ אָמֹן וְאָבִיו תִּירָאוּ וְאֶת־שַׁבָּתִי תִשְׁמְרוּ אֲנִי יְהוָה
אֱלֹהֵיכֶם :

“You should have *yirah* for one’s mother and father and should protect My Shabbats; I am Adonai, your God.”

The first time יִרָא emerges in Leviticus is in 19:3, echoing the fifth commandment in the Decalogue, but replacing the term כָּבֵד and transposing the order of “mother” and “father.” Though many interpretations have rendered תִּירָאוּ as “fear,” it is important for the sake of this analysis to suspend decisions about the verb’s precise meanings until one has

⁶ Milgrom, p 212

⁷ Wenham, p. 265

Chapter 2: יִרָא in Leviticus

examined the context of how this word is used here as well as elsewhere in Leviticus, and throughout the Tanakh. One must remain open to the potential meanings offered by understanding its relation to the spectrum from “fear” to “awe.” Therefore, I have rendered the translation openly as “You should have *yirah*.”

In the Septuagint, the earliest translation of the Bible into Greek, this root has been interpreted to be *phobos*, an indication of fear, which is supported by its translation in the King James Version of the Bible.⁸ But Drazin points out that:

The Hebrew *yirah* can be translated as “fear,” as Onkelos renders it, or as “reverence.” “Fear” generally emanates from the dread of a possibility of receiving punishment. “Reverence,” on the other hand, implies an “awe” inspired by an appreciation of another’s nobility, greatness, or position.⁹

Based on this perspective, many contemporary scholars have chosen to translate יִרָא as “revere” in this situation, eliciting the latter part of Drazin’s description of *yirah*. Such a choice makes even more sense when this root is explored in relation to its wider context in this section of Leviticus.

Contextually, in Parashat *Kedoshim*, God lays out the vision of what it takes for persons to become holy. Chapter 19 lists the commandments that build holiness without mentioning ramifications of not living up to them. Such negative consequences that come about from disobeying God, do not appear until Chapter 20. The focus of Leviticus 19 is not on the negative consequences of failing to live up to God’s expectations. Rather, the focus is only on the holiness that is created by following God’s ways. As such, it would seem that

⁸ The Holy Bible, King James Version, Leviticus 19:3

⁹ Israel Drazin. Stanley M. Wagner. *Onkelos on the Torah: Leviticus*. Jerusalem: Gefen, 2008. p. 147

Chapter 2: ירא in Leviticus

reading *yirah* as “fear” in this section might not be in line with the overall tone of this section of Leviticus.

In explaining God’s expectations for the people, this opening section of chapter 19 reiterates nine of the Ten Commandments of the Decalogue revealed at Mount Sinai in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 (at which point, *yirah* also plays a key role, as will be explored later). Two of the commandments in this section appear in a single verse, one that refers to ירא. And these are the two commandments in 19:3 – honoring one’s parents and keeping or protecting the Shabbat.

Here, instead of using the root כבד (which appeared in the parallels in Exodus and Deuteronomy), the author chooses ירא to describe how one should respond to one’s parents. It begs the question, how are these two commandments and these two roots related? In his commentary on this verse, Hartley mentions that:

Fearing one’s parents, is the foundation of social morality, and . . . keeping the Sabbath, is essential for spiritual vitality. Children are enjoined to revere (ירא) both mother and father (cf. Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16; 27:16). The use of ירא, “fear,” for parents is most unusual. In the Decalogue it says, “Honor [כבד] your father and your mother” (Ex 20:12, Deut 5:16). *When ירא, “fear,” is used to express respect and devotion, God is usually the object. In this commandment, “fear” means a child is to acknowledge his parents’ authority. This command thus gives parents an exalted place in a child’s life.*¹⁰

Hartley’s argument suggests that the relationship that is described by the word ירא is typically reserved for God, but in this case, the text implores each person to have such a relationship with one’s own parents, thus raising up the status of the parent-child connection. We will see over the course of this exploration that it is indeed rare for a person to be told to direct *yirah* towards any source that is not God or at the very least from God (*mitzvot* or

¹⁰ Hartley, pp. 312-313 (emphasis in italics added)

Chapter 2: ירא in Leviticus

God's sanctuary). This insight allows broader understanding of the impact of such a word choice. As Wenham mentions, "As far as a child is concerned, his parents are in the place of God: through them he can learn what God is like and what he requires."¹¹

Returning to Hartley's comment we note that, even though he uses the language of "fear" to describe the impact of the root, ירא, in his translation of this verse, Hartley renders תירא as "revere." The impact of doing so serves as a commentary about both כבוד and ירא, signifying that כבוד of one's parents is linked to the realm of the holy and transcends merely human interaction. Meanwhile, we learn that having ירא provides the mindset and motivation needed in order to truly show honor, כבוד, towards another. These concepts work together in helping us to understand what it means to be holy, especially when combined with other references in this cluster.

As Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch points out, "יראה את ואב" is the first step towards קדושה.¹² After being told to be holy in Lev 19:2, ירא is the first action listed in describing the path to becoming holy, potentially indicating that *yirah* is an important precondition along one's path to becoming holy, a key beginning. Hirsch's perspective suggests that being able to understand what it is to have *yirah* for one's parents, who are responsible for protecting and teaching and creating meaning, makes it possible for that individual to relate to the Divine in a similar way. Such a relationship with God should lead a person to grow in similar ways, allowing that individual the opportunity to learn how to create and embody holiness.

¹¹ Wenham, p. 265

¹² Samson Raphael Hirsch. Hirsch Commentary on the Torah: Volume 4 Vayikra/Leviticus (Part Two). Trans. Isaac Levy. London: Judaica Press, 1986. p. 500

Chapter 2: ירא in Leviticus

While the use of ירא seems to have the effect of elevating the relationship between child and parent to one of unprecedented high esteem, it also plays a role in establishing the status of one's mother. The order of "mother" and "father" is transposed in Lev 19:3 as compared to the revelation in the Decalogue in Exod 20:22 and Deut 5:16 that lists "father" before "mother" as the objects of כבוד. Many commentators conclude that this change in order, listing "mother" first, points to her as having an equal status with one's father, since they each take turns being listed first. As Milgrom points out,

A man honors his mother more than his father because she sways him with persuasive words. Therefore in the commandment to honor (Ex 20:22) [God] mentions the father before the mother . . . A man is more afraid of his father than his mother because he teaches him the Torah. Therefore in the commandment (Lev 19:3), he mentions the mother before the father . . . Scripture thus declares that both are equal, the one as important as the other.¹³

While this is an interesting commentary on the equality of one's parents, there is an aspect of this comment that bears particular relevance to a further understanding of *yirah*. The rationale for why a child displays *yirah* towards one's father is because "he teaches him Torah." This statement seems to link *yirah* with the process of learning – an attitude towards the instructor that is necessary in order to attain new knowledge. We shall see that this understanding is significant and is consistent with the attitude of *yirah* in the book of Proverbs.

In addition to the transposition of mother and father and the replacement of כבוד with ירא in Lev 19:3, there is another variance in its reference to the Fifth Commandment. Rabbi Hirsch points out that the person of each of the verbs in this verse has become plural:

Here it is not put in the singular, as in the Decalogue, תשמור, תירא, but: תשמורו, תיראו. It is not only by the single individuals themselves that these

¹³ Milgrom, pp. 220-221

two fundamental institutions of Jewish breeding are to receive homage . . . Through them, God becomes “Our God, in them our allegiance to God is made manifest, and as long as these two pillars of the holiness of Jewish life stand erect, our whole relationship towards God stands on firm ground, and God can say of us: **אני ה' אלוהיכם**.¹⁴

Here and throughout the book of Leviticus, **ירא** consistently serves as a necessary component of achieving holiness, as opposed to a threat that one will be cursed. Being couched in the positive instead of the negative communicates a sense of elevation and inspiration – it is a vehicle through which we can make ourselves holy. Rather than being solely about fear or reverence or awe, **תירא** represents a positive motivation and an attitude that leads us to achieve the specific *mitzvot* that lead us to being holy.

THE EXPERIENCE OF *YIRAH*

Before continuing to explore *yirah* throughout the rest of Leviticus, it is worthwhile to pause in order to discern what the experience of having *yirah* entails. Rabbi Hirsch expands on the use of **ירא** in Lev 19:3 to formulate a general approach to what it means to experience *yirah*. He teaches:

It is not fear, awe, of the presence of mother and father, though we use that word in translation of **יראה** which can easily be taken as a feeling that is to fill us in the presence of parents; **יראה אתה** is rather having a person constantly in one's mind's eye, and taking what their wish would be as the deciding factor in our lives. (**ירא** is the mental, the spiritual; **קרא**, “to call it to one's mind”), its very first and most essential effect is obedience, in completely subordinating one's own wishes to the will of those to whom **יראה** is directed.¹⁵

According to this perspective, an experience of *yirah* is a powerfully motivational moment, leading a person to put the needs and wants of another as primary, instead of one's own

¹⁴ Hirsch, p. 501

¹⁵ *ibid* p. 500

desires. Such a moment can be perceived as an experience of smallness next to someone who is perceived as greater. This moment can involve great fear, as that larger presence has the potential to crush the one experiencing *yirah*. Yet, the wonder and desire to respond to another overcomes the frightening aspects of the moment, pushing the individual on to a path of action.

It is God, and His revelation of history and Law to which the tribute of honour and fear is to be paid in honouring and fearing parents. Here in this chapter of קְדוּשָׁה, it is that aspect of the child's duty towards its parents that in the very first place is "obedience," that is stressed. The over-ruling of the will of the parents over its own will, the cheerful yielding of its own will to that of the parents, is the first, earliest and most lasting school of practicing self-control, which leads young human beings out of the life of enforced obedience to one's urges into mastery over one's passions and impulses, into freeing the godly element in man, into that moral freedom, the achievement of which constitutes the character of קְדוּשָׁה.¹⁶

Hirsch reveals an idea that control over one's instincts plays a crucial role in achieving holiness. From this perspective, one can see that *yirah* represents the emotional motivation that guides an individual away from one's own personal cravings towards that which serves a higher purpose – in this case, the will of one who should know better, one's parents or, ultimately, God.

Leviticus 19:14

לֹא-תִקְלָל חֵרֶשׁ וְלִפְנֵי עֵוֶר לֹא תִתֵּן מְכֻשָׁל וְיִרְאַתִּי
מֵאַחֲרַי אֲנִי יְהוָה:

"You should not curse the deaf, and before the blind you should not put a stumbling block; and you should have *yirah* for your God: I am Adonai."

In Lev 19:14, יִרָא appears once more in the context of how to make the world holy.

Rather than stating punishment for crossing the boundary between that which is holy and the kind of action that is not, the text offers a "vision statement" that goes along with the specific

¹⁶ *ibid* p. 501

Chapter 2: ירא in Leviticus

actions at hand. As Hartley mentions, “The person who fears God will never act so cruelly (cf v. 3).”¹⁷ *Yirah* thus becomes a mentality that prevents a person from lowering oneself to the base actions that get in the way of being holy. If one is interacting from a mentality of יראת מאלהים, that individual would never even conceive of cursing a deaf person or placing a stumbling block before the blind. Hirsch describes how this mentality works:

In all these matters, we are not to feel ourselves under the judgment of our fellowmen, to be before a human tribunal, but to be placed under the Eye of God, the All-seeing One Whose constant presence teaches us the most conscientious watch over ourselves and self-criticism of all our behavior . . .¹⁸

Hirsch’s perspective places a great deal of responsibility on individual choice for the ability to bring holiness into this world. To help persons navigate such responsibility, especially in regards situations in which only the acting individual can know whether or not one is bringing holiness into the world, Leviticus adds a layer of accountability – not only to one’s fellow humans, but also to God. When it comes to showing honor to one’s parents, how can parents know if their child is truly acting out of honor? Likewise, it is difficult for a deaf person to know that he or she is being cursed, and for a blind person to find the source of the obstacles in his or her path. Just because the person upon whom one is acting might not be able to find the source of their suffering, does not mean that we can take advantage of them.

Curiously, in both Lev 19:4 and 19:14, not only does ירא appear, but so too does the declaration, אנני יהוה, “I am Adonai.” In fact, as we shall see, this phrase coincides with every instance of ירא in this chapter, as well as three of the four cases in chapters 25-26. This statement serves as one of the “lexical expressions” Milgrom refers to as evidence of the

¹⁷ Hartley, p. 315

¹⁸ Hirsch, p. 517

Chapter 2: יִרָא in Leviticus

shift from the Priestly Code to the Holiness Code in Leviticus. It conveys a particular perspective.

This formula is explicitly defined at the opening of the chapter by the declaration “I YHWH your God am holy” (v. 2). Hence anyone who disobeys YHWH’s injunctions concerning the care of the underprivileged and the alien is desecrating YHWH’s holiness . . . Both chapters [19 and 25] also utilize the closing formula “you shall fear your God” (19:14, 32; 25:17, 36, 43). It is no accident that this formula is attached to those prescriptions involving the handicapped and the most vulnerable (the deaf and blind, elders, indentured servants). Their case cannot be adjudicated in a human court, but YHWH has witnessed the exploitation *and will prosecute*.¹⁹

Specifically in verse 19:14, the deaf person can never hear the individual who “curses” him or her. There is no human accountability in this world for such an act. “All the laws in chapter 19 are unenforceable in human courts; hence the emphatic: “I YHWH (your God will enforce them).”²⁰ Milgrom’s theory reveals that the concept of *yirah* is invoked in order to keep an individual aware of one’s relationship with God during all of one’s actions – even those for which there would be no consequences in this world.

Milgrom highlights a retributive aspect to this use of יִרָא, which is certainly a valid reading suggesting that fear of punishment is being invoked in order to elicit the desired behavior. I find that limiting the use of *yirah* solely as a warning about punishment results in a much too narrow understanding of the verb’s range of messages. Such usage would suggest that if *yirah* is a part of bringing holiness, one brings קְדוּשָׁה by abstaining from certain actions for personal gain (not being punished), rather than by aligning one’s will with that of God in an effort to bring God’s work to this world.

¹⁹ Milgrom, p. 216

²⁰ *ibid* p. 222

Chapter 2: ירא in Leviticus

אני יהוה is added for good measure as a reminder that such acts are God's will. An experience of *yirah* should motivate an individual to align one's will with that of God, and prevent a person from even thinking of acting in such a way; this expression makes God's will explicitly known to the individual, thus clearly and specifically informing each person how to act on one's experience of *yirah*.

What this passage teaches is that constant awareness of being a part of a caring system bigger than ourselves, aligning our will to that system, and being our own patrol, helps us avoid straying from that which we do not wish to become. Of course this is easier said than done, and we cannot always maintain a constant level of יראת מאלהיך. But when able to do so, when we keep in mind before whom we stand, we can maintain a vision strong enough to ensure that we follow the desired *mitzvot* of this section intended to connect us with holiness.

Leviticus 19:30–32

30 אֶת־שַׁבְּתֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ וּמִקְדָּשִׁי תִירָאוּ אֲנִי יְהוָה :

30 "You should protect My Shabbats and have *yirah* towards My sanctuary: I am Adonai."

31 אֶל־תִּפְנוּ אֶל־הָאֲבֹת וְאֶל־הַיָּדְעָנִים אֶל־תִּבְקְשׁוּ לְטִמְאָה

בָּהֶם אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם :

31 "Do not turn to ghosts and do not make requests of spiritists, to be made impure by them: I am Adonai, your God."

32 מִפְּנֵי שִׁיבָה תָקוּם וְהַדְרַתָּ פָנֶי זָקֵן וִירָאתָ מֵאֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲנִי

יְהוָה :

32 "You should rise before the aged and show deference to the elderly; you should have *yirah* for your God: I am Adonai."

These series of three verses are interesting in that ירא appears in two of the three. Looking at the pattern, verse 30 involves telling Israel to do something – a positive command. Following this is a negative command – that which the people should not do –

Chapter 2: שְׁמִירָה in Leviticus

along with a description of what will happen if one breaks the command: impurity. But as it continues to verse 32, we have another positive command that is linked to שְׁמִירָה. Verse 30 relates directly to God – protecting God’s Shabbat and having *yirah* for God’s sanctuary. But in verse 31, the people are told to avoid and reject that which is not godly. This leads us back to verse 32, in which we relate to God once again, through the way we treat other people. This verse works similarly to verse 19:14 – if we are able to maintain an attitude of יִרְאֵת מֵאֱלֹהִים, we will be sure to treat those who are more experienced or more vulnerable than ourselves with the kind of respect and deference and establish a meaningful relationship with them.

Lev 19:30 reveals another unique element about שְׁמִירָה. Once again, this is a rare instance in which the object of *yirah* is not God, but rather a physical institution, the sanctuary. However, just as commentators related the connection between a child and a parent to a relationship with God in verse 19:3, here too commentators specify that the object of *yirah* is the divine aspect of the sanctuary.

Reverence for the sanctuary means to regard it as the place where God reveals himself in splendor and awe. It means that the people are careful to conduct themselves circumspectly whenever they are in its areas; e.g., anyone in a state of uncleanness may never enter its precincts. Reverence for the Temple also guards against the importation of pagan cultic practices into the precincts of the Temple.²¹

Rather than focusing on the physical nature of the sanctuary, one’s *yirah* should be directed to the holy acts that are performed in service to God through the vehicle of the sanctuary. The sanctuary functions as a physical representation of the bond between humans and God. From the perspective of the author of Leviticus, “the operation of the sanctuary is essential for the

²¹ Baruch A. Levine. The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989. p. 321

Chapter 2: יִרָא in Leviticus

maintenance of the covenant and for approaching God with the offerings required by the law.” From this standpoint, approaching the sanctuary with *yirah* is a means of approaching God with *yirah*, allowing the creation of holiness through the services that take place within the sanctuary. The object of one’s *yirah* is not the physical manifestation itself, aside from the fact that it is the vessel containing the divine aspect of what the sanctuary represents.

Noting that object of one’s *yirah* relate to the service of God within the sanctuary, Leviticus 19:30 reveals another nuance pertinent the idea of *yirah* and its relation to fear. In two of the other three appearances of יִרָא (19:14 and 19:32), fear of punishment from God can be a perfectly legitimate interpretation of its usage. Even in 19:4, one might assume that having *yirah* of one’s parents involves having a fear of their ability to punish a child for bad behavior. However, while legitimate for those instances, such an understanding would be overly simplistic, as the usage in Leviticus 19:30 suggests. It is hard to imagine that the individual was being told to “fear” the sanctuary. That is why most translations render תִּירָאוּ as “revere.” The sanctuary was not built with a mechanism for punishment for those who strayed from its ways. Defilement of the sanctuary was punishable by God, therefore in showing reverence to the sanctuary, one shows obedience to God – it is a method of displaying one’s *yirah* towards God.

YIRAH IN CHAPTER 25

Leviticus 25:17

וְלֹא תוֹנוּ אִישׁ אֶת-עֲמִיתוֹ וְיִרְאתָ מֵאֱלֹהֶיךָ כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה
אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

“A person should not do wrong to another; and have *yirah* your God; because I am Adonai, your God.”

Chapter 2: אָר in Leviticus

Leviticus 25 deals primarily with laws involving the sabbatical and jubilee years, which are intended to “prevent the utter ruin of debtors. In biblical times a man who incurred a debt that he could not repay could be forced to sell off his land or even his personal freedom by becoming a slave.”²² This section’s authors sought to ensure that such necessary economic conditions would not lead to permanent ramifications and an ever-increasing gap between the wealthy and the poor.

Leviticus 25 takes the perspective that “everyone had the chance to make a fresh start,”²³ which moves away from a system of individuals trying to leverage one another and, instead, strive to shape a more cohesive society. Therefore, what we see in 25:17 is that:

The exhortation not to take advantage of each other is repeated from v 14b and grounded on the cornerstone of Israelite faith, namely, each person’s אָר, “fear,” of his God (cf 19:14). In fearing God, one places far greater value on personal relationships than on personal gain. This value begins with a personal relationship with God, as the reference to God as “your God” indicates. The importance of this exhortation is further strengthened with the formula of Yahweh’s self-identification.²⁴

Milgrom links 25:17 back to 19:14, 19:32, and 25:36 and 25:43. He mentions that all of these cases deal with “exploitation of the helpless . . . The defense of the poor is an aspect of the divine holiness that Israel must emulate to attain its holiness.”²⁵ In this perspective, *yirah* is the motivation to hold back one’s desires for personal gain in order to be a part of serving the greater good and ensuring equality. As Hirsch comments about this idea,

Each [person] is to fear God, to know that God has His Eye and His Ear directed to each one of them, and also that He is equally the God of each of his brethren . . . This is for all members of the nation.²⁶

²² Wenham, p. 317

²³ *ibid*

²⁴ Hartley, p. 437

²⁵ Milgrom, pp. 229-230

²⁶ Hirsch, p. 752

Key to this statement is that *yirah* is revealed as the realization that God has an equal relationship to each person in the society. With the understanding that one's relationship with God is equal with that of another, it becomes illogical to take advantage or mistreat someone else, because that would damage one's own relationship with God. This understanding also helps one to cultivate a more holistic perspective, knowing that just as we are asked to act from the same place of *yirah*, so too would others who would thereby treat us fairly. This seems to be the force of *yirah* in this verse – rather than abstaining from the mistreatment of another leading one to *yirah*, it is one's *yirah* towards God that gives us strength to overcome the all-too-human desire to mistreat another for personal gain.

Leviticus 25:36

אַל־תִּקַּח מֵאִתּוֹ נֶשֶׁךְ וְתִרְבִּית וְיָרֵאתָ מֵאֱלֹהֶיךָ וְחִי אִתָּךְ
עִמָּךְ :

“Do not take advance or accrued interest from another; and have *yirah* for your God. and your kinsman shall live with you.” (referring to a kinsman coming under one's authority)

Leviticus 25:43

לֹא־תִרְדֶּה בּוֹ בְּפָרֶךְ וְיָרֵאתָ מֵאֱלֹהֶיךָ :

“Do not rule over (your kinsman) ruthlessly; you shall have *yirah* for your God.”
(Same context as above)

Lev 25:36 and 25:43 both demand ethical treatment of those who become indebted or indentured to another person. Despite the inherent power dynamics, the owner of the debt or the indentured service should not treat one's debtor or servant as mere chattel. In verse 25:36, the debtor is even referred to as אִתָּךְ, your brother. Additionally:

There is the motivational statement מֵאֱלֹהֶיךָ יָרֵאתָ, “you shall fear your God” (vv 36, 43; cf v 17). To this is joined the ethical injunction not to תִּרְדֶּה בְּפָרֶךְ, “rule ruthlessly,” over a servant (vv 43, 46, 53). It is tied to the motivation, as the second person singular form of the verb attests, and it is in accord with several laws in chap. 19 (e.g. Vv 11, 14, 18). This ethical motivation fits in well with the ethos of the laws on holy living, especially the

Chapter 2: ירא in Leviticus

speech in chap 19 (e.g., vv 9-18). These laws are an integral part of the material on holy living.²⁷

Yirah seems to automatically signal that this discussion of how to treat one's servants provides an opportunity to bring more holiness into the world. As Hartley claims, ירא is the appeal to follow the standards put forth to not grind down (פָּרַךְ) one's Israelite servant, which refers to the "toil that breaks the body and grinds down the spirit"²⁸

Additionally, the use of ירא in these passages seems to contextualize the imbalance in the power dynamic born out of the relationship between owner and owned. In such a relationship, it is possible for an individual to succumb to a skewed perception of this dynamic as one of a "god" and a subject.

בִּפְרֹךְ literally means 'with backbreaking labor,' as Rashi notes. This idiom also evokes the Egyptian bondage . . . (Ex 1:13-14) What the Egyptians did to the Israelites, Israelites ought not to do to one another. Fear of God should assure compliance with His commandments in this regard.²⁹

Having *yirah* is a constant check and balance about one's over reach when it comes to power. The Egyptian Pharaoh was the source of the Israelite bondage and has become the symbol of that which one should strive to avoid becoming or submitting to – one who thought of himself as a god, and therefore indulged in treating others בִּפְרֹךְ. "This prohibition is supported by the basic premise of biblical faith, the fear of God. Devotion to God motivates the faithful to express compassion toward others, whether they are successful or poor."³⁰

Yirah thereby represents a reminder that there is still a higher ideal and will with more power by which one must measure one's own actions, even when there is no person

²⁷ Hartley, p. 425

²⁸ *ibid* p. 441

²⁹ Levine, p. 179

³⁰ Hartley, p. 440

Chapter 2: יָרָא in Leviticus

around to hold the individual accountable. As Rashi points out,

People can easily find excuses for lending money on interest and can resort to ploys, such as using a non-Jew as an intermediary. Since in many cases it would be near impossible to uncover that the person is doing wrong, the Torah reminds people to fear God and not disobey this command.³¹

יָרָא helps one who might be inclined to abuse such a relationship imagine what it would be like if God abused the relationship with the individual; it allows the owner to better understand the plight of one's debtor or servants. And applying the same logic as was argued in chapter 19, one who approaches the servant with *yirah* could never even think of treating another בַּפֶּדְיָהּ.

Leviticus 26:2

אֶת־שַׁבְּתֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ וְיִמְקְדָּשִׁי תִירָאוּ אֲנִי יְהוָה : ס

“You should protect My Shabbats and have *yirah* towards My sanctuary: I am Adonai.”

The final appearance of יָרָא in Leviticus comes in Lev 26:2, towards the conclusion of the book, is an exact repetition of Lev 19:30, which is also the very last verse in the Torah portion, *Behar*. Having such a unique position points to the role of יָרָא in contextualizing a unit. Since this verse is a complete replica, it would suggest that a redactor inserted this verse in this location as a means of summarizing what had come before, namely the codes of holiness in every day living. With this repetition, the author is also linking this teaching to the next section about “faithful worship.” “Whether or not a redactor has placed [this verse] here, [it does] tie the following speech into the laws on holy living.”³² יָרָא not only plays a role in contextualizing relationships, as seen in 25:36 and 43, but it also has the potential to serve as an indicator of key elements in the topical units in the biblical text, as well.

³¹ Drazin, p. 211

³² Hartley, p. 449

נִיר IN LEVITICUS: GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

In the Book of Leviticus, נִיר has a fairly uniform usage. It seems to be an emotional response that, when one is open to it, motivates an individual to live by ethical codes that transcend one's immediate desires. In this manner, it allows a person to play a role in creating holiness. Such a description is almost like that of a conscience – a yearning to do the right thing. How does one know the right thing? It is through the experience of *yirah* that one is motivated to find out.

YIRAH TOWARDS GOD AND THE “GODLY”

Each time *yirah* is directed at that which is not God, the commentary makes links between those worldly people (parents) or objects (sanctuary) and the Divine. *Yirah* in its fullest sense should not apply to anything that is not related to God's holiness. Doing so would be akin to idol worship. It expresses the kind of awe that Abraham Joshua Heschel describes: “Within our awe there is no place for self-assertion. Within our awe we only know that all we own we owe. The world consists, not of things, but of tasks.”³³ If one were to direct such awe, which is the way Heschel translates *yirah*, towards specific objects or people, one would be elevating something that is not God to a level on par with God. This would be going against the first of the Ten Commandments, “You shall have no other gods besides Me.” Therefore, even in the rare cases in which we are told to direct *yirah* towards that which is physical, we are actually compelled to direct our emotional response to the aspect that transcends the object itself and is linked to God. As Hirsch explains regarding the Levitical teaching about parents in 19:3:

³³ Abraham Joshua Heschel. Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion. New York: Farr Straus and Giroux, 1951. p. 69

Chapter 2: נִיחָ in Leviticus

We understood them to be considered not only the medium of the physical existence of the child, but as the medium through which the mission and calling of Jewry, its history as well as the Torah is to be transmitted from God's Hands to every coming generation. We told ourselves that it was not the measure of what parents do for their children, but the great and lofty mission which God has given parents concerning their children . . .³⁴ (p. 500)

This description of the parent-child relationship is parallel to the relationship God has with the Israelites. Transmitting the mission and the calling, as well as the history and Torah of the Jewish people, becomes the Godly task that parents have. And according to Rabbi Heschel's insight, that is the task that is worthy of *yirah*.

THE EQUALITY OF *YIRAH*

One result that emerges from directing *yirah* in Leviticus towards only God, or that which is from God or serves God, is discovering that the Leviticus text is a quest for establishing equality. *Yirah* provides us with perspective to help us recognize that we are not alone in our ambitions, nor are we alone with our relationships with God. Based on the texts in Leviticus, we all have equal access to such *yirah* and to creating holiness by following the commandments set out in the sections we have examined. Such realizations should inspire us to treat others equally with respect, especially those who are disadvantaged. Our *yirah* helps us to contextualize our relationships, especially when we are in advantageous situations in which we have the potential to exploit another. The texts suggest that we should allow our sense of *yirah* to remind us of our equality, and also remind us that we would not want to be treated poorly by others or by God should the tables turn. These understandings lead us away from our immediate desires for power or profit when they come at the expense of taking advantage of others. As such, *yirah* becomes the root of sympathy and empathy.

³⁴ Hirsch, p. 500

FEAR OR AWE OR REVERENCE?

Yirah is often translated into English as “fear.” Though “fear” does make sense for the several of the uses in Leviticus, we have seen that it does not seem to be an appropriate rendering of יִרָא in verses 19:30 and 26:2. Furthermore, when the other findings are taken into account – such as: that chapter 19 only focuses on blessings from creating holiness and not curses, the moral/ethical component of desiring to do God’s will, the drive for equality brought about by the experience of *yirah*, and the motivation spurning one to learn as seen in 19:3 – then “fear” seems to limit our potential for understanding this word in its context. While “fear” may be a component of this experience, along with “awe” or “reverence,” none of these words can fully capture the range of meaning of *yirah* in Leviticus.

CHAPTER 3: YIRAT ADONAI – THE SOURCE OF WISDOM IN PROVERBS

The book of Proverbs is a book of wisdom literature – a compilation of aphorisms and philosophical advice for living life in a fulfilled way. As opposed to specific, divine commandments that one finds in other portions of the *Tanakh*, especially the Torah, Proverbs offers general “precepts, norms, and guidelines for securing a life of well-being, decency, and dignity.”¹ At the center of living a life of purpose and meaning sits the concept of wisdom. Proverbs encourages the reader to seek and acquire wisdom so that one can navigate through the challenges life provides. Therefore, Proverbs portrays wisdom as the truth that “transcends the individual mind and resides within it. God possesses it, and, we are taught, it can be ours as well.”² As we shall see, the key for living such a life of wisdom is *yirah*.

The book’s contribution to the pursuit of wisdom is encapsulated in the opening prologue, 1:1-7, where the book’s goal is directly stated:

Proverbs 1

2 לְדַעַת חֲכָמָה וּמוֹסָר לְהַבִּין אֲמָרֵי בִינָה: 3 לָקַחַת
מוֹסָר הַשֹּׁפֵל צֶדֶק וּמִשְׁפָּט וּמִיִּשְׁרִים: 4 לָתֵת לַפְתָּאִים
עֲרֻמָּה לְנֹעַר דַּעַת וּמוֹנָה: 5 יִשְׁמַע חָכָם וַיּוֹסֶף לָקַח
וְנִבּוֹן תַּחְבֻּלוֹת יִקְנֶה: 6 לְהַבִּין מָשָׁל וּמְלִיצָה דְּבָרֵי
חֲכָמִים וְחִידוֹתָם: 7 יִרְאֶת יְהוָה יִהְיֶה רֹאשִׁית דַּעַת חֲכָמָה
וּמוֹסָר אֱוִילִים בָּזוּ

2 To learn wisdom and discipline, to understand words of understanding. 3 To take the discipline of insight: justice, judgment, and uprightness. 4 To give craftiness to the simple; to the young,

¹ Michael V. Fox. *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. The Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 2000. p. 3

² *ibid*

knowledge and purpose³. 5 Let the wise one listen and increase his understanding; the astute one⁴ acquire counsel. 6 To understand proverb and epigram, the words of the wise and their riddles. **7 *Yirah* of Adonai is the beginning of knowledge; Fools despise wisdom and discipline.**⁵

This opening prologue introduces a number of words that relate to wisdom – knowledge, understanding, and discipline. Verse 1:7 wraps up this prologue with what is often described as the motto of the book of Proverbs. This is where the link between *yirah* towards God and wisdom appears. Longman extrapolates the significance of this verse's location, by observing that:

The position of this verse signals that the compiler intends to color our view of the teaching of the book as a whole . . . [t]his statement claims that there is no “knowledge” (a near synonym of “wisdom,” which is actually used in the formula elsewhere) apart from a relationship with Yahweh that is characterized by [*yirah*].⁶

This verse serves as the thesis statement for the book of Proverbs. The connection between *yirat Adonai* and wisdom/knowledge stands as a central idea for which much of the rest of the book serves as commentary, particularly where *yirah* appears. As Murphy points out, the requirement for *yirat Adonai* as a precursor to knowledge is reiterated in a number of other verses, most strongly, in 1:29, 2:5, 9:10, and 30:3.⁷ Other applications of this connection in

³ Fox renders this word as “shrewdness,” while JPS translates “foresight.” BDB provided two main definitions: “purpose” and “discretion.” I chose to render “purpose” as it seems to fit better with the overall perspective Proverbs offers regarding the role of wisdom/knowledge as instruments of meaning making.

⁴ Fox, p. 53. Fox translates יָבִין as “the astute man.” JPS renders it as “the discerning man” – coming from the root, בִּין, it is clearly linked to one who has already acquired or at least is capable of understanding.

⁵ This is my own translation, drawing mainly on sources from the BDB, Fox, and JPS

⁶ Tremper Longman III. *Proverbs*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006. p. 57

⁷ Roland E. Murphy. *World Biblical Commentary: Volume 22 Proverbs*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998. p. 256

the book, such as its use as a source of divine retribution or as a means to avoiding evil,⁸ nuance the concept further, as will be shown in the later analysis.

The rest of the introduction to Proverbs (1:8-2:22) states a case for why wisdom is critical to a good life. Prov 1:7 is followed by a father's appeal to his child (verses 1:8-9), issuing vivid warnings against the perils of self-destructive, lawless companions (1:10-1:19), and those who are foolish (1:20-33), before transitioning to a more positive view that explores the benefits of obtaining wisdom (2:1-22). The rewards of seeking wisdom include righteousness, equality, and justice; the ability to be saved from wicked men and from strange women, leading to the ability to stay on the right path. As M.L. Barré teaches, *yirat Adonai* "is the first step – 'square one' – in the quest for a meaningful existence."⁹ *Yirat Adonai* thereby represents the access that each of us has to acquiring wisdom that will help us to have direction and meaning in life that will sustain and fulfill us while helping us to avoid destruction.

ACCESS TO *YIRAT ADONAI*

While Prov 1:7 provides context for all of these pitfalls and rewards, teaching that they all stem from the ability to start with *yirat Adonai*, it fails to explain what this concept is, implicitly. The nature of *yirat Adonai* remains vague and undefined. It takes the rest of the book of Proverbs for the fuller meaning to emerge and help the reader to understand what *yirat Adonai* entails. One place to start this search occurs in Prov 2:1-5, which provides a brief glimpse as to how one can achieve a state of *yirat Adonai*. The act of seeking out wisdom – attuning one's ear to it (2:2), directing one's heart to it (2:2), calling out to it (2:3),

⁸ *ibid* pp. 256-257, based on the analysis presented by Becker, J. "*Gottesfurcht im Alten Testament.*" *Anbib* 25. Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965. pp. 221-228

⁹ M. L. Barré, "'Fear of God' and the World View of Wisdom." *Biblical Theology Bulletin*. Volume 11, 1981, pp. 41-43. p. 41

seeking it like silver or treasure (2:4), allows one to understand *yirat Adonai*, from which God's knowledge flows (2:5).

WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE

If one is to link *yirat Adonai* to wisdom based on the axiom in verse 1:7, it is also important to note the relationship between knowledge and wisdom. After all, *yirat Adonai* is mentioned as the beginning of knowledge, not specifically of wisdom. The word for knowledge (דעת) appears almost as many times (41) as does wisdom (חכמה – 43). It seems to have a broad application from elementary levels of simple cognition to higher levels of erudition and sagacity.¹⁰ There is no doubt that this higher end of the spectrum insinuated by overlaps with, even appearing as a synonym in some places (2:6). And indeed, verse 9:10 mirrors the motto of Proverbs in verse 1:7, seemingly interchanging דעת with חכמה. In each of these verses, not only do the Hebrew words take turns relating directly to *yirat Adonai*, but the other term for wisdom or knowledge also appears as a part of the verse. It is clear that *yirat Adonai* is being linked directly to wisdom. Knowledge serves either as a close ally to wisdom, or more likely as a means of gathering wisdom.

YIRAH AND WISDOM

Before examining the various appearances of *yirah* in the book of Proverbs, it is worth examining further the relationship between *yirah* and wisdom. Since wisdom is core to the book of Proverbs, and *yirat Adonai* is critical to obtaining knowledge, which is closely related to wisdom, *yirah* must be central to the understanding of the book of Proverbs.

It is important to note that *yirat Adonai* is specified as the core component to this relationship rather than a general sense of *yirah*. Several interpreters highlight the role of

¹⁰ Fox p. 31

Chapter 3: *Yirat Adonai* – the Source of Wisdom in Proverbs

yirah, translating it as “fear.” Murphy draws from this fact, concluding that “it seems undeniable that fear of God [*yirat Adonai*] is rooted in a basic attitude of mortal beings before the Numen.”¹¹ He characterizes *yirat Adonai* as a natural phenomenon – an understandable reaction to the individual’s coming into relationship with the Divine, one he chooses to render as a fearful experience. Longman expands on this idea by stating that,

While fear is not to be equated with terror, it is probably more than mere respect. After all, people are totally dependent on Yahweh, who created and sustains them. The sages understood this and therefore trembled in the presence of God.¹²

Though both Longman and Murphy convey a sense of fear or trembling as a part of *yirah*, both acknowledge its being in relation to God as a key aspect of the *yirah* that leads to knowledge. Such a perspective therefore portrays wisdom as a theological concept. Longman mentions that:

Wisdom is not simply a matter of learning certain principles of life and applying them mechanistically. Wisdom begins with a relationship with God . . . The bottom line is that there is no wisdom apart from a relationship with Yahweh. The very concept of wisdom is a theological concept, and it runs throughout the book.¹³

This theological perspective on wisdom and the link between the two concepts of wisdom and *yirah* that emerges is a part of the unique contribution of the book of Proverbs, portraying both of the concepts in a slightly different light than in other parts of the Jewish canon.

Fear of God is inherently and self-evidently a religious virtue; it is wisdom that has an ethical question mark over it. (Think of the “wisdom” of the Egyptian magicians [e.g., Exod 7:11] or the corrupt royal advisers [e.g., Isa

¹¹ Murphy, p. 255.

¹² Longman, p. 57

¹³ *ibid* p. 57-58

Chapter 3: *Yirat Adonai* – the Source of Wisdom in Proverbs

19:11; 29:14].) The motto in 1:7 states an axiom of the epistemology of Proverbs, though not of Israelite thought in general.¹⁴

Just as *yirah* conveys a slightly different context and meaning in the book of Proverbs than it does in other books of the *Tanakh*, so too does the concept of wisdom. However, the merging of these two concepts also provides the uniquely Jewish wisdom literature that emerges in the book of Proverbs.

Murphy, referring to the scholarship of H.D. Preuss, brings up the discussion as to whether or not fear of God is a unique contribution or if it is an older remnant of other religions of the ancient Near East. Referring specifically to Prov 10:29, he writes that it:

does not differ from ancient Near Eastern wisdom in its conception of the Lord. It would surely be wrong as well as foolish to consider the idea of “fear of God” as exclusive to Israel; it is a natural response to a Higher Being who cannot be fathomed. But neither is fear of God to be considered merely a common denominator or catchall in the religious understanding of the ancient Near East.¹⁵

Accordingly, neither broad fear of God, which may or may not be a separate idea from *yirat Adonai*, nor valuing wisdom represents unique ideas to biblical thought. Therefore, the juxtaposition of these two concepts as they relate in Proverbs represents a breakthrough brought to the world by the Jewish Bible. Therefore one can agree with Fox who concludes that:

The importance Israelite Wisdom assigns to the fear of God in motivating behavior is not paralleled in foreign Wisdom. Fear of God [elsewhere]. . . is not isolated and identified as the initial step toward wisdom or a deep motive for wise behavior. Its importance in Wisdom literature is an Israelite innovation and shows the rootedness of Israelite Wisdom in Israelite thought generally.¹⁶

¹⁴ Fox p. 69

¹⁵ Murphy, p. 256

¹⁶ Fox, p. 71

Chapter 3: *Yirat Adonai* – the Source of Wisdom in Proverbs

According to Fox's scholarship, there are no ancient Near-Eastern parallels to which one can compare the relationship between wisdom and *yirat Adonai* in order to gain a broader perspective on the way the two concepts work together. This is not to suggest that all the truths in Proverbs are exclusively or inherently Israelite or Jewish, as Longman mentions:

Pagans may well stumble on some interesting and helpful truth that provides insight on how to avoid a problem or achieve a desired goal. They may even be able to formulate that bit of advice in a way that is memorable. The Israelite sages may even adapt the advice for inclusion in the book of Proverbs. However, based on 1:7, they still would not judge pagan wisdom teachers as truly and authentically wise, because they lack the fear of Yahweh.¹⁷

Because such concepts do not appear in any parallel wisdom literature and is also fairly unique within the *Tanakh*, a deeper analysis of how Proverbs centrally couples *yirat Adonai* with wisdom provides a rich opportunity to further explore the way the concepts interact as a means to enhancing one's understanding of *yirah*. As I will show, the notion in Proverbs goes well beyond a focus on fear.

In his attempt to more fully explain *yirah* in the context of Proverbs, Murphy turns to the research of J. Becker,¹⁸ who describes three basic types of fear that develop from experiencing the numinous, which he describes as cultic, moral, and nomistic. The cultic expression deals with loyalty to and the covenant with God, and is the predominant usage within the Deuteronomic writings. The nomistic aspect of *yirah* deals with adherence to law and fear of retribution or punishment as a direct result of straying from what is commanded, as is characteristic within the Wisdom of Ben Sira. Meanwhile, it is the moral component of *yirah* that Becker claims as the predominant expression within Proverbs, as well as within

¹⁷ Longman, pp. 57-58

¹⁸ Becker, pp. 75-84

Chapter 3: *Yirat Adonai* – the Source of Wisdom in Proverbs

parts of Job and Ecclesiastes.¹⁹ Guiding this morality is his perspective is that “fear of the Lord also includes love.”²⁰ In Proverbs, love is a component of *yirah*, not an antonym – an intimate connection between *chochmah* and *ahavah*. *Yirah* is the first step, which leads eventually to *chochmah*.

However, *Yirat Adonai* as portrayed in Proverbs seems to be more than just “moral” but is revelatory. It helps one to access revelatory understanding of that which is happening in one’s life, which is not prescribed in the laws of the nomistic or cultic aspects of relating to *Yirat Adonai*. Morality is a part of it, but this is about more than just having a “recipe for right or wrong” by providing the reader with a means for identifying for oneself the right path. Fox describes ethical behavior as that key component that emerges from the relationship between *yirat Adonai* and wisdom:

The fear of God is the sphere within which wisdom is possible and can be realized, the precondition for both wisdom and ethical behavior . . . One attains wisdom, and with it an *understanding* of the fear of God [(this is the reward mentioned in verse 2:5)] . . . At this stage, the pupil has progressed from unreflective fear to a cognitive awareness of what fear of God really is, and this is equivalent to knowledge of God. This is fear of God as *conscience*.²¹

Because *yirat Adonai* does not only include fear of God, but also carries components of love, it produces a biblical idea of the conscience, when coupled with wisdom. It is the nature of matters of conscience that they are not limited to situations in which clear-cut laws apply; rather, most decisions that come about from one’s conscience emerge from situations in which right and wrong are somewhat blurred. In such context, the reward or punishment for one’s actions does not always emerge as clearly. Proverbs addresses the need to guide

¹⁹ Murphy, p. 255

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ Fox, pp. 69-70

people through such events, as they tend to make up the majority of the time spent experiencing life.

The fear of God is so valued because it motivates right behavior even when socially enforced sanctions do not exist or cannot be effective . . . God knew that Abraham truly feared him when he saw that he did not spare his son (Gen 22:12), although he had no legal obligation to sacrifice him, and even though God did not reinforce his charge with threats . . . Wisdom deals almost entirely with behavior that is not governed by law or that, like adultery, is usually clandestine . . . There is need for a motivation prior to and deeper than the promised retribution, and this is the fear of God.²²

Wisdom is necessary to guide people towards fulfilled life, and *yirat Adonai* serves as the motivating factor to lead people to this wisdom. According to Dermot Cox *yirat Adonai* is

a form of conscience that calls for an intellectual adhesion to a principle, the divine order, the concept of goodness of life, and this is a guarantee of ‘success.’ . . . It is a state of mind, not an action; it is almost synonymous with knowledge (especially in Prov 1-9).²³

This consciousness is the access that an individual needs in order to know that which one needs to attain wisdom. Having such a state of *yirah* then transforms *yirah* from the means to the end. It starts as a trust in the Numenon, and becomes its own self-fulfilled meaning. Once an individual understands this, then he or she can take it and apply it to life situations, helping one to avoid the snares in life. But beyond this, when paired with wisdom, *yirah* leads an individual to enlightenment and the opportunity to transform the interior of the being into a source of ongoing revelation – providing a person with the opportunity to make judgments. This is how Proverbs 1 describes the wise person who attains the ability to navigate around tempting wicked woman of wisdom and find true lady wisdom. *Yirat Adonai* therefore trains the individual to be more ethical, disciplined, and wise – allowing

²² *ibid* p. 70-71

²³ Fox ,p. 70, summarizing Cox, Dermot. “Fear or Conscience?: *Yir’at YHWH* in Proverbs 1-9.” *Studia Hierosolymitana* 3, 1982. pp. 83-90

each person who accesses it in this way to live a good life, the life that is worthy of that which the Jewish people honor. It helps an individual to live a life that one can appreciate and becomes an authentic manifestation of the personal relationship with Adonai, leading to self-fulfillment via the access to that which our tradition lays-out as what we need for self-fulfillment - *yirah*.

Although the word “fear” is often used to describe or translate it, *yirah* in Proverbs conveys much more information than this one word. And when “fear” is appropriate, it appears to be different from what we usually mean by “fear.” In what follows I further examine some of the nuances that can expand our understanding of the term in Proverbs. My analysis is divided into two basic units, one that focuses on the actual word, *yirah*, which is most often coupled with the name of God into the phrase, “*yirat Adonai*,” and the second section that examines נִיִּי when not attached to *Adonai*.

IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS – *YIRAH* IN PROVERBS

Because Prov 1:7 serves as the motto of the book of Proverbs – a statement that the rest of the book expounds upon, it is useful to explore the various occurrences of *yirat Adonai* and of the root נִיִּי, itself, in order to advance our understanding of how *yirah* is used and viewed through the perspective of Proverbs. According to J. Becker, *yirat Adonai* is most strongly presented as the necessary ingredient to wisdom in verses 1:7, 1:29, 2:5, 9:10, and 30:3

is associated with retribution in 10:27; 14:26-27; 15:16; 16:6; 19:23 and 22:24 . . . 15:33 is an exception and works more in the spirit of chaps 1-9 in that it is termed “wise instruction . . . The function of 16:6 is particularly important; it enables one to “avoid evil.”²⁴

²⁴ Murphy, pp. 256-257, citing J. Becker, *Gottesfurcht* pp. 221-228

Meanwhile, Longman claims that all the other appearances of *yirat Adonai* in Proverbs repeats the sentiments of verse 1:7.²⁵ A focused in-depth analysis should reveal how *yirat Adonai* is being used and whether or not it appears as a monolithic concept, within a consistent context, or if it varies in different places.

Proverbs 1:7

יִרְאַת יְהוָה רֵאשִׁית דָּעַת חֲכָמָה וּמוֹסָר אֱוִילִים בִּזּוֹן :

“Yirat Adonai is the beginning of knowledge; Fools despise wisdom and discipline.”

As previously mentioned, this is the central theme of the book of Proverbs. Because it is so central, many scholars and commentators have speculated on just what *yirat Adonai* might entail. It is clear that this verse presents *yirah* as a necessary component to the acquiring of wisdom, but what is not as easily understandable is the quality of this *yirah*.

As a beginning, this statement claims that there is no knowledge apart from a proper attitude and relationship to Yahweh . . . The verse demands a particular attitude in one’s relationship to Israel’s covenant God, and that is communicated by the noun “fear” (*yir’at*, from the verb *yr*). The verb has a semantic range that goes from what might be called “respect” or “awe” to “utter terror.” *Indisputable, however, is the basic premise that to fear Yahweh is to stand in a subservient position to him, to acknowledge one’s dependence upon him.* In the context of knowledge, it is to recognize that there is no true knowledge without reference to him.²⁶

Longman’s commentary on this verse presents the context in which *yirah* operates as a relational hierarchy – that the object of *yirah* must by nature be in a lesser, or “subservient” position. And Gunther Plaut specifies that “the fear of” God serves as a critical component of the experience that causes an individual to embrace the position of submission.

Moderns have shrunk from this expression [(fear of God)], feeling that it is denigrating the bond between God and man to base it on fear. Thus the *Union Prayerbook* and other recent translations of *yir’as adonai* have used *awe and reverence* as suitable substitutes. But the picture of a “fearless” man who is afraid of nothing, or who fears himself more than God, accords neither with

²⁵ Longman, p. 100

²⁶ *ibid* p. 100-101 (emphasis added)

the realities of religious experience nor with the best insights of dynamic psychology. Some fears are healthful, even necessary. In the context of a moral order which pervades the universe, man should fear the consequences of his deeds and therefore make God a part of his plan. It need not be trembling dread which paralyzes his actions, but neither should it be merely a polite reverence which animates this relationship.²⁷

According to Plaut, fear becomes a part of the vehicle for this relational hierarchy – a positive contribution to one’s moral health. Fearlessness, as Plaut describes, becomes a hindrance to the openness to wisdom that Proverbs seems to be describing. However, his conclusion, that this experience of *yirat Adonai* be more than a “polite reverence” leaves open the potential for other routes beyond fear alone to describe the quality of *yirah*.

When applying these concepts to the acquisition of wisdom, knowledge (and, therefore, wisdom) can only come as a result of that which God allows the subservient partner to access. If this is the case, only openness towards God could allow one to access wisdom and would thereby be the necessary starting point for acquiring knowledge.

Subservience, however, is not necessarily the only paradigm implied by the link between *yirat Adonai* and wisdom. Rashi mentions it more as a motivational tool.

This is the separation of the fundamentals of knowledge, and what shall be for you first, preceding knowledge: Before your wisdom, first fear your Creator, and that will give your heart the desire to engage in wisdom and in knowledge, for the fools, who do not fear the Lord, despise wisdom and discipline.²⁸

Whatever the experience of *yirat Adonai* may be, it results in the necessary motivation required to maintain the discipline and desire to persevere throughout the process of acquiring wisdom. As any student can attest, learning is not always easy, and can be a

²⁷ Gunther W. Plaut. Book of Proverbs: A Commentary. New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1961. p. 32

²⁸ Rabbi A.J. Rosenberg. Proverbs: A New English Translation. New York: Judaica Press, 1988. p. 5 – quoting Rashi

challenging process. Rosenberg explains Rashi's insight by summing up that without *yirat Adonai*, one will have "no desire to acquire wisdom."²⁹

Perhaps, then it is crucial that the experience of *yirat Adonai* is left intentionally vague. As Fox points out,

Proverbs 1:7 does not say anything about the quality of the fear. One person may worry about consequences, another may be uneasy about divine disapproval without thinking about retribution, and yet another may be in trepidation before the otherness of the holy. At the very start, a God-fearing child may simply worry that God will punish him for misdeeds.³⁰

Fox's perspective allows all people to experience *yirat Adonai* on their own levels, at the place where each can access this starting point or motivational component necessary for acquiring knowledge, even if two people are motivated in different ways. For some, this experience of *yirah* that inspires learning may be as grand as wanting to be a part of that which is bigger than each individual. While for others, it may stem from an irrational superstitious idea that they will be cursed. In either case, if this experience is genuine and speaks deeply to the individual, it will provide that person with the necessary incentive to overcome any obstacles that prevent the acquisition of learning. As Kravitz and Olitzky mention:

What "the fear of *Adonai* " actually means depends on the particular individual (or theologian) reflecting on that particular verse. Gersonides (1288-1344), a medieval philosopher, understood the words to refer to ethical virtues that were the necessary preliminaries to the intellectual virtues. Self-control, even for the philosophers, comes before the acquisition of knowledge.³¹

²⁹ Rosenberg, p. 5

³⁰ Fox, p. 70

³¹ Leonard S. Kravitz, Kerry M. Olitzky. Mishlei: A Modern Commentary on Proverbs. New York: UAHC Press, 2002. p. 3

Chapter 3: *Yirat Adonai* – the Source of Wisdom in Proverbs

Yirat Adonai, regardless of the specifics of the experience, offers a person a poignant sense of motivation, providing the self-discipline he or she needs in order to dedicate oneself to the endeavor of learning from one's experience. For each person, this sense of purpose may be different, but the desire to follow-up on the spark of curiosity that *yirat Adonai* creates is crucial to overcoming the difficulties inherent in learning. And some of these challenges are not necessarily monumental, formidable barriers. They may be as mundane as being that which is time consuming, trivial, or boring. A genuine experience of *Yirat Adonai* opens one's heart to the end goal of acquiring wisdom, providing the necessary motivation to achieve such a prize. And it becomes a self-perpetuating prize, as well because

It is the 'beginning' (not the 'best part,' although this is a possible meaning) of wisdom, that is, a training that leads to wisdom, a moral formation to which wisdom contributes while it is also dependent upon it.³²

Yirat Adonai helps motivate the individual to learn and grow. But upon acquiring more knowledge and wisdom, one has the opportunity to be more attuned to the experience of *yirah*.

Proverbs 1:29

תַּחַת כִּי־שָׁנְאוּ דָעַת וַיִּרְאוּ יְהוָה לֹא בָחָרוּ:

"Because they hated knowledge, And did not choose *yirat Adonai*,"

Contextually, this verse appears in the middle of a section describing the fate of those who are foolish. Prov 1:7 mentioned that the foolish were those who scorned wisdom and discipline. Therefore, it would make sense that such individuals would be those who do not choose *Yirat Adonai*, thus failing to acquire wisdom.

However, this verse also introduces the notion that there is choice when it comes to *yirat Adonai*. What remains unclear about this choice is whether or not an individual chooses

³² Murphy, p. 256 (See commentary on verse 2:5 for more explanation)

to experience *yirat Adonai* or does it involve what a person chooses to do after such an experience.

Kravitz and Olitzky nuance what *yirat Adonai* represents in this verse, lending more opportunity for understanding the choice that is involved.

The “fear of God” is presented as the basic morality that binds all persons (Gen 20:11). Those who have been doomed by their own foolishness cannot complain that they did not have the information that would have saved them. They knew what was considered to be “good,” and they rejected it nonetheless.³³

Such a perspective helps to explain the choice being made, given the assumption that the individual had access to *yirat Adonai* and chose to reject what came from it, in this case an understanding of what morality would be. In such a case, it seems as though the “fear of God” represents the warning that foolish individuals should have heeded, informing them that they were not on the right path – whether it is conveyed as a gut intuition or an explicitly conveyed idea. But the question still remains: can we choose to experience *yirat Adonai*? If so, what must we do in order to allow for such an experience?

Proverbs 2:5

אִז תֵּבִין יִרְאַת יְהוָה יִדְעַת אֱלֹהִים תִּמְצָא :

“Then you will understand *yirat Adonai*, And you will find God-knowledge.”

In the verses leading up to 2:5, the speaker of this Proverb, implores his or her son to seek wisdom as though seeking a treasure. Storing it away, directing one’s heart and ear to it, and calling out to it lead to this understanding of *yirat Adonai*. And if 1:7 suggests that *yirat Adonai* provides the motivation for seeking wisdom, then 2:5 adds a corollary. The seeking of wisdom that is triggered by the *yirah* leads us back to understanding our *yirat Adonai* in the first place, providing us with knowledge of God. Kravitz and Olitzky mention that “this

³³ Kravitz, p. 9

Chapter 3: *Yirat Adonai* – the Source of Wisdom in Proverbs

wisdom is of the highest kind: Fear of *Adonai* and knowledge of God.”³⁴ What started out as a means to an end seems to have become an end in itself, as Murphy explained earlier in his comment about Prov 1:7. As Fox mentions

The simple fear of divine anger that prompted the first, juvenile steps toward wisdom matures into a reasoned, cognitive conscience. The fear of God at the mature stage is the object of understanding (2:5a) and is defined by the parallel as a form of knowledge (2:5b).³⁵

Yirat Adonai, which sets the individual upon a path of learning and seeking meaning and purpose, matures over the course of one's searching into a more sophisticated approach,³⁶ leading one simultaneously right back where one started (with *yirat Adonai*), yet moved and inspired differently (with *דעת אלהים*). While *yirat Adonai* “is essentially an emotion or attitude,” whereas God-knowledge (*דעת אלהים*) “is in essence an awareness or cognition, though it is inextricably bound to fear of God and righteousness of action.”³⁷

But what is the source of the motivation to learn in the first place – from where does this *yirat Adonai* emerge?

Fear of *Adonai* and knowledge of God . . . Both terms conceal a paradox. They suggest information that is passed on by revelation from the Deity to humans. However, Proverbs . . . implies information developed by human beings and passed down to human beings by instruction from one generation to another. It is the very use of the terms . . . that raises the level of wisdom from the human to the Divine and thereby sanctions it.³⁸

A cynical approach to this comment might be to say that “*yirat Adonai*” is invoked by the author as a way of spreading humanly acquired wisdom as that which is divine and thereby universal.

³⁴ *ibid* p. 18

³⁵ Fox, p. 111

³⁶ *ibid* p. 113

³⁷ *ibid* p. 112

³⁸ Kravitz, p. 18

On the other hand, it is also possible that *yirat Adonai* is a necessary component to leading an individual to universal wisdom and knowledge and seems to suggest that the knowledge worth acquiring is that which stems not from this world but from God. The wisdom one learns through *yirat Adonai* is not merely human understanding, but rather it is God's knowledge and wisdom that is being bestowed upon the individual. Perhaps this concept sheds light on the choice being discussed in verse 1:29, for only a fool or one who lacks discipline would acquire such certainty from God but not act upon it. As Fox mentions, such God-knowledge "requires commitment as well . . . this commitment must be realized in action . . . To *know* what God does means to *do* it."³⁹ This link to the Divine represents the uniqueness of the wisdom of the book of Proverbs.

Proverbs 8:13

יִרְאַת יְהוָה שְׂנֵאת רָע גָּאָה וְנָאֵן וְדֶרֶךְ רָע וּפִי תַהֲפֻכּוֹת שְׂנֵאתִי :

"*Yirat Adonai* means hating evil; Pride, arrogance, the evil way, And duplicity in speech do I hate."

Personified Wisdom speaks Verse 8:13, offering an explanation about its character.

An ethical notion that is particular to Judaism is being taught here: reverence for God includes the hatred of evil . . . evil begins with falsehood. If we are unwilling to maintain what is true, we will end up stuck with what is false and therefore evil.⁴⁰

Since *Yirat Adonai* represents the beginning of Wisdom and as this verse teaches means hating evil, this verse provides a list of that which gets in the way of *yirat Adonai*. Pride, arrogance, the evil way, and duplicity in speech seem to represent deleterious attitudes that would get in the way of an individual's access to the experience of *yirat Adonai*, and thereby would block one's acquisition of wisdom.

³⁹ Fox, p. 112

⁴⁰ Kravitz, p. 83

According to Fox, the first half of this verse is a later insertion, “a pietistic insertion intended to counterbalance the possibly amoral overtones of cunning and shrewdness” in the previous verses.⁴¹ Bringing the concept of *yirat Adonai* into the discussion of what Wisdom hates again serves the purpose of elevating the acquisition of wisdom from a worldly, potentially selfish pursuit that could lead to profit into that which is Divine.

Proverbs 9:10

תְּחִלַּת חִכְמָה יִרְאַת יְהוָה וְדַעַת קְדָשִׁים בִּינָה :

“The beginning of wisdom is *yirat Adonai*, And knowledge of The One Who is Holiness⁴² is understanding.”

Verse 9:10 echoes the motto of the book of Proverbs, 1:7. The key differences being that instead of linking *yirat Adonai* to knowledge (דַּעַת), in this case it is being connected with wisdom (חִכְמָה). Longman claims that “the meanings of ‘knowledge’ and ‘wisdom’ are essentially the same.”⁴³ At the very least, Proverbs places equal value on them and appears to use them interchangeably.⁴⁴ Although Fox mentions that this verse creates a distinction between “knowledge of the Holy One and wisdom, but makes the former a prerequisite for the latter.”⁴⁵ Yet, knowledge also appears later in this verse – knowledge of that which is holy, which leads one to another of the words that accompanies wisdom throughout Proverbs – understanding (בִּינָה). Overall, this usage of *yirat Adonai* promotes the idea that the “starting point of education is an awareness of God’s presence – a concern for what is right

⁴¹ Fox, p. 272

⁴² *ibid* p. 308. M. Fox compares this verse with 2:5, revealing a similar structure and parallelism between the usages of אֱלֹהִים in 2:5 with קְדָשִׁים here in 9:10. Upon further searching, he concludes that this usage of קְדָשִׁים is comparable to the honorific “His Holiness” that Catholics use to describe the Pope.

⁴³ Longman, p. 219

⁴⁴ In modern thought, “knowledge” is often identified with information, but the biblical term is more comprehensive.

⁴⁵ Fox, p. 309

and wrong.”⁴⁶ Without such an awareness and a concern that leads to a commitment to learning, wisdom remains inaccessible, even if it is possible for an individual to accidentally stumble upon the “right path.” Such moments, however would be fleeting.

According to Fox, Prov 9:7-10 is a later insertion into the narrative in this section, providing further evidence that the themes of 9:10 and of 1:7 are crucial to the intended message of the book of Proverbs. Verses 9:1-6 are spoken from the perspective of personified Wisdom once more. In these verses, Wisdom appeals to the “callow” and the “senseless” to embrace and accept wisdom’s understanding.⁴⁷ Fox claims that originally, verse 9:11 followed 9:6, which would then read:

(9:6) “Abandon callowness and live; walk in the path of understanding, (9:11)
for through me your days will increase and years be added to your life.”⁴⁸

Instead of leaving it as such, the compiler of Proverbs chose to insert 9:7-10 in which those who are already wise and on the right path also are shown to be desired by Wisdom, and thereby worthy of the reward in verse 9:11. As Proverbs stands today, *yirat Adonai* seems to be a precondition to the path that will allow an individual access to the reward indicated in verse 9:11.

Additionally, the inclusion of verse 9:10 creates a strong bookend for the first section of Proverbs, chapters 1-9, as a call back to verse 1:7. *Yirat Adonai* in this way also provides a context for the book of Proverbs as a whole, a concept that marks the transition between sections of the book.

Proverbs 10:27

יִרְאַת יְהוָה תוֹסִיף יָמִים וְשָׁנוֹת רָשָׁעִים תִּקְצְרֶנָּה :

“*Yirat Adonai* prolongs life, while the years of the wicked will be cut short.”

⁴⁶ *ibid* p. 308

⁴⁷ *ibid*

⁴⁸ Translation from Fox, p. 295

Chapter 3: *Yirat Adonai* – the Source of Wisdom in Proverbs

Beyond Chapters 1-9, the book of Proverbs takes a turn towards shorter sayings and statements that do not tend to carry with them the same amount of context of surrounding verses as in the opening section.⁴⁹ The first time *yirat Adonai* appears in this next section is here in 10:27. The concept of *yirat Adonai* is coupled with one of the core blessings associated with wisdom, again making a subtle connection between the two concepts.⁵⁰ At the same time, this context provides a concrete contrast for the more abstract idea of the “God-fearer” by putting the one with *yirat Adonai* in parallel to the wicked. While it is difficult to understand exactly who has *yirat Adonai*, we have a better understanding of the wicked. Knowing who the wicked is at least allows the reader to comprehend what one with *yirat Adonai* is not. As Ibn Nachmiash wrote:

Although worry and concern weaken a person, worry about his sins and about the fear of God lengthens his days. The wicked, although they enjoy life and satisfy all their desires and lusts will not achieve longevity.⁵¹

According to this interpretation, *Yirat Adonai* provides access to a longitudinal perspective that goes beyond immediate desires and lusts. Thinking in such long-scale terms is one of the ways in which an individual can be open to *yirat Adonai*.

If one is to interpret this verse as creating a connection between *yirat Adonai* and prolongation of life, Murphy mentions that this is meant to be understood “both qualitatively and quantitatively, a full and a long life.”⁵² However, such a concept leaves this verse open to some critique as to the way of the world.

Everything being equal, living in a way that conforms to God’s will results in a longer life . . . The purpose of this proverb is to motivate people toward fear

⁴⁹ Fox, p. 44

⁵⁰ Murphy, p. 76

⁵¹ Rosenberg, pp. 59-60

⁵² Murphy, p. 76

Chapter 3: *Yirat Adonai* – the Source of Wisdom in Proverbs

of Yahweh. Since all things are not equal and therefore sometimes God-fearers die young.⁵³

Such a concept states that in an ideal sense, we would be able to see this reward for adhering to *yirat Adonai* and seeking wisdom. It seems as though *yirah* in this case is used as a means to a concrete reward, rather than a transcendent value to itself, as it has been portrayed in the earlier chapters. Regardless of this shift in the context for which *yirah* is used, Van Leeuwen brings in a divine aspect of this ideal that maintains the motivational power of this proverb by claiming that “the problem’s ultimate resolution requires a developed view of life after death.”⁵⁴ Even though Van Leeuwen is coming from a Christian perspective with a different position from that of modern Jewish thinkers on what that view of life after death would be, his insight is valid. It applies equally whether one is referring to a Christian concept of heaven or to the Jewish concept of **עולם הבא**, “the world to come” within which all those living can earn a share by living according to God.

Proverbs 14:26-27

26 בְּיִרְאַת יְהוָה מְבִטָּח-עַז וְלִבָּנָיו יִתֵּן מַחְסֶה :

27 יִרְאַת יְהוָה מְקוֹר חַיִּים לְסוּר מִמִּקְשֵׁי מָוֶת :

26 “In *yirat Adonai* is a strong promise⁵⁵ and a refuge for God’s children⁵⁶.

27 *Yirat Adonai* is a spring of life, to turn one away from deadly snares.”

Once again in this second section of Proverbs, *yirat Adonai* represents a future reward. However it is rendered, **עז מבטח** seems to refer to a source of comfort and that, which helps to preserve one’s future. Both strong promises and strongholds have the

⁵³ Longman, p. 243

⁵⁴ R.C. Van Leeuwen. “Proverbs.” The New Interpreter’s Bible. Eds. L.E. Keck, et al. Nashville: Abingdon, 1997, p. 113

⁵⁵ Rosenberg, p. 84 translates it as such, which matches the simple translation of the text. JPS renders it as “Fear of Adonai is a stronghold”

⁵⁶ Murphy, p. 102 mentions that “there is no clear antecedent to the suffix in **לִבָּנָיו**, “to his children,” unless it is understood to refer to” God.

potential to bring a sense of calm and comfort or even protection in otherwise tumultuous times, as would a refuge, keeping the individual safe until a crisis has blown over. Once again we have the idea that having *yirah* in Proverbs implies a longitudinal view of one's situation. This meritorious reward associated with *yirat Adonai* also reveals that the term has positive value that goes beyond a fear of punishment.

Verse 14:27 recalls some of the connections between *yirat Adonai* and wisdom as portrayed earlier in Proverbs. As Kravitz and Olisky observe, Gersonides commented on this verse, “the fear of God is wisdom that, when attained, will provide guidance. For Rabbinic Judaism, fear of God was translated into the laws and rituals of Jewish observance.”⁵⁷ From the perspective of Gersonides, it appears that 14:26-27 applies the paradigm of the link between *yirat Adonai* and wisdom. How does this link manifest itself in our lives? It serves as a source of comfort, showing us a future promise, should we choose to follow it. The wisdom we acquire from such inquiry represents that promise, and the result is that it has the potential to help us avoid deadly snares, which thereby makes it a constant source of life-sustaining aid.

Proverbs 15:16

טוֹב-מֶעַט בְּיִרְאַת יְהוָה מֵאֵצֶר רַב וּמְהוּמָה בּוֹ :

“It is better to have a little with *yirat Adonai* than to have great wealth with confusion in it.”

The book of Proverbs focuses on the acquisition of wisdom. Unfortunately for so many of the world's scholars, wisdom does not guarantee the acquisition of wealth, even if it is one of “the benefits promised to the wise.”⁵⁸ This verse makes a clear statement about the value placed on the guaranteed reward of following one's *yirat Adonai*, which would be

⁵⁷ Kravitz, p. 142

⁵⁸ Murphy, p. 113

wisdom. According to Gersonides, “it is better to have less money acquired with ‘fear of God,’ that is, in a decent manner, than great wealth acquired through the oppression of others.”⁵⁹ This perspective shows another application of *yirat Adonai* and its link to wisdom. The knowledge acquired through *yirah* can also be a part of one’s business dealings. And the truly wise allow their sense of *yirah* to guide their dealings, which would lead to fairness and honesty – the type of business that would allow an individual to take pride in at the end of the day and know that one conducted oneself with integrity and honesty. Such a reward in the longitudinal sense is often more valued than fleeting financial profit. This perspective teaches us that an individual “can tolerate (relative?) poverty, for that is preferable to being overpreoccupied about one’s personal state and the problems it begets.”⁶⁰ *Yirat Adonai* inspires and motivates an individual to strive for that, which is greater than the immediate worldly gains one can achieve at any given moment, which often come with a sacrifice. And in many ways this relates to 14:26-27, for there have been many people killed (literally and figuratively, as in one’s reputation) in retaliation for crooked business dealings. Opening oneself to the experience of *Yirat Adonai*, even in one’s business dealings, provides access to understanding life-affirming decisions.

Proverbs 15:33

יִרְאַת יְהוָה מוֹסֵר חֲכָמָה וְלִפְנֵי כְבוֹד עֲנוּה :

“*Yirat Adonai* is the discipline of wisdom; and before honor is humility”

The overt link between *yirat Adonai* and wisdom as portrayed in this verses is a direct reference back to the motto of this book, 1:7, which is reiterated in 9:10. The nuance added in this verse is that *yirat Adonai* represents the מוֹסֵר, “discipline,” of wisdom. In other

⁵⁹ Kravitz, p. 150

⁶⁰ Murphy, p. 256

Chapter 3: *Yirat Adonai* – the Source of Wisdom in Proverbs

places, *מוֹסֵר* seems to be one of the tools for turning the spark of motivation that comes from *yirat Adonai* into wisdom – the discipline required to inquire, study, and learn. Such interpretation lead Kravitz and Olitzky to explain what they call “Spiritual logic”

To gain, one must give. To gain wisdom, one must voluntarily place oneself within a covenantal relationship with God. In doing so, one obligates oneself to perform mitzvot and live a Jewish life, what is referred to as “fear of God.”⁶¹

As Kravitz and Olisky understand it, performing *mitzvot* and living a Jewish life must be their interpretation of what it means to have *מוֹסֵר*.

The second half of this verse may also lend some insight as to the quality of an experience of *yirah*. If these two halves of the verse are in parallel as is often the case in Proverbs, then it links *yirah* with humility, and “discipline of wisdom” with honor. It is not difficult to imagine an experience of *yirat Adonai* as a humbling experience. This verse teaches that such humility is a necessary prerequisite for being able to achieve true honor. However, Murphy warns against making such a conclusion, claiming that the second half of this verse “seems only loosely connected with” its beginning.⁶²

This verse is the end of chapter 15, which also represents the end of another section of Proverbs.⁶³ Once again, *yirat Adonai* and its connection to wisdom bring context to the body of Proverbs,⁶⁴ appearing as a signal that the book is shifting gears into a new section of thought.

Proverbs 16:6

בְּחָסֵד וְאֱמֶת יִכָּפֵר עֲוֹן וּבִירְאָת יְהוָה סוּר מָרָע :

⁶¹ Kravitz, p. 154

⁶² Murphy, p. 115

⁶³ *ibid* p. 116

⁶⁴ cf 9:10

Chapter 3: *Yirat Adonai* – the Source of Wisdom in Proverbs

“With loving-kindness and truth will iniquity be expiated, and through *Yirat Adonai* turn away from evil.”

Yirat Adonai is the key to avoiding evil, serving as the subject of the verb, סוּר, “to turn away,” as in 14:27, the verse this sentiment most closely echoes. The first half of this verse deals with forgiveness, which “underscores that human רַחֲמִים, “kindness,” can be met by divine forgiveness . . . the “evil” is moral evil, as well as any physical harm.”⁶⁵ *Yirat Adonai* again is portrayed as conveying a protective quality.

Rosenberg quotes the Mezudath David in order to bring out another key teaching from this proverb: “Through the loving-kindness and truth that a person performs, his sins will be forgiven, provided that he turns away from evil out of fear of the Lord, not out of fear of people.”⁶⁶ The caveat presented by Mezudath David is a curious one, but seems to be consistent with the book of Proverbs. For example, if a younger brother were to beg forgiveness for having annoyed his older brother, and he did so because he feared that his brother would beat him up, this would not constitute a genuine expiation. It would not have come out of truth nor loving-kindness. Is it different if the younger brother apologizes because he fears that God will punish him? But this idea of being punished does not seem to be a part of *yirah* as presented in the book of Proverbs. Rather, *yirat Adonai*, as presented in Proverbs, would sit in the pit of the individual’s stomach, serving as the indication that something is not as it should be. And if that individual explores the root of the discomfort, that person would understand why an apology was necessary and take the necessary action to rectify it.

⁶⁵ Murphy, p. 121

⁶⁶ Rosenberg, p. 95

Proverbs 19:23

יִרְאַת יְהוָה לְחַיִּים וְשִׁבְעַ יָלִין בְּלִי-יִפְקֹד רָע:

“*Yirat Adonai* – for life⁶⁷; and that person will abide in contentment, and will never be visited by evil.”

The ultimate purpose for *Yirat Adonai* is life. This verse echoes 14:27 and 16:6, as it “underlines once more the goal of wisdom/[*yirat Adonai*]: life.”⁶⁸ And in 16:6 as well as 19:23, the life that is brought about by *yirat Adonai* is that which avoids evil altogether. In this proverb, the sentiment goes even further, so as to say that evil will never befall the one who has *yirat Adonai*. This grand promise challenges what one often observes. However, Ibn Ezra suggests a way to interpret this perspective that takes into account real world experience in which evil, or calamity, or misfortune is a part of life. He says that “God-fearing people do not remember even the trouble that has already befallen them.”⁶⁹ By means of this interpretation, *yirat Adonai* leads an individual to a moral certainty with which to contextualize one’s suffering. This type of approach would not linger on the negative experience but would instead learn from it.

Proverbs 22:4

עֵקֶב עֲנָוָה יִרְאַת יְהוָה עֲשֹׂר וְכָבוֹד וְחַיִּים:

“The effect of humility is *Yirat Adonai*, wealth, honor, and life.”

Just as in verse 15:33, this proverb couples *Yirat Adonai* with humility. And like it, this verse promises publicly visible signs of reward (as do 9:11, 10:27 and 19:23). Rashi offers a reading of this verse that supports some of the claims made about the second half of verse 15:33 about a potential quality of *yirah*. “Because of humility, fear of the Lord comes.

⁶⁷ Murphy, p. 140 translates the first part of the verse as such. JPS renders it as, “The one who fears *Adonai* ‘earns life’”

⁶⁸ *ibid* p. 146

⁶⁹ Kravitz, p. 193

. . Humility is the main attribute, and fear is secondary to it and a ‘heel’ to it.”⁷⁰ Just as *yirat Adonai* represents the beginning of wisdom, according to Proverbs, humility, or עֲנוּה, just might be the beginning of *yirah*. This makes a great deal of sense, for the various routes to wisdom that begin in *yirat Adonai* all seem to originate from an experience that serves as a guide towards wisdom. In order for an individual to change paths, that person must be open to allowing one’s experience to call into question deeply held assumptions. Humility, the lack, or at the very least suppression, of one’s ego, is a required element for an individual to be open to the kind of outside data acquisition that can lead to true change. Without it, a person might be too inclined to hold fast to one’s preconceived notions of self or of right and wrong, preventing any wisdom that might contradict such assumptions from taking root.

Meanwhile, Kravitz and Olitzky explore the results of humility that leads to *yirat Adonai*.

Both Ibn Ezra and Gersonides see a casual connection between “humility” and “fear of *Adonai*” and between “fear of *Adonai*” and “wealth, honor, and life.” For Ibn Ezra, divine favor gotten by “fear of *Adonai*” will bring material goods for the latter. For Gersonides, “humility” will move the thinker to philosophical reflection, which, in turn, will bring the thinker to the political virtues of “wealth” and “honor” and the intellectual virtues, which provide “life.”⁷¹

While Ibn Ezra focused primarily on physical reward for experiencing *yirat Adonai*, Gersonides’ perspective seems to be more in line with the rest of Proverbs, elaborating on the kind of wisdom that *yirat Adonai* can lead one to acquire. The *yirat Adonai* that comes out of humility allows one to understand wealth, honor, and life in new, more purposeful ways.

Proverbs 23:17

אֶל-יִקְנָא לְבָךְ בַּחֲטָאִים כִּי אַם-בִּירְאָת־יְהוָה כָּל-הַיּוֹם :

⁷⁰ Cited in Rosenberg, p. 133

⁷¹ Kravitz, p. 215

“Do not be envious of sinners in your heart, but rather only for those with *yirat Adonai*, at all times.”

This proverb stresses the desirability of achieving *yirat Adonai*. It also might be pointing to the difficulty in always being able to live by such *yirah*. There is an assumption that most of those who would be reading this book will not always be able to access it, therefore it proffers an ideal – the one who always lives by *yirat Adonai* – as a goal, juxtaposing it with the other extreme of a sinner.

Proverbs 31:30

שֶׁקֶר חֶסֶן וְהַבֵּל הַיָּפִי אִשָּׁה יִרְאַת־יְהוָה הִיא תִתְהַלָּל:

“Grace is deceptive, Beauty is illusory; it is for her *yirat Adonai* that a woman should be praised.”

Once again, *yirat Adonai* appears at the end of a major section of Proverbs – this time in the next to last verse of the entire book, in conjunction with 31:31.⁷² “However this verse is to be translated, it seems to be an inclusion with 1:7, and underlines the importance of fear of the Lord in this book.”⁷³

Another key development in this passage is that it specifies that women can access *yirat Adonai*. Although modern readers might suppose that all the teachings in Proverbs apply equally to women and men, such may not have been the case for earlier readers of the book; it may not have been as obvious at the time of this text that Proverbs includes women, especially since much of the book addresses a son (as in 1:8), even though wisdom is personified as female (as in 7:4). If women have access to *yirat Adonai*, then women should also be able to access wisdom.

Some scholars seem baffled about why *yirah* was included in this verse. They claim that it does not necessarily match ideas of grace and beauty that appear earlier in the verse

⁷² Murphy, p. 249

⁷³ *ibid* p. 258

and in the rest of this poem honoring a woman of valor. But looking closely across Proverbs through the lens of *yirat Adonai*, it seems this verse combines all the elements of *yirah* displayed so far. Again, *yirat Adonai* leads one to think more longitudinally, giving promise of a future reward (being content as one ages, able to let go of one's vanity). Such a perspective can only come out of humility, which offers people life-affirming opportunities to reinvent themselves as they age. *Yirat Adonai* is accessible to everyone who is willing to be open to it, and is worthy of being praised. Since it is linked to wisdom, this verse values thought and understanding over physical gifts – not to their exclusion, but rather setting up a hierarchy with wisdom at the top. Such a person would seem to have purpose in life that can transcend the temporary gifts of beauty and grace, which is the ultimate goal of Proverbs – discovering such meaning. Therefore, this verse neatly bookends Proverbs, allowing *yirat Adonai* to bookend its wisdom from beginning to end.

IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS: NON-*YIRAH*, יָרָא IN PROVERBS

Proverbs 3:7

אַל־תְּהִי חָכָם בְּעֵינֶיךָ יָרָא אֶת־יְהוָה וְסוּר מִרָע :

“You shall not be wise in your own eyes; have *yirah* for *Adonai* and turn away from evil.”

In addition to the 15 instances of *yirat Adonai* in the book of Proverbs, the root יָרָא appears an additional seven times. In this first occurrence as a verb, יָרָא completely aligns with the usage in the rest of the book as *yirat Adonai*. Not only is the object of the verb *Adonai*, but also it is linked to wisdom and it is coupled with the same verb, סוּר, seen in later verses (14:27 and 16:6), describing the effects of turning oneself away from evil. This verse leads Kravitz and Olitzky to conclude that, “Fear of God, however constructed, suggests a

source by which an individual may gauge his or her actions.”⁷⁴ Such an idea actually seems to reflect back to the usage of *יִרָא* in the book of Leviticus. This verse offers the perspective that individuals have the potential to create their own realities, and sometimes need grounding in order to maintain moral perspective.

Mezudath David explains: Do not be wise in your own sight to decide that . . . you do not need to impose safeguards upon yourself because a wise man like you finds them unnecessary. Rather, fear the Lord lest you stumble despite your wisdom.⁷⁵

This perspective reveals one of the experiential qualities of *yirah*. It grants a wider perspective, forcing oneself outside of the paradigms offered solely from within one’s own viewpoint. The verse also evokes indirectly the magnitude of God in whose presence a person rightly experiences humility, able to recognize the limits of one’s own wisdom. *Yirah* becomes a motivational factor that keeps us removed from sin. As Longman concludes, this verse is “an alternate way to state that [one] should not depend on [one’s] own understanding.”⁷⁶ This verse also describes the acquisition of wisdom as an ongoing endeavor – one in which there is no point when a person can obtain enough wisdom to stop learning. Proverbs warns against haughtiness or straying from the open-mindedness that leads one to acquire wisdom in the first place, suggesting that *yirah* is a necessary component to applying wisdom, in addition to gaining understanding.

Proverbs 3:25

אַל-תִּירָא מִפֶּתַח פֶּתָאִים וּמִשְׂאֵת רָשָׁעִים כִּי תֵבֵא :

“You shall not *have yirah* of sudden fear, nor the disaster of the wicked should it come.”

⁷⁴ Kravitz, p. 28

⁷⁵ Rosenberg, p. 16

⁷⁶ Longman, p. 133

Chapter 3: *Yirat Adonai* – the Source of Wisdom in Proverbs

For the first time in this analysis, יִירָא is not coupled with *Adonai*. It is one of only a few places where the object of *yirah* is not that which is divine. However, it is also an instance in which the advice is to not תִּירָא. While the rest of Proverbs to this point promotes coupling the experience of *yirah* with God, in this case, it advises against applying *yirah* to that which is not God.

At the same time, this verse offers a critical insight to the nature of יִירָא as opposed to the more standard word for fear, פֶּחַד. But first one must attempt to understand the words in context. Rosenberg states, “do not fear “sudden terror” – for it will not befall you, according to the *Mezudath David*. Rashi says that ‘when darkness comes upon the wicked, you need not fear.’”⁷⁷ The traditional commentaries quoted by Rosenberg reveal that the standard understanding of this verse teaches that one who is righteous need not fear sudden calamity or unexpected tragedy. Therefore, most translators render פֶּחַד in this instance as “terror,” or “sudden terror” in the case of Rosenberg. As Longman comments, “Such ‘ruin’ interrupts the life of the wicked, not the life of the righteous.”⁷⁸

Murphy says that “it is against such unexpected attacks that the Lord will protect the one who shows trust,” revealing something about his perspective on the meaning of אַל-תִּירָא, “you shall not *have yirah*.”⁷⁹ Such a perspective adds a component of trust to the idea of *yirah* that has been implicitly stated in the commentary on most of the previous instances explored. Without trust that it will lead in a positive direction, one’s *yirat Adonai* would not hold any value worth exploring.

⁷⁷ Rosenberg, p. 20

⁷⁸ Longman, p. 142

⁷⁹ Murphy, p. 23

Chapter 3: *Yirat Adonai* – the Source of Wisdom in Proverbs

In each case, **יִרָא** is portrayed as an important experience, one that should not be wasted on that which is on a lower level of **פֶּחַד**. This verse seems to value **יִרָא** over **פֶּחַד**, warning the individual against elevating that which is merely **פֶּחַד**, in the realm of worldly fears, to the level of **יִרָא**, which is a fear that is on the plane of one's relationship with the divine. Therefore, the fear of that which happens as a natural part of this world – whether by punishment for those who are wicked or by natural disaster – should not paralyze a person nor cajole one to act according to such fear in the same way we are told to pursue **יִרָא**. This reveals a key distinction between **יִרָא** and **פֶּחַד** – the former should motivate the individual to action, while the latter represents a fear that we should fight and overcome. We must not submit our will to our objects of **פֶּחַד** in the same way we are compelled to do with **יִרָא**. At the same time, this proverb is a plea that one does not relegate one's access to the divine via **יִרָא** to the worldly level of **פֶּחַד**.

Proverbs 13:13

בֶּן לְדָבָר יִתְקַל לוֹ וְיִרָא מִצְוָה הוּא יִשְׁלָם:

“The one who disdains a precept, it will go badly for him; the one who has *yirah* for a commandment will be made whole.”

Verse 13:13 is followed up in verse 14 with a nearly identical statement to 14:27, sans the concept of *yirat Adonai*, stating that the teachings of the wise are a fountain of life helping one to avoid deadly snares.⁸⁰ This provides some additional context for verse 13:13, seeming to couple the teachings of the wise with the one who has *yirah* for a commandment, and the deadly snares with the person for whom things go badly.

⁸⁰ *ibid* p. 97

Chapter 3: *Yirat Adonai* – the Source of Wisdom in Proverbs

This verse is unique in the book of Proverbs, as it is the first and only positive instance of *yirah* being coupled with a concrete concept other than Adonai. In other cases, where *Adonai* does not directly follow ירא, we are either being warned not to apply *yirah* to the object of the sentence, or else the object is not directly stated and can most likely be implied to be God. In this case, however, the object of *yirah* is *mitzvah*, commandment. While *mitzvah* is a level removed from Adonai, it is connected nonetheless, since God is the source of the *mitzvot*, according to Jewish thought. Yet, this is a critical distinction to be made – it is not only God alone who has the clout to lead a person to wisdom and meaning through *yirah*, but also the teachings that come from *Adonai*. This confirms the precedent set in the book of Leviticus, where the object of *yirah* is God’s sanctuary (19:30), which is an offshoot of what we learn from the divine or where we encounter the divine.

Proverbs 14:2

הוֹלֵךְ בְּיִשְׁרָיו יֵרָא יְהוָה וְנִלְוֹז דְּרָכָיו בְּזִוְהוֹ:

“The one who maintains his integrity has *yirah* of *Adonai*; one of devious ways has contempt for God.”

As Kravitz and Olitzky summarize, “Fear of God entails proper behavior. Inappropriate behavior reveals a lack of commitment to God. For Judaism, behavior is an indication of belief.”⁸¹ In this verse, the order of causation from 1:7 is reversed. Instead of *yirat Adonai* leading towards wisdom, purpose, and meaning; one’s ability to live according to such principles –to live with integrity – reveals that a person truly does have *yirat Adonai* at one’s core. As Murphy points out in this case, along with a few other verses,⁸² “Fear of the Lord

⁸¹ Kravitz, p. 135

⁸² Murphy, p. 93. He identifies 15:33, 16:6, and 30:5, as well as 14:26 (in which *yirah* does not appear), as verses that promote this same idea and connection between wisdom and justice.

means trust in God . . . such connections bind wisdom and justice ever more tightly.”⁸³ Such a viewpoint suggests that justice is one of the central goals of the wisdom Proverbs is promoting. Indeed, without the sense of a greater commitment – either due to fear or reverence - it is easy for an individual to let an overall sense of justice and responsibility towards others slide. This would suggest that another quality of the experience of *yirah* might be a craving for justice. Applying such logic to the rest of Proverbs’ notion of *yirah* would indicate that it is our awareness and instinctual sense of injustice around us that could inspire and motivate us to acquire wisdom that teaches us how to right such unfairness, and that the learning is not complete without it leading to action. Only at the point of action can a person truly determine that indeed one has aligned one’s will to the experience of *yirat Adonai*.

Proverbs 14:16

חָכָם יִרָא וְסָר מִרָע וְכִסִּיל מִתַּעֲבֵר וּבֹטָח:

“A wise person has *yirah*⁸⁴ and turns away from evil, but a dullard is incensed and falls down.”⁸⁵

Once again, *יִרָא* is used in connection with wisdom and turning away from evil. And in this case, a counter-example is given of the dullard or fool who acts with rashness and therefore fails. As Kravitz and Olitzky note, “The wise person knows what to be afraid of. The irate fool rushes in to his or her own hurt.”⁸⁶ According to this perspective, *yirah* then adds a component of patience to one’s decision-making process, helping a person avoid the snare of acting rashly out of anger, causing one to “fall down” or “fail.” *Yirah* could be that

⁸³ *ibid*

⁸⁴ Kravitz, p. 139, translates *יִרָא* as one who “is wary.”

⁸⁵ *ibid* – Kravitz and Olitzky note that the end of this verse is often misunderstood. “While it may appear that *mitabeir* comes from the root *avar*, ‘to cross over,’ it actually comes from the similar root *avar*, ‘to be angry.’ Likewise, *botei-ach* does not come from the root *batach*, ‘to trust.’ Rather, it comes from the similar root *batach*, ‘to fall prostrate.’”

⁸⁶ *ibid*

Chapter 3: *Yirat Adonai* – the Source of Wisdom in Proverbs

internal moral voice that causes a person to pause ever so quickly before acting, especially in the heat of a moment, thereby helping one to avoid bringing disaster upon oneself by rash action. However construed, such *yirah* seems to extend the moment into the future, inspiring a person to act not just from an emotional response to the present conditions, but also by taking into account that which might change in the future. Again, it appears to add a longitudinal perspective to the decision making process.

Though there is no direct object to the verb יָרָא, it seems as though God would be that implied source of a wise person's *yirah*. This would be consistent with most of the rest of the book of Proverbs. However, Rosenberg notes that Rashi takes a different perspective, claiming that "a wise man fears retribution."⁸⁷ One could only assume that it is the fear of divine retribution that is at stake here, though in the context of the verse, it could indeed be a fear of how others will react to one's actions. However, it leaves open the question of how one knows if the object of one's *yirah* is appropriate.

There is no consensus, however, on how to interpret the second half of the sentence. Plaut disagrees with the translation offered by Kravitz and Olitzky, as well as Rosenberg, rendering the end of the verse, "But the fool behaveth overbearingly, and is confident."⁸⁸ Such an interpretation adds a level of humility associated with wisdom that seems to emanate from the experience of *yirah*. Its opposite becomes the one who is arrogant, and therefore overconfident in one's own knowledge, making the assumption that one's own internal understanding is enough. Rather, Plaut links this verse to one of the ancient fathers of wisdom, Socrates, who humbly claimed "The only thing I know is that I know nothing."⁸⁹ If

⁸⁷ Rosenberg, p. 82

⁸⁸ Plaut, p. 161

⁸⁹ *ibid*

Chapter 3: *Yirat Adonai* – the Source of Wisdom in Proverbs

this is the basis of wisdom, the acceptance of such realization must be *yirah*, which becomes a faith that the knowledge of how to act and what to do will reveal itself to the individual when needed, as long as one is open to it. Socrates' statement, like passages in Proverbs, implies humility, a realization or acknowledgement of one's limits in the face of what can be known or encountered.

Proverbs 24:21

יִרְאֵת יְהוָה בְּנֵי מֶלֶךְ עַם-שׁוֹנִים אֶל-תִּתְעָרֵב:

"Have *yirah* of Adonai, my son, and the king, And do not mix with dissenters."

At first this verse appears to be an instruction that would be completely consistent with the rest of the appearances of ירא in Proverbs, as it compels the reader to direct ones *yirah* towards *Adonai*. However, an additional object of *yirah* is added to this verse, מֶלֶךְ, king. It appears odd that the author should in this case equate a king to God, including them in the same sentence in this way.

It is surprising to see fear of the Lord bracketed (it occurs only here) with the king. Housman (*Menschenbeild*, 137) comments: "King and YHWH are characterized here rather as 'Greats' to whom one must pay equal attention because one never knows exactly when they will allow a misfortune to overtake the one who is not acting properly toward them. Herein alone, according to this text, is the commonality (viewed negatively in the eyes of the author) between YHWH and the king."⁹⁰

According to Housman's view of this verse, the link that is being made between God and a king is that both have the power to make decisions that affect an individual's life should either one be insulted by that person. Both God and a king have the potential to be a source of calamity, and this seems to trouble Housman, who claimed that the author must have viewed this negatively. Plaut, meanwhile, seeks to reconcile this by claiming that מֶלֶךְ refers

⁹⁰ Murphy, p. 182

instead to a heavenly king – the Messiah. And that even if it were to refer to an earthly ruler, “one should note that the fear of the Lord has primacy: where God and government, religious conviction and secular power stand in conflict, the former must take precedence.”⁹¹ Plaut reads a hierarchy into the verse based on the word order since *Adonai* is listed before מֶלֶךְ in the verse. As such, *yirat Adonai* is valued above a *yirah* towards a king.

However, both Plaut and Murphy put forth another theory regarding what the true warning of this verse might be. Both of them concur that the key is the second half of this verse, in that one should not “mix with dissenters,” or as Plaut says “don’t become enamored of radicals and revolutionaries.”⁹² According to Murphy, such a view of *yirah* “explain[s] the fear that comes to the average person in dealing with the great in this life; to get caught on the side of rebels means certain death or imprisonment.”⁹³ If *yirah* is meant to be an experience that enhances and extends life, as in the rest of Proverbs, such behavior that would lead to certain death would be something that one’s *yirah* should prevent. Yet, according to Plaut’s theory of a hierarchy that should cause an individual to value religious conviction over secular power, one could be coaxed to becoming a revolutionary when a government impedes a religious conviction.

Proverbs 31:21

לֹא־תִירָא לְבֵיתָהּ מִשָּׁלֵג כִּי כָל־בֵּיתָהּ לְבָשׁ שָׁנִים :

“She does not have *yirah* for her household because of snow, for her whole household is dressed in crimson.”

This verse, in the middle of the description of the אִשָּׁת חַיִּל, the woman of valor, is steeped in imagery that seems to have multiple meanings. According to Plaut, snow

⁹¹ Plaut, p. 250

⁹² *ibid*

⁹³ Murphy, p. 182

represents the “unusual,” and scarlet is a “symbol of luxury.”⁹⁴ Meanwhile, Rosenberg mentions that “In Midrash, [the crimson] refers to Rahab the harlot, who had no fear of the Israelite armies because the spies gave her the sign of the crimson thread in her window.”⁹⁵ Both of these ideas suggest that a woman of valor should not worry or run her household based on grandiose fears. Rather, she can and does take comfort in the awareness that as an honorable person, her household will be protected. Thereby, she can maintain a sense of security within its walls, even when unusual stirrings are happening in the world at large. It is possible that this is another example of a case in which we are told not to fear, not to revere – not to have *yirah* – for that which is not divine. Instead, like the woman of valor, we should keep the world around us in perspective, rising up to face our worldly challenges head-on while recognizing that only God will be the source of our guidance if we remain open to accepting it.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

In all, יִרָא appears 22 times in the book of Proverbs, and in 15 of these cases, it is in the form of *yirat Adonai*. After analyzing the usages, it seems possible to group the overall context of יִרָא into three main categories:

- First, *yirat Adonai* leads to wisdom (1:7, 1:29, 2:5, 9:10, 15:33, 3:7).
- Second, *yirat Adonai* helps one to avoid evil, leading to life, and thereby offering moral instruction (8:13, 10:27, 14:26-27, 16:16, 19:23, 22:4, 23:17 13:13, 14:2, 14:16, 24:21).
- Third, *yirat Adonai* is to be valued over worldly gains (15:16, 31:30, 3:25).

⁹⁴ Plaut, p. 314

⁹⁵ Rosenberg, p. 202

Chapter 3: *Yirat Adonai* – the Source of Wisdom in Proverbs

I suggest that each of the second two categories represents a subset of the first – that *yirat Adonai* leads to wisdom is the general usage of **יִרָא** in the book of Proverbs. What wisdom looks like and how *yirah* is connected with acquiring such knowledge becomes more clear by examples in the second two categories. It is interesting to note that just about all of the contextualizing usages that signal a framework within the book of Proverbs (1:7, 9:10, 15:33) fall into the most general category of linking *yirah* to acquiring wisdom, the exception being the final appearance 30:31.

It becomes clear through this analysis and by the statement of the motto of Proverbs that wisdom and its link to *yirah* is a central theme. Yet, wisdom is not the end in and of itself; rather, it seems to be the vehicle that leads to fulfillment, meaning, and purpose in life. It is *yirat Adonai* that leads the individual along the path towards wisdom. And yet, the path ends up leading one back to *yirat Adonai*, for we see in some of these examples that even when one acquires knowledge, it does not actually become wisdom unless it is accompanied by action that leads from this awareness. An example of this notion comes from Heschel's discussion of Hasidism. He writes that, "The Baal Shem Tov . . . set awe above learning. What good was a head crammed with knowledge if the heart was haughty? . . . Hard work [is] needed to attain awe. Dutiful study [is] not enough."⁹⁶ *Yirah*, or awe, motivates one to learn, but also to act. It is the sustaining force behind the hard work one needs for action, and yet it is the hard work that leads one back to *yirah*, as well. In *Pirke Avot*, Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa said, "Anyone whose deeds exceed his wisdom, his wisdom shall endure; anyone whose wisdom exceeds his deeds, his wisdom shall not endure."⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel. A Passion for Truth. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1973. p.

62

⁹⁷ *Pirke Avot 3:12*, Translation by Abraham Joshua Heschel

YIRAT ADONAI LEADS TO LIFE

The exploration of the nature of *yirah* in Proverbs indicates that translating the term as “fear” is insufficient and misleading. The examples most often articulate (as Heschel rightly suggests) awe or reverence that opens one up to an awareness of that which is greater than oneself, and in the text identifies that transcendence as God. *Yirat Adonai* needs to be coupled with this wisdom, motivating a person towards such action. As Proverbs makes clear, each person has a responsibility to follow the path that combines the two ideas in order to reach direction and meaning, leading one towards being sustained and fulfilled. The alternative, as presented in Proverbs is destruction. Because one must constantly apply wisdom and yet remain open to the sense of the Eternal that comes from outside of one’s self, the centrality of *yirah* in Proverbs suggests a constant state of change. Contemporary philosopher, Irving Greenberg seems to allude to this idea in his perspective on the message of the High Holy Days. He teaches that “One definition of life is the capacity to respond . . . the only way to overcome death is by rebirth . . . If you are the same as you were last year, you have died a little in the interim.”⁹⁸ His perspective seems to suggest that every moment one is not actively living with purpose and meaning and the ability to respond to new situations, is a moment one spent getting closer to death. As long as one is growing, one is acquiring life as is the focus of so many of these verses in Proverbs. *Yirat Adonai* is the motivating force that keeps us striving for such life via the process of learning, or acquiring wisdom and knowledge, which feeds our spiritual growth. It is also a condition that enables us to open up to the unexpected, or as Heschel would describe, the mystery of living.

⁹⁸ Rabbi Irving Greenberg. The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988. p. 200

THE ATTITUDE OF *YIRAH*

The nature of *yirat Adonai* as presented in Proverbs seems to be an attitude. It is a willingness to inquire about one's feelings and reactions to an experience – a readiness to reflect on one's gut reactions and yet to be also attuned to that which is beyond us. The mindset of *yirah* helps us to be less selfish, extending ourselves beyond the present moment alone and the immediate gains we can achieve for ourselves. And while the text is not inherently against the acquisition of wealth or other personal gains, it does provide advice in how to avoid letting wealth overcome one's sense of self, and it offers insight that wealth should not define how a person sees one's self.

Such an approach allows us to reach into a more longitudinal understanding of the consequences of any particular moment, offering a consciousness of conscience. These consequences go beyond merely avoidance of punishment, but instead have the value of providing positive experiences of meaning and purpose, and ultimately, the sense of being a part of doing God's work on earth – being a partner with God.

AN ONGOING SENSE OF REVELATION

If *Yirat Adonai* leads to wisdom, which leads to meaningful action doing God's work on this earth, it would seem that *yirah* represents our access to an ongoing sense of revelation that goes beyond the commandments set forth in the Jewish tradition. Reading Proverbs suggests that the vast number of laws and rules set forth by the revelation described in the Torah do not always suffice as a guide to live by in every situation. Proverbs seems to recognize such constraints with a codified book of revelation and supplies what is lacking.

If revelation represents knowledge that is passed from the divine onto humans, then *yirat Adonai* would be the vehicle for passing along such wisdom that goes beyond the texts.

Chapter 3: *Yirat Adonai* – the Source of Wisdom in Proverbs

Proverbs' quest for wisdom signals that despite the knowledge that is imparted within the Jewish text, one still needs to strive for more. One needs to remain open to the newness of every moment in life and to couple one's learning with a sense of relationship to God in order to navigate the variance of situations that life has to offer. This would be an ongoing revelation – wisdom that is being passed from the divine to individuals in a new, contemporary context. *Yirat Adonai*, the sense of conscience, the attitude of openness to an idea that goes beyond one's own predispositions, provides the spark of a new understandings that, if a person is attuned to, can lead one to wisdom whose origin is from God. This is an expansion of God's commandments as written in the Torah.

WHAT IS THE EXPERIENCE OF *YIRAH*?

Despite the numerous places in which *yirah* appears in the book of Proverbs, there is a lack of description about the experience of *yirat Adonai*. If *yirat Adonai* plays the crucial role in the acquisition of wisdom and the striving for a meaningful life, we might expect a fuller description in the text of what such an experience is like, so that it is possible for us to recognize such a moment when it happens. Instead, these verses in Proverbs explain the effects of a moment of *yirah*, but leave (intentionally perhaps?) the quality of the experience to the vagueness of imagination. Yet, there are a few glimpses offered regarding what an experience might entail.

Throughout Proverbs, *yirah* seems to be a motivational experience. As 14:26 indicates, *yirah* is linked to a sense of a future promise and a comfort. An experience in *yirah* seems to be a moment that is forward-leading, that extends one's insight into the future, and pushing one to desire pursuing such a path. Rabbi Joshua Abraham Heschel calls such *yirah* "awe." He writes,

Chapter 3: *Yirat Adonai* – the Source of Wisdom in Proverbs

The meaning of awe is to realize that life takes place under wide horizons, horizons that range beyond the span of an individual life or even the life of a nation, a generation, or an era. Awe enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple; to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal.⁹⁹

Meanwhile, Prov 15:33 adds an element of humility to the experience of *yirah*, particularly *yirat Adonai*. This verse offers the greatest potential for understanding an experience of *yirah*, as it implies that one's humility in the face of God is a necessary component of an experience of *yirah*. And since *yirah* is also described as motivational, leading one into the future, I suggest that a moment of *yirah* is the motivation to transcend one's own immediate personal desires and, instead, feeling compelled to align one's will with the desires of another, seemingly more significant will – whether that of a people, or of God. In this sense, *yirah* seems to be akin to a moment of epiphany, or the rebirth of which Rabbi Irving Greenberg spoke. Or as Rabbi Heschel summarizes, “To us, wisdom is the ability to look at all things from the point of view of God, sympathy with the divine pathos, the identification of the will with the will of God.”¹⁰⁰ *Yirat Adonai* is the experience that compels us to seek out this wisdom, so that we can understand the actions necessary to continue the experience of aligning our will with that of God.

Yirah is different from fear in that it is not an experience that compels us to pull away from the object of our *yirah*, but rather to draw nearer to it.¹⁰¹ This perspective is evident throughout Proverbs. With this understanding, experiences of *yirah* seem to be life-affirming, leading to positive ends towards which a person would want to move. As 13:13

⁹⁹ Abraham Joshua Heschel. God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955. p. 75

¹⁰⁰ *ibid*

¹⁰¹ *ibid* p. 77

Chapter 3: *Yirat Adonai* – the Source of Wisdom in Proverbs

teaches, *Yirat Adonai* carries with it a sense of wholeness and peace – a virtue for which we all strive.

CHAPTER 4: YIRAH AND THE TEN COMMANDMENTS – EXODUS AND DEUTERONOMY

In the wisdom literature of Proverbs, *yirah* represents the starting point of wisdom. *Yirat Adonai*, the experiencing of a mixture of reverence, awe, fear, and motivation to follow God's will, appears to be a critical component in an ongoing revelation of divine wisdom. If this is the case, one might expect נִרָא to play a role in the revelation at Sinai when describing the giving of the Ten Commandments. Although the Ten Commandments in Exodus or Deuteronomy do not mention *yirah* in the body of either Decalogue, it does appear in the verses that surround these nearly identical, centrally important commandments that impart God's wisdom for living a good life unto the Israelite people. The context in which these two declarations appear, and the usage of *yirah* as a description of each of these experiences, allows us to further nuance the range and meaning of *yirah*.

The Ten Commandments represent the pinnacle of revelation – the time in which all the Israelites, as a community, were exposed to the grandeur of direct relationship with God. According to both versions of the event, all the people heard these words directly from God, witnessing the aura of thunder, lightning, and *shofar* blasts that surround God's immanent presence. In what follows I examine the nature of *yirah* in these two accounts of a formative event/experience.

YIRAH IN EXODUS' REVELATION

In the book of Exodus, the last of the Ten Commandments ends at verse 20:14, according to most texts,¹ נִרָא appears three verses later and does so twice, once in the noun form of *yirah*.

¹ Though variant traditions and academics denote the last verse of the Ten Commandments to be 20:17, in which case, the verses highlighted here would refer to verses 20:18-20.

Exodus 20:15 & 17

15 וְכָל-הָעָם רֹאִים אֶת-הַקּוֹלֹת וְאֶת-הַלַּפִּידִם וְאֵת קוֹל הַשָּׁפָר וְאֶת-הָהָר
עֹשֵׂן וַיֵּרָא הָעָם וַיִּנָּעוּ וַיַּעֲמִדוּ מֵרָחֵק . . .
17 וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-הָעָם אֶל-תִּירְאוּ כִּי לְבַעֲבוֹר נִסּוֹת אֶתְכֶם בָּא הָאֱלֹהִים
וּבַעֲבוֹר תִּהְיֶה יְדְאָתוֹ עַל-פְּנֵיכֶם לְבַלְתִּי תַחֲשָׂאוּ:

15 And all the people experienced² the thunder and lightning and the call of the shofar and the smoking mountain; and the people were in yirah of it³, and they fell back and they stood at a distance.

16 They said to Moses, “You speak to us and we will listen⁴; but may God not speak with us, lest we die.”

17 And Moses said to the people, “Do not be in yirah, for God has come only in order to test you, and in order that the yirah of God will be upon your faces, in order to cancel out your sins.”

A “YIRAH” MOMENT

The receiving of the Ten Commandments as described in the book of Exodus provides an account of God’s address to the Israelites at Mount Sinai as a part of the overall narrative of redemption from slavery in Egypt. In response to this climactic moment of revelation, one might expect that the Israelites would have felt some aspects of the broad range of experience typically associated with the concept of *yirah* – fear, awe, reverence, excitement, motivation, inspiration, etc. Indeed, Moses names the peoples’ reaction as such, since his response to their plea to never experience such a moment again was to say, אַל-תִּירְאוּ, “Do not be afraid/in awe/struck with *yirah*.” He identifies this encounter with the divine as a potential “*yirah*” moment. Yet, he further complicates the matter by seemingly

² The root רָאָה typically refers to “seeing,” and many translations render it as “witnessed.”

In this case, it is clear that the people had use more than just the sense of sight in order to take in all of the sensory imagery surrounding this moment.

³ Most often, this word is identified as having a root of רָאָה, rendering a translation, “They saw.” I have chosen to instead render it as of the root יָרָא, based on context and evidence that will be explained further.

⁴ Many commentators, including JPS, render this as “obey.” While I agree that the context suggests such a strong meaning of “listen,” I chose to stick to the more general, literal translation, which still leaves open a possible interpretation of obeying.

contradicting his plea to the Israelites by saying that the only reason for these commandments to have come in such a manner is to make sure that all the people will indeed know this moment of immanent *yirah* of God. While this seeming contradiction will be explored below, it is clear that *yirah* plays a key role in the narrative component of receiving the Ten Commandments.

DISGUISED רִאָּה?

Upon closer analysis we can detect the appearance of *yirah* after the Ten Commandments even sooner than Exod 20:17. Verse 15, according to most translations indicates that the people “saw” the thunder and lightning, the shofar blasts and the mountain smoking. However, “to see” seems an odd verb choice for describing the means of experiencing senses that typically have to do with sound (shofar/thunder), and precludes the sensations of touch (thunder’s rumbling), and smell (smoking mountain) that also may have been a part of this moment. JPS explains this aspect of the word רִאָּה,

“To see” is extended to encompass sound, thus creating a “sense paradox.” . . . It is an experience that cannot be adequately described by the ordinary language of the senses. The encounter with the Holy universally inspires fascination; inevitably and characteristically it also arouses *feelings of awe, even terror*. Fear of death is a frequent reaction. The unique, transcendent, supernal holiness of the Divine Presence *is felt to be beyond human endurance*.⁵

While JPS renders רִאָּה as “to see,” its commentary suggests that it goes beyond a typical definition of the word. Not only does this moment seem to transcend the language in which it is presented, but it also suggests, contextually, some elements of an experience of *yirah*. Limiting this experience to sight lessens the intensity of the moment of standing at that place

⁵ Nahum M. Sarna. The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991. p. 115

of revelation. Durham takes this into account in his translation of verse 15, “And all the people were *experiencing* the rumblings of thunder and the bolts of lightning and the sound of the ram’s horn and the mountain smoking; and as the people took it in, they trembled and drew some distance back.”⁶ Durham chose to render רָאִים as “experiencing,” combining the BDB’s alternate definitions of seeing as both “to perceive” and “of mental observation.”⁷ He explained this choice by claiming that,

The experience of the people through the whole of the theophany of Yahweh . . . is summed up in the רָאִים, “experiencing” and the וִירָא, “they took it in” of this verse . . . Having experienced the phenomena of Yahweh’s Advent and then Yahweh’s own voice, the people became more and more frightened. As they “saw” what was happening to them and “realized, took in” the experience of which they were a part, the people trembled, and drew back even from the perimeter of safety set about Sinai for their protection.⁸

Durham’s interpretation of רָאִים and וִירָא points to the need to go beyond standard translations of these words referring only to sight. The context that he describes also suggests that these two verbs trigger a reaction that one might associate with an experience of *yirah*.

While it is difficult to link the word רָאִים to *yirah* with confidence, at the very least, such analysis suggests the potential for some word play between the roots of רָאָה and יָרָא. Each of these roots contains weak letters (ה and ך, respectively) that often drop out of a word in conjugation, making it possible for words to have ambiguous connections to these roots that could only be determined definitively through context. And indeed, in Fuhs’ analysis of

⁶ John I. Durham. World Biblical Commentary: Volume 3, Exodus. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987. p. 301. Emphasis in bold is added.

⁷ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs. The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: Tenth Printing. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006. p. 907

⁸ Durham, pp. 302-303

the etymology of יָרָא, he suggests that it possibly derives out of the Hebrew root “*ra’a*, see.”⁹ Such potential wordplay lays the groundwork for a theory of an alternative reading of יָרָא later in the verse. While this word is most often identified as being of the root יָרָא, there is contextual evidence as well as other manuscripts that suggest it could have been intended to be יָרָא. To further support this claim, the Samaritan Pentateuch, Septuagint, Syriac, at least one manuscript from the Cairo Geniza, and the Vulgate, all render this verb as the equivalent of יָרָא instead of יָרָא.^{10,11} More specifically, William Propp, who concluded that this word indeed comes from the root of יָרָא, explains his choice, from both a contextual standpoint and a scholarly one based on comparing various manuscript versions.

The plural participles of LXX (*phobethentes*) and Vg (*perterriti*), however, reflect a form of the verb *yr’* ‘fear,’ either *wayyira(‘)* (sing.) or more likely *wayyire’u* (pl.). Thus there are two potential original consonantal readings, *wyr’* and *wyr’w*, each with two possible vocalizations. My translation “feared” follows LXX-Vg. MT is redundant, since the verse begins “and all the people were *seeing*.” Moreover, in v [17], Moses tells the people, “Fear not,” suggesting their fear was already mentioned (note also *ir’ato* ‘his fear’). We cannot be certain, however, since MT makes sense and is to some extent *lectio difficilior*.¹²

⁹ H. F. Fuhs. “*yare’*; *yare’*; *yir’a*; *mora’*.” Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament. Eds. G. Johannes Botterwick and Helmer Ringren. Trans. David E. Green. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990. p. 291

¹⁰ Durham, p. 301 “and so they saw” יָרָא taken here also as in n.18.a. SamPent, LXX, Syr, VG, other versions read instead יָרָא “and so they were afraid.” Though Durham mentions that MT makes perfect sense if יָרָא is not read literally. Cf. Barthelemy, *Preliminary and Interim Report*, 115-16.

¹¹ K. Elliger and W. Rudolf. Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia. Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997. p. 119

¹² William H. C. Propp, The Anchor Bible: Exodus 19-40. New York: Doubleday, 2006. pp. 114-115. *Lectio Difficilior* is a principle in textual criticism meaning, “the more difficult reading is stronger.” It refers to a situation in which different manuscripts seem to conflict on a particular word. The scholarly choice is to validate the more unusual form. The logic behind this idea suggests that if a word in the original manuscript did not make sense or was controversial, a later redactor would change it to another word that made more sense or was less controversial.

At best, this theory represents a possibility of how one might interpret this verse. However, it seems to be plausible that reading **וַיִּרָא** as a form of **יָרָא** would be a valid choice as well. In any case, this verse seems to describe a foundation for the natural phenomenon that can elicit an experience of *yirah*, as is made more explicit two verses later. Additionally, understanding that there seems to be a connection between these two roots suggests that there might be a connection between our senses and one's access to *yirah* – that depending on what one sees, or more broadly what one takes-in, it is possible to trigger one's access to *yirah*, a sense of the mystery that lies beyond oneself.

The grandeur of the scene described here, leading up to the great revelation, also seems to be a part of creating a setting in which *yirah* could be experienced. As Casuto mentions, the construction is **וְכָל הָעָם רֹאִים**, and not **וַיִּרָא וְכָל הָעָם**, which seems to indicate that this is happening simultaneously to the events above, not subsequently (as the participle form indicates of the verb). “It reverts to the awe-inspiring phenomena that heralded the theophany.”¹³ In other words, all of these experiences were happening not after the revelation, but simultaneously, along with the direct communication with God. Awareness of such grandeur in nature is seen as one of the possible methods of accessing this sense of *yirah* that allows humans to connect with the Divine.

לְאֵל-תִּירָא SO THAT YOU WILL HAVE YIRAH

Despite the ambiguous connections to **יָרָא** in verse 15, verse 17 undoubtedly describes *yirah* as a part of revelation. **יָרָא** appears twice in this verse, but in seemingly

¹³ U. Casuto. A Commentary on the Book of Exodus. Trans. Israel Abrahams. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1951. p. 252

Chapter 4: Yirah and the Ten Commandments – Exodus/Deuteronomy

contradictory ways, since Moses implores the people not to have *yirah*, while at the same time telling them that God only spoke with them in order that they would always have *yirat Adonai*. Many translators side with Everett Fox, who differentiates between the two by translating one as “fear” and the other as “awe.” His translation reads: “Moshe said to the people:/ “Do not be afraid!/ For it is to test you that God has come, to have awe of Him be upon you, so that you do not sin.”¹⁴ Unfortunately, such a translation obscures the fact that the same term is used in both places. Fox chooses to render the two uses differently, limiting one to the realm of “fear,” while elevating the other to the level of awe. Meanwhile, Casuto makes a similar distinction. While still translating both uses of יִרָא in a consistent fashion, he nuances them by claiming,

Moses hastened once again to encourage the people and to assure them that there was no reason to be afraid: *And Moses said to the people, Do not fear* (compare xiv 31); *for*, it is not to slay you, Heaven forefend!, but *to prove to you* – whether you will follow His teaching, or not – that *God has come, and that the **fear of Him** – not dread but reverence – may be before you, that you may not sin.*¹⁵

Writing about awe, Heschel helpfully differentiates between “fear” and “awe” by describing “fear” as that which pushes one away from mystery, while “awe” draws one near. However, he also draws a link between the two concepts,

‘fear’ [can mean] the state of being struck still by life’s mystery, silenced by God’s overwhelming presence . . . [such a state of] fear is not the antithesis of awe but an aspect of it. Thus we distinguish between profane and reverential fear.¹⁶

This viewpoint reveals an aspect of fear that is a component of *yirah*. The component of fear associated with *yirah* brings about a paralyzing, overwhelming reaction on behalf of the one

¹⁴ Everett Fox. *The Five Books of Moses*. New York: Schocken Books, 1995. p. 373

¹⁵ Casuto p. 253, emphasis added in bold

¹⁶ John C. Merkle. “Worship, Insight and Faith In the Theology of Abraham Joshua Heschel.” *Worship* (49), December 1975. pp. 583-596. p. 589

Chapter 4: Yirah and the Ten Commandments – Exodus/Deuteronomy

experiencing *yirah*. But as Heschel, as well as Fox and Casuto indicate, it is important for people to fight through the fear component of *yirah* in order to reach the higher level of reverence, or awe, that becomes the motivating factor Proverbs addresses.

To lend more credibility to such an argument, it is important to note that the earlier occurrence of *יִרָא* in this verse comes in the context of a phrase, *אֱלֹהֵי-יִרָא*. This phrase seems to also bring about a specific perspective on *yirah* and seems most often, especially in the book of Deuteronomy, to refer to a fear of that which is not divine. A few examples of *אֱלֹהֵי-יִרָא* in some conjugation or another include Genesis 21:17, where Hagar is told not to fear (אֱלֹהֵי-יִרָא) for her son's fate; Genesis 46:3, in which Jacob is told not to fear (אֱלֹהֵי-) going down to Egypt; Deuteronomy 3:2, in which Moses is told not to fear (אֱלֹהֵי-יִרָא) King Og of Bashan; Numbers 14:9, in which the Israelites are told not to have fear (אֱלֹהֵי-יִרָא) of the people who are in the land; or Proverbs 3:25, in which one is told not to fear (אֱלֹהֵי-יִרָא) fear. In each of these cases, someone is told not to have *yirah* towards that which is not God or even of the divine (one's fate, a big journey, a King, other people, fear). Though it is clear that the advice in each of these cases urges a person to not be paralyzed by fear in the process of fulfilling the course of God's will, one can also apply the loftier aspects of *yirah* – awe, reverence, and motivation. In these cases, those who are being told *אֱלֹהֵי-יִרָא* are also being advised not to elevate these potential objects of one's reverence to the level of God. Even though the objects of *אֱלֹהֵי-יִרָא* in each case may instill terror or inspire those who see them, one should not allow oneself to respond in the way one would respond to God.

Chapter 4: Yirah and the Ten Commandments – Exodus/Deuteronomy

Additionally, most of these cases are contextual, specific examples in which one is told not to have *yirah* in the moment, as opposed to general, blanket statements of grand advice.¹⁷

This suggests that the first half of verse 17 comes to advise the Israelites not to be in *yirah* of the sights, sounds, and natural phenomena that surround them in this specific case. The warning of אֱלֹהִים-יִרְאֵה is here to teach that one should not allow oneself to be paralyzed by fear of the thunder and lightning or the smoking mountain, and even more importantly, one should not think of each of these phenomena as gods themselves and revere them. Instead, the second half of the verse explains that these are all emanations that come from God, who represents the main object of one's *yirah*. The phenomena present signs and signals of the power that God wields in this world, and this experience therefore teaches that one should direct one's *yirah* towards the source rather than the setting. This is a huge development in Near Eastern theological thought in general away from polytheism, and it represents a key message in the narrative of a people who had just left Egypt. As such, this verse can be interpreted as a positive example of the first of the commandments, to have no other gods besides God. In the process of allaying the paralyzing fears of the people, Moses reveals that, "The purpose of the personal, direct, unmediated nature of the mass experience was to prove the quality of their faith. The enduring, living memory of the encounter should instill the fear of God and so be a deterrent to sin."¹⁸ This perspective explains that revelation at Sinai helps the people to know what to do with their *yirah*.

¹⁷ The Proverbs verse is the exception in this list, though Proverbs as a genre is almost exclusively more general, non-contextual advice.

¹⁸ Sarna, p. 115

Chapter 4: Yirah and the Ten Commandments – Exodus/Deuteronomy

Whether the experience was one of fear or awe or a mixture of the two, it is this experience of *yirah* that is necessary for the people to truly open themselves up to attaining the wisdom offered in these commandments. As Durham comments:

Having reverence for Yahweh is a basic emphasis of Israel's teaching tradition; Wolff (*Int* 26 [1972] 158-73) has claimed this "Fear of God" as "the most prominent theme of the Elohist." What is meant by such "reverence" or "fear" is a respect for Yahweh/Elohim that will give a constant emphasis to His way for living and relationship, and so avoid . . . sin. The use of - "you must not be afraid" followed by "in order that there might be reverence (fear) of [God] before your face" is a deft touch of didactic narrative.¹⁹

According to this perspective, the main purpose of *yirat Adonai* here, as in Proverbs, is to motivate the Israelites to learn and seek the wisdom that is necessary for life. Durham suggests that the lesson God teaches while giving the Ten Commandments goes beyond the words of the commandments themselves. Additionally, God created a setting in which each person present would experience *yirah*, allowing them to know the mixture of fear and inspiration that the Torah specifies God wants from us.

Yahweh/Elohim comes to Israel at Sinai to give them so vivid and unforgettable an experience of himself, including his own statement of his principles for life in relationship with him, that they will not only not forget but will follow his way as a first priority of life. Such, at any rate, is the emphasis of the composite that is Exodus and the memory of Sinai that permeates much of the teaching of the OT.²⁰

Because *yirah* is so difficult to define and understand solely from a logical, rational standpoint, the episode of the revelation at Sinai is described with such detail so as to allow each person who reads the text access to his or her own reactions to this moment of revelation. Even today, each Jew is compelled to see himself and herself as if they stood at Sinai in that moment, imagining what this experience must have been like. There is no

¹⁹ Durham, pp. 303-304

²⁰ *ibid*, p. 304

blanket prescription for how *yirah* manifests itself in the reaction of any individual – some may find fear, others reverence, wonder, awe, or any combination therein.

Moses' attempt to allay the fear of the people is a pointed repetition of the emphasis of this brief section. The people did hear and see all that had them so scared, but they have been given the experience deliberately, as a gift, not that they might be afraid of Elohim (=Yahweh), but that they might have reverence for him, and so take seriously his way of living in relationship both to him and with one another.²¹

Regardless of the specific emotions an experience of *yirah* elicits, in this instance, the key is that it draws one closer to God and the message that God is trying to impart.

YIRAH IN DEUTERONOMY'S REVELATION

The book of Deuteronomy records a second version of the revelation of the Ten Commandments. Instead of coming in the middle of a narrative of redemption, however, this perspective on the core of revelation is presented as a reflection back on the moment of revelation after the Israelites had been able to form collective experiences of trying to live by these laws. While the Ten Commandments themselves are repeated in Chapter 5 with a few slight changes, the experience of revelation is also revisited. And as one might expect, *yirah* appears in the verses leading up to and following the revelation at Sinai.

The book of Deuteronomy itself brings a particular theological perspective to the experiences of the Israelites. A central theme of Deuteronomy is the model of retributive justice – that God rewards the behavior that aligns with God's will, and that God punishes that which is antithetical to God's commandments. And usually such rewards or punishments come in very physical form. How *yirah* fits into such a perspective on the human relationship with God in these verses should further our understanding of *yirah* in the Hebrew Bible.

²¹ Durham, p. 304

Chapter 4: Yirah and the Ten Commandments – Exodus/Deuteronomy

Additionally, because this represents an episode that had already appeared in the book of Exodus, the different perspectives on the experience of the revelation as described in each of the sections of Torah can help us to nuance our understanding of *yirah*. As Richard Elliot Friedman suggests in his critical analysis of the authorship of the Torah, each of these accounts surrounding the Ten Commandments comes from different sources. He and most others hold that the Exodus narrative comes from the so-called E source,²² named thus for its description of God as אֱלֹהִים. Fuhs believes that parts of chapter 20 are redactional, including Ex 20:15, the verse we examined above. He claims that it “combines . . . versions of J and E, explicitly add[ing] the phenomena of the J account (the smoking mountain, Yahweh’s coming down in fire, earthquake) to the causes of the people’s fear.”²³

Friedman identifies the account in Deuteronomy as a part of the Deuteronomistic history,²⁴ which contains “sources that are as old as . . . E or possibly even older, but the formation of the work took place in the reign of King Josiah of Judah, circa 622 CE.”²⁵ Comparing the way each of these sources deals with the concept of *yirah* can offer different insight into the contextual understanding of the experience of *yirah*.

Deuteronomy 5:4-5

(4) פָּנִים בְּפָנִים דִּבֶּר יְהוָה עִמָּכֶם בְּהָר מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ :

(5) אָנֹכִי עֹמֵד בֵּין יְהוָה וּבֵינֵיכֶם בְּעֵת הַהוּא לְהַגִּיד לָכֶם

אֶת־דְּבַר יְהוָה כִּי יֵרְאֶתֶם מִפְּנֵי הָאֵשׁ וְלֹא־עָלִיתֶם בְּהָר לֵאמֹר :

(4) “Face to face, Adonai spoke to you all on the mountain amongst the fire — (5) I stood between Adonai and you at that time in order to convey to you the word of Adonai, for you were in *yirah* from the face of fire and did not go up the mountain, saying” (Ten Commandments follow)

²² Richard Elliott Friedman. The Bible with Sources Revealed. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003. p. 154

²³ Fuhs. p. 301

²⁴ Friedman, pp. 319-320

²⁵ *ibid* pp. 4-5

Chapter 4: Yirah and the Ten Commandments – Exodus/Deuteronomy

In these verses that immediately precede the re-recitation of the Ten Commandments, Moses reminds the Israelites of their mindset as the words of God were about to be announced. This comes across as a chastisement of the people, for the object of their *yirah*, according to this verse was not God, but rather the face of the fire. This prevented them from getting near, which was why Moses was the necessary intermediary for conveying “the terrible spectacle of revelation.”²⁶

According to these verses, it would seem as though the experience being described in Deuteronomy varies a bit from the narrative in Exodus. In this account, Moses stands as an intermediary between God and the people. Though, as Christensen mentions, this does not preclude the ability of the people to hear God speaking. “‘Face-to-face’ in verse four indicates that ‘God spoke *directly* to the people of Israel while Moses was on the mountain. (cited by Buis and Leclercq, *Le Deutéronome* [1963] 36).’ This did not mean a literal interpretation, that the people saw a form of God.”²⁷ However, Moshe Weinfeld suspects that there was some manipulation of these verses in order to gain alignment with the earlier narrative in Exodus:

The glossator comes to harmonize this with the old tradition. In agreement with Exod 20:15 that “the people fell back and stood at a distance” . . . the glossator adds here that the people did not ascend the mountain out of fear. According to another tradition (J?), the people were prohibited from ascending the mountain (Exod 10:12, 21, 24, cf 34:3) in order to prevent their “seeing” the Deity, but this is not in line with Deuteronomy, which never speaks of “seeing” God but only of “hearing” him.²⁸

In his analysis, Weinfeld reveals another key difference between the two accounts –

²⁶ Moshe Weinfeld. The Anchor Bible: Deuteronomy 1-11, volume 5. New York: Doubleday, 1991. p. 242

²⁷ Duane L. Christensen. World Biblical Commentary, Volume 6a: Deuteronomy 1-11. Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1991. p. 111

²⁸ Weinfeld, p. 241

that Deuteronomy shifts away from the sense of sight as a part of the moment of *yirah* that surrounds the revelation, and instead focuses primarily on the sensation of hearing. Weinfeld suggests that this is because of the “more abstract nature of the revelation in Deuteronomy.”²⁹ There does not seem to be as much of emphasis on the experience of the theophany, but rather more on what happened and what was conveyed. Instead of describing the experience of *yirah* with the fullness of the scene in Exodus, the Deuteronomic account mentions that the people reacted with *yirah* without as much detail as to its source.

Deuteronomy 5:26³⁰

מִי־יִתֵּן וְהָיָה לְבָבְכֶם זֶה לָהֶם לִירְאָה אֹתִי וּלְשָׁמֹר אֶת־כָּל־
מִצְוֹתַי כָּל־הַיָּמִים לְמַעַן יֵשֶׁב לָהֶם וּלְבָנֵיהֶם לְעֹלָם:

“May they always be of such heart, to have *yirah* towards Me and guard all My commandments, that it may go well with them and with their children forever!”

While Deut 5:5 parallels the description of the scene leading up to the revelation in Ex 20:15, Deut 5:26 provides the rationale for this experience of *yirah*, in much the same way as does Ex 20:17. Whereas the Exodus verse proclaims *yirah* as an end in itself – that which God wants the Israelites to experience in order to prevent them from sin – in Deuteronomy, the rationale is the promise of a good reward. Such a context seems to move the understanding of *yirah* further away from the connotation of fear and more towards reverence, since fear is not a typical emotion associated with seeking a reward. As Christensen comments, “If the people could make this true reverence a life pattern, then indeed it might go well for them and for their children forever.”³¹ Rather, Deut 5:26 seems to be applying the reactions associated with *yirah* to garner a sense of covenantal loyalty to

²⁹ *ibid* p. 242

³⁰ Or Deuteronomy 5:29 according to some texts that label commandments 6-8 as separate verses.

³¹ Christensen, p. 134

God.

FREE CHOICE

But before one can understand the concept of loyalty, it is important to note that it is impossible to have such a value without the ability to choose whether or not to be loyal. This is a central aspect of the experience of *yirah* that is put forth in the Deuteronomic text: the experience of *yirah* does not force loyalty, but rather inspires it. As Rambam commented, each person is “granted permission to act righteously or wickedly, as he decides, for ‘everything is in God’s hands to determine except for fear of God’ [Brachot] 33b).”³² Even according to a perspective steeped in God’s direct intervention in history as the Talmud citation reveals, each individual has the opportunity to define for oneself how to act and react.

According to Tigay, “God hopes for reverence (*yirah*), but does not cause the people to be reverent.” Ultimately, God allows people to choose whether or not to obey that which God conveys through an experience that should elicit *yirah*. “It is a fundamental premise of the Bible that the individual human being determines his own behavior and is not controlled by God.”³³ Because of free choice, *yirah* can only be a beginning. Though God wants people to respond from a place of having *yirah* in one’s heart, it is clear that God values the ability of people to come to such a perspective on their own. The ideal for which an individual should strive, accordingly, would be to constantly choose to respond to the world from a place of *yirah*. Doing so will lead the individual to align one’s own will with that of

³² Rabbi Nesanel Kasnett *et al*, eds. Ramban – Nachmanides/Commentary on the Torah Artscroll Series Volume 7: Devarim/Deuteronomy. New York: Mesorah Publications, 2008. p. 136

³³ Jeffery H. Tigay. The JPS Commentary: Deuteronomy. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996. pp. 73-74

God, as the analysis of *yirah* in Proverbs led us to understand.

COVENANTAL LOYALTY

Since God has granted free will to people, according to the paradigm just discussed, then what is it God hopes for us to do with our free will? Deut 5:26 reveals that we should strive for a perpetual alignment with the will of God, which would manifest itself as an ongoing choosing to be loyal to God. In the context of the theophany at Sinai, God's will is that the people follow God's commandments – that being loyal to this aspect of the covenantal relationship with God will be the Israelite display of keeping their experience of *yirah* in their hearts. As the wisdom literature preaches, doing so leads ultimately leads a person to living a meaningful, purposeful life, or as Deut 5:26 reveals, “that it may go well with you and your children.”

In order to further understand the link between *yirah* and the Deuteronomic idea of covenantal loyalty, we can examine a few other places in Deuteronomy that relate to this subject. Just a few verses later, Deut 6:2, claims:

Deuteronomy 6:1-2

(1) וְזֵאת הַמִּצְוָה הַחֲקִים וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם
לְלַמֵּד אֶתְכֶם לַעֲשׂוֹת בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם עֹבְרִים שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ:
(2) לְמַעַן תִּירָא אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשָׁמֹר אֶת־כָּל־חֻקֹּתָיו וּמִצְוֹתָיו אֲשֶׁר
אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה אֹתָהּ וּבְנֶךָ וּבִתְּךָ כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ וּלְמַעַן יָאָרְכֶן יָמֶיךָ:

(1) “And these Commandments, the laws and judgments, that *Adonai* your God commanded me to teach to you to do in the land that you cross into to settle there, (2) so that you will have *yirah* towards *Adonai* your God to guard all God's laws and commandments that I command you – you and your children and your children's children, all the days of your life – and in order to lengthen your days.”

Such a statement is fairly similar to the sentiment in Deut 5:26, and there is a “clear structural association between [5:26] and 6:2 in the present form of the text.”³⁴ While Deut 5:26

³⁴ Fuhs, p. 307

Chapter 4: Yirah and the Ten Commandments – Exodus/Deuteronomy

demands that the “people should ‘fear’ Yahweh with their heart,” a few verses later, they are told “they should ‘love’ him ‘Heart’ or ‘mind’ in [5:26] does not refer to feelings or emotion but to the conscious and deliberate decision to be faithful to Yahweh and Yahweh’s covenant.”³⁵ Such a perspective presents a paradigm in which one chooses to *yirat Adonai*, thus expanding it beyond an experience that passively happens to the individual and into a choice one has to make.

As Christensen claims, these verses allude to the “primary function of the book of Deuteronomy in the life of ancient Israel: namely, religious education.”³⁶ From a didactic standpoint, “The paradigmatic teacher [of the Torah] was Moses, whose primary objective was to instill *the fear [of] Yahweh your God* (v. 2).”³⁷ Instead of “fear,” many scholars translate this instance of אָרָא as “revere.” Using educational language, this reverence becomes the core content of this lesson Moses teaches. And as Craigie asserts, “the evidence of this reverence would be seen in the obedience of the Israelites to God’s law, and its fruit would be long life.”³⁸ From such a perspective, Deuteronomy portrays *yirah* as the motivation to be loyal to God’s commandments, which are the sign of God’s covenant with the Jewish people.

Additionally, Deut 10:12 nuances our understanding of the Deuteronomic view of *yirah*. According to Fuhs, “in Dt. 10:12 . . . we find the source for the passages in [chapter] 5.”³⁹

³⁵ *ibid*

³⁶ Christensen, p. 135

³⁷ *ibid*

³⁸ Peter C. Craigie. The Book of Deuteronomy: The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976. p. 168

³⁹ Fuhs, pp. 307-308

Deuteronomy 10:12

וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל מָה יְיָהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ שֹׂאֵל מֵעַמְּךָ כִּי אִם-לִירְאָה
אֶת-יְיָהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לָלֶכֶת בְּכָל-דִּרְכָיו וּלְאַהֲבָה אֹתוֹ וּלְעַבֵּד
אֶת-יְיָהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ:

“And now, Israel, what does Adonai your God ask from you? This: to have *yirah* of Adonai your God, to walk in all God’s ways and to love God and to serve Adonai your God with all your heart and with all your soul.”

In this passage, God reveals the centrality of having *yirah* of God. Again, it conveys a sense of loyalty to God’s will. But it also provides further insight as to the nature of such loyalty. As Christensen claims:

Careful prosodic analysis suggests that the term (*lirah et Adonai*) is in fact defined here, by means of poetic parallelism: *to fear Yahweh is to walk in all his ways*. This phrase is in turn explained by the following rhythmic unit: *to fear God is to love him and to serve Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul-life*, in short, with your whole being (v. 12).⁴⁰

Once again, action is being linked to *yirah*. If having *yirah* of Adonai means “to walk in God’s ways,” it is not enough merely to feel the experience of *yirah* and align one’s will with that of God, but if one is to truly act with *yirah*, one must follow-up with action. As Craigie mentions, there are “five vocatives used in 10:12-13: *to fear, to walk, to love, to serve, and to keep*.”⁴¹ *Yirah* becomes the first in this process of steps that leads one to loyalty to God.

Loyalty to God is clearly one of the central concepts of Deuteronomic thought. An entire system of reward and punishment system emerges from the Deuteronomic texts as one way of creating incentive for such loyalty. However, openness to the experience of *yirah*, and choosing to follow the inspiration such moments reveal, represents another means of achieving such loyalty. As Craigie mentions,

The common theme is *allegiance* to the God of the covenant; the particular requirements indicate the dimensions of the common theme of allegiance and

⁴⁰ Christensen, p. 135

⁴¹ Craigie, p. 206

are reminiscent of the language of the Near Eastern political treaties. Expressed differently, the requirements may be seen as a positive sermon on the negatively stated first commandment: "You shall not have other gods besides me."⁴²

According to Craigie's perspective, reverential actions that are based on one's *Yirat Adonai* become the method of positively and actively following the first commandment. This perspective reveals the message that we should strive for a perpetual alignment with the will of God, which would manifest itself as an ongoing and reaffirmed choosing to be loyal to God. Such a message is echoed later in Deut 30:19 in which people are implored always to "choose life." And as the wisdom literature preaches, doing so leads ultimately leads one to living a meaningful, purposeful life.

CULTIVATING *YIRAH* – FIRE AND FLAME

If *yirat Adonai* leads one to become loyal to God, how is it that a person can achieve such *yirah* in the first place? Lest we intellectualize *yirah* too much, it is important to bear in mind the source of *yirah* in this pinnacle moment of revelation. Before God even speaks, the Israelites are surrounded by incredible images of intense natural phenomena, bespeaking an experience of grandeur and power that is hard to imagine. As Christensen mentions:

Though one cannot look on the face of God and live, one can hear God's voice speaking "from the midst of the fire. . . and he may still live" (5:24). It is easy for us to have too small a view of God in mind. The actual experience of God often shatters the inadequacy of our views to impress us with the awesomeness of "the living God" (5:26). That living God has now entrusted to us His commandments in order that we may keep them, and that we may teach them to our children. In so doing we will prosper.⁴³

The grandeur of the moment at Sinai serves as a reminder not to limit our perspective on God; it is there to help to keep us open to the experience of *yirah*. While the scene described

⁴² *ibid* p. 204

⁴³ Christensen, pp. 135-136

at Sinai was directed at the Israelites and intended to elicit a reaction so that a communal moment of revelation could occur, we do have reminders in our world today that can elicit similar reactions.

I would equate such an experience to that of standing at the Grand Canyon in Arizona and realizing the incredible power that created such beauty, or of staring into the vast endless sky at stars that could not be reached in twenty lifetimes of traveling at the fastest speeds humans have been able to achieve. This humbling reaction to the vastness of time and space is an experience of human finitude. In such moments, if one is open to the experience, one cannot help but realize the smallness of the individual amongst God's creations. As Tigay mentions:

Reverence is man's response to God's power. It consists of both respect and awe at His grandeur and dread of His power, which serves as a deterrent to disobeying Him. It is one of Moses' main aims in Deuteronomy to instill reverence for God as a guiding principle in the people's lives. As he explains here, this was both the purpose and the effect of the awesome, terrifying phenomena that accompanied God's communication with Israel - the quaking of the mountain, the thunder and lightning, the trumpets, the cloud and the darkness, the fire and smoke. The purpose of the experience is described similarly in Exodus 20:17: "God has come . . . in order that the fear of Him may be ever with you, so that you do not go astray." Because of its deterrent effect, "reverence for God" is virtually a synonym for ethical behavior and fear of sin (see also Deut 5:26).⁴⁴

Such a moment of realization of power that goes beyond the individual seems to be a critical part of the mindset necessary for a person to be open to experiencing *yirah* and all the emotional and intellectual responses that come with it. Though Tigay equates *yirat Adonai* with fear of sin, the rest of this analysis has shown that the term clearly goes beyond just the idea of fear of retribution for sin. However, the overall effect of aligning one's will with that which is divine causes one to avoid sin.

⁴⁴ Tigay, pp. 46-47

Chapter 4: Yirah and the Ten Commandments – Exodus/Deuteronomy

Yet, such moments are not without their potential drawbacks. Because the Deuteronomic text constitutes a retelling of the Sinai experience as portrayed in the Exodus narrative, it also functions as a commentary on the people's reactions to this *yirah*-filled moment of revelation and its two-fold lesson already mentioned. It appears possible that exposure to God's power, or at the very least a power that is much greater than an individual, can be too overwhelming to take in productively. As we see, the people ask never again to be exposed to such frightening intensity. Craigie sees the Deuteronomic text as a critique of this limitation of the Israelites:

the attitude expressed in the people's request was a proper and a reverential one, . . . unfortunately it was not a typical attitude. On a previous occasion when God had overheard the people's words, as here, He was provoked to anger (1:34). The reverence shown now was in response to the phenomena accompanying God's revelation, and though it was not thereby any less genuine, it was nevertheless regrettable that the people could not show the same reverence in the more mundane affairs of daily life. It was not only that lack of reverence betrayed the wrong attitude to God, but also that such a lack was not good for the people themselves. If they always maintained an attitude of true reverence, then indeed it would *go well for them and for their children for ever* (v. 29)⁴⁵

The people feared their deaths, which prevented them from drawing closer to God than could have been possible. This seems to reveal that individuals have limits as to how open they can be to an experience of *yirah*. While Craigie sees this as a critique of the people who were unable to live up to God's expectations, it can also be viewed as an indication that there is a limit at which peoples' fears, especially in situations of imminent mortality, can overcome the openness necessary for an experience of *yirah*.

It is difficult to overlook the imagery that accompanies this revelation and think that it had nothing to do with instilling fear. Consequently one needs to recognize a role for fear

⁴⁵ Craigie, p. 166

within the paradigm of an experience of *yirah*. Perhaps such moments of *yirah* challenge us to choose to overcome our initial gut-level fear-responses. Instead, we are urged to direct our hearts to the transcendent, “that-which-is-bigger-than-ourselves” perspective of that which we encounter, inspiring us to act on the experience, helping us choose to align our will with that of God’s.

COMPARING *YIRAH* AS PORTRAYED IN EXODUS AND DEUTERONOMY

Though the account of the revelation at Sinai is fairly similar in both the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy, the way each book portrays the idea of *yirah* is slightly different. Weinfeld mentions that the overall concept in Deut 5:26, in which the people are told to have *yirat Adonai* in their hearts, exposes one of these key differences:

God expresses the wish that the fear of the people, caused by the theophany, should be transformed into fear of God in their heart, which will produce observance of God’s commandments. The idea is taken from Exod 20:20, where Moses says that the theophany was aimed to “put God’s fear upon their faces so that they do not sin.” But there is a significant difference between the two sources. In Exodus the “fear (*yr’h*)” is the divine terror . . . which will deter them from sin, and for “fear/terror (*phd yr’h*)” spread over the face, cf. Deut 2:25, “the dread and fear (*phdk wyr’tk*) of you upon the peoples.” The divine terror was enhanced by the shocking experience of the theophany.⁴⁶

This perspective on *yirah* corresponds to that identified by Fuhs as consistent with the E author. “One of E’s central concerns is thus the fear of God in the specifically ethical sense of the term. E took an existing concept[, *yirat Adonai*,] and applied it to the concrete situation of Israel in his own day.”⁴⁷ Hence Exod 18:20 addresses the people’s “numinous fear” as a reaction to the grandeur of the revelation, transforming it from a scene that expresses the distance between God and mortals into an intimate moment of teaching an ethical message.

⁴⁶ Weinfeld, p. 325

⁴⁷ Fuhs, p. 310

Chapter 4: Yirah and the Ten Commandments – Exodus/Deuteronomy

Meanwhile, *yirah* plays a slightly different role in the Deuteronomic account of the theophany.

In Deuteronomy, however, the fear of God is given in their heart. The “fear” here is not terror but inner religious feeling, which suits the spiritualization of religious values in Deuteronomic and Jeremianic prose. For the fear of God in the heart formulated in language overlapping Deut 5:26, see Jer 32:39-40 – (I will give them one heart . . . to fear me all the days so that it shall be well with them and their children after them. . . and I will put my fear into their hearts).⁴⁸

In Exodus, the focus is on the source of *yirah* – God, the cause of the fire and lightning and powerful natural phenomena – who brought these signs as a means of inspiring the people to trust the offer of an ethical code. Weinfeld suggests that the focus of Deuteronomy is on the outcome of *yirah* – on what one does with the experience after the fact. One is supposed to direct one’s experience of *yirah* inwardly, and it is from the inside that one’s actions should be inspired. The choice we each have in our hearts becomes a focus of the Deuteronomic revelation, as opposed to the Exodus focus on an outside truth that is being given to the people to accept. This Deuteronomic idea is not unique, “The idea of putting fear of the gods into the heart of men . . . is found in neo-Babylonian royal inscriptions . . . and is also attested in Ptolemaic Egypt.”⁴⁹ However, the Deuteronomic tradition primarily portrays this concept of *yirah* as “worship, specifically sole and faithful worship of Yahweh.”⁵⁰

Yirah plays a key role in both the Exodus and Deuteronomy accounts of the giving of the Ten Commandments. While both texts focus on the words of the commandments themselves, both offer an additional revelation – the connection of *yirah* in the performing of these ideals. *Yirah* becomes the necessary component to motivating each individual to learn

⁴⁸ Weinfeld, p. 325

⁴⁹ *ibid*

⁵⁰ Fuhs, p. 307

Chapter 4: Yirah and the Ten Commandments – Exodus/Deuteronomy

the commandments and to taking them to heart for oneself in order to align one's will with that of God's by following the commandments. Philo makes a distinction between the one who serves God out of love and the one who serves out of fear.⁵¹ It would seem that he drew such a paradigm from the biblical authors of each of these books. Despite the terrifying scene that was described surrounding the theophany, in each account, the focus is on more than just commandments themselves. *Yirah*, albeit in slightly different forms for each book, becomes that characteristic part of the experience of revelation that transforms these moments of revelation from that of strictly fearful to one that inspires a desire to serve God out of love. As Deuteronomy teaches, the choice is ours.

⁵¹ Weinfeld, p. 345

CHAPTER 5: YIRAH – A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN EZRA AND NEHEMIAH

One more opportunity to further nuance the term *yirah* as portrayed in the Hebrew Bible is in the book of Ezra-Nehemiah. This book is one of the later works in the Hebrew Bible, and despite a separation between Ezra and Nehemiah in certain printed editions, the two sections constitute a single work in the Jewish tradition. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi concludes that in this single work wholeness exists as a “tapestry or symphony.”¹ The author of this work employs a technique that is fairly unique in the biblical narrative, the first-person “Memoir,” which “allow[s] persons to ‘speak’ in their own voice.”² Two individuals, Ezra and Nehemiah, are portrayed as narrating large sections of Ezra-Nehemiah in the Memoir genre, providing us with examples of the concept of *yirah* from their own perspectives – whether in fear, awe, reverence, or intimidation, as we shall see.

Many differences exist between the figures of Ezra and Nehemiah - they represent different leadership styles, different lineages, and different tasks to complete. One additional difference between the two is linguistic. The Nehemiah section of Ezra-Nehemiah, includes various forms of the word *yirah*. The Hebrew root that often describes fear or awe (יָרָא) - appears fourteen times in the Nehemiah section, twice in its noun form of *yirah*.

Meanwhile, in the Ezra sections of this book, יָרָא does not appear once. The word does not even appear in Ezra 3:3, in which the priests had built an altar in Jerusalem in order to worship God and ask protection because they were “in fear of the peoples of the land.” Though the emotion of fear is described in this verse, the Hebrew word chosen is *eimah*,

¹ Tamara Cohn Eskenazi. In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988. pp. 13-14

² *ibid*

Chapter 5: *Yirah* – A Difference Between Ezra and Nehemiah

whose root is יִרָא - a very different word than *yirah*.

This particular use or absence of *yirah* can be another lens through which to note the differences between Ezra and Nehemiah as leaders or role models. As Eskenazi mentions, “Whereas Ezra is the exemplar, Nehemiah is the foil . . . constantly struggling with opponents. His portrayal is complex.”³ Ezra represents an ideal or idealized character whose motivations seem pure, wholeheartedly devoted to God’s work. Meanwhile, the portrayal of Nehemiah is of a needy person who is constantly seeking approval – “All of Nehemiah’s requests keep him at the center.”⁴ In many ways Nehemiah’s portrait is more real – representing anyone who struggles with the intention of serving God while also having very strong personal desires. As we have seen, negotiating this tension is one of the key roles of *yirah* – to motivate us to overcome our selfish urges when they come in conflict with the course of God’s will. In this way, יִרָא serves as a contextualizing agent in this text – allowing us access to Nehemiah’s struggle in a paradigm that relates back to the rest of our biblical narrative.

In the following section I have listed each of the appearances of יִרָא in Ezra-Nehemiah, all of them come from the Nehemiah section. Upon examination, I group these occurrences into three different categories: descriptions of *yirah* towards God, descriptions of *yirah* towards people, and instances where *yirah* represents a form of intimidation. All translations are my own, based primarily on the JPS translation.

³ *ibid* p. 144

⁴ *ibid* p. 145

YIRAH TOWARDS GOD

Nehemiah 1:5

וַאֲמַר אָנָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם הָאֵל הַגָּדוֹל
וְהַנּוֹרָא שֹׁמֵר הַבְּרִית וְחֹסֵד לְאַהֲבָיו וּלְשֹׂמְרֵי מִצְוֹתָיו:

"And I said, 'Please Adonai, God of the heavens, the great and the *yirah*-filled God, who guards the covenant and shows lovingkindness to those who love God and keep God's commandments.'"

Nehemiah 1:11

אָנָּה אֲדֹנָי הָהִי נָא אָזְנוֹךָ-קְשֹׁבֶת אֶל-תְּפִלַּת עֲבָדֶיךָ
וְאֶל-תְּפִלַּת עֲבָדֶיךָ הַחֹפְצִים לִירְאָה אֶת-שְׁמֶךָ
וְהַצְלִיחָה-נָא לְעֲבָדֶיךָ הַיּוֹם וּתְנֶהוּ לְרַחֲמִים
לִפְנֵי הָאִישׁ הַזֶּה וְאֲנִי הֵייתִי מְשַׁקָּה לַמֶּלֶךְ:

"Please, Adonai. Please let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who desire to be in *yirah* of Your name. Please cause your servant to succeed today, and dispose that person to be compassionate toward him!" I was the king's cupbearer at the time."

Nehemiah 4:8 – (the 2nd use)

וַאֲרָא וָאָקוּם וָאֹמַר אֶל-הַחֹרִים וְאֶל-הַסִּגְנִים וְאֶל-יֵתֶר
הָעָם אֶל-תִּירְאוּ מִפְּנֵיהֶם אֶת-אֲדֹנָי הַגָּדוֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא
זְכוּרוּ וְהִלַּחֲמוּ עַל-אַחֵיכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם וּבְנֹתֵיכֶם
נְשֵׁיכֶם וּבְתֵיכֶם:

"I saw and I got up and I said to the nobles, the prefects, and the rest of the people, 'Do not have *yirah* towards them! Think of the Adonai, the one who is great and worthy-of-*yirah*. Remember and fight for your brothers, your sons and daughters, your wives and homes!'"

Nehemiah 5:9

וַיֹּאמֶר [וְ] [אֹמַר] לֹא-טוֹב הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר-אַתֶּם עֹשִׂים הַלּוֹא
בִּירְאָת אֱלֹהֵינוּ תִלְכוּ מִחֶרְפַּת הַגּוֹיִם אוֹיְבֵינוּ:

"And he said [I said], "This thing that you are doing is not good. Shouldn't you go forth in *yirah* of our God away from the reproach of the nations, our enemies?"

Nehemiah 5:15

וְהַפְחוּת הָרָאשִׁים אֲשֶׁר-לִפְנֵי הַכְּבִידוֹ עַל-הָעָם וַיִּקְחוּ
מֵהֶם בָּלֶחֶם וַיִּזֶן אַחֵר כֶּסֶף-שְׁקָלִים אַרְבָּעִים גֵּם נַעֲרֵיהֶם
שָׁלְטוּ עַל-הָעָם וְאֲנִי לֹא-עָשִׂיתִי כֵן מִפְּנֵי יְרֵאת אֱלֹהִים:

"The former governors that were before me made it heavy for the people and they took from them for bread and wine more than forty silver shekels, also their youths domineered over the people. And I – I did not do thus because of *yirah* of God."

Nehemiah 7:2

וְאֶצְוָה אֶת-חֲנָנִי אָחִי וְאֶת-חֲנַנְיָה שֹׂר הַבִּירָה
עַל-יְרוּשָׁלַם כִּי-הוּא כָאִישׁ אֱמֶת וַיֵּרָא
אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים מֵרַבִּים:

"I commanded Hanani, my brother, and Hananiah, the captain of the capital over Jerusalem, for he is like a man of truth and one with more *yirah* of God than most."

Nehemiah 9:32

וַעֲתָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ הָאֵל הַגָּדוֹל הַגִּבּוֹר וְהַנּוֹרָא
שׁוֹמֵר הַבְּרִית וְהַחֲסֵד אֶל-יִמְעַט לִפְנֵיךְ אֶת
כָּל-הַתְּלָאָה אֲשֶׁר-מִצָּאתָנוּ לְמַלְכֵינוּ לְשָׂרֵינוּ
וּלְכַהֲנֵינוּ וּלְנִבְיָאֵנוּ וְלְאַבְתֵּינוּ וְלְכָל-עַמֶּךָ
מִיָּמֵי מַלְכֵי אַשּׁוּר עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה:

"And now, our God, great, mighty, and worthy-of-*yirah* God, who stays faithful to God's covenant, take compassion on all the suffering that has overtaken us—our kings, our officers, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and all Your people—from the time of the Assyrian kings to this day."

In each of these verses, it is clear that the intended object of *yirah* is God. While Nehemiah 1:11 uses שִׁמְךָ, "Your name," as the object, this is just a matter of synecdoche in which God's name is a representation of God. Using יֵרָא in this way also places Nehemiah's struggles to rebuild Jerusalem within the overall framework of the biblical narrative. Therefore,

Nehemiah sets the whole enterprise within the context of the religious tradition of his ancient people's struggle for freedom within the land promised to them, a struggle which, indeed, had been waged not merely by their ancestors but, according to the biblical tradition, by God himself fighting on their behalf . . . Nehemiah is therefore able to speak in stereotyped language which not only carries meaning within itself but is further reinforced by the recollections it would evoke of the past victories of God for his people's sake.⁵

יִרָא is one of these “stereotyped” concepts whose full meaning can only be appreciated when supplemented by study of the rest of the Hebrew Bible (as I show in this paper). Neh 5:15 exemplifies this perspective in that it seems to almost exactly parallel the uses of יִרָא in the Leviticus text. Here *yirah* prevents the one in power from exploiting those over whom they have been granted authority. In יִרְאת אֱלֹהִים as his core motivation, Nehemiah reveals that *yirat Adonai* is one of the key motivations his actions.⁶

YIRAH TOWARDS PEOPLE

Nehemiah 2:2

וַיֹּאמֶר לִי הַמֶּלֶךְ מִדּוּעַ פָּנֶיךָ רָעִים וְאַתָּה אֵינְךָ חוֹלָה
אֵין זֶה כִּי-אֵם רָע לֵב וְאִירָא הָרַבָּה מְאֹד :

“And the king said to me, ‘Why is your face bad, yet you are not ill? It must be because you are with badness of heart.’ And I had very much *yirah*.”

Nehemiah 4:8 – (the 1st use)

וַאֲרָא וְאָקוּם וָאֹמַר אֶל-הַחֲרִים וְאֶל-הַסֹּגָנִים וְאֶל-יְתֵר
הָעָם אֶל-תִּירְאוּ מִפְּנֵיהֶם אֶת-אֲדֹנָי הַגָּדוֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא זְכוֹר
וְהִלַּחֲמוּ עַל-אֲחֵיכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם וּבְנֹתֵיכֶם נְשֵׁיכֶם וּבְתֵיכֶם :

“I saw and I got up and I said to the nobles, the prefects, and the rest of the people, ‘Do not have *yirah* towards them! Think of the Adonai, the one who is great and worthy-of-*yirah*. Remember and fight for your brothers, your sons and daughters, your wives and homes!’”

⁵ H.G.M. Williamson. World Biblical Commentary, Vol. 16: Ezra, Nehemiah. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985. p. 227

⁶ Williamson, p. 244

In these two examples, the object of *yirah* seems to be other humans. Neh 4:8 is clearly the case in the first appearance of יִרָא within the verse. Neh 2:2 is slightly more challenging to classify. The object of Nehemiah's *yirah* is not as directly identified, and therefore in the context of receiving a cryptic message from the Persian king, he most likely was frightened for his life. It is unclear if this experience of *yirah* was directed at God as a resignation that his life might be ending, akin to his life flashing before his eyes, or if Nehemiah was truly frightened in the presence of the king. This latter perspective would be an interesting application of יִרָא, because it would represent a relationship that most biblical sources warn against having – *yirah* towards another human (that is not one's parent). What such a perspective would reveal, though, is that it is possible to misdirect our experiences of *yirah*, attributing them to the wrong source, which most likely would lead us away from God's wisdom and towards false conclusions instead.

YIRAH AS INTIMIDATION

Nehemiah 6:9

כִּי כָלָם מִירָאִים אוֹתָנוּ לֵאמֹר יִרְפוּ יְדֵיהֶם
מִן־הַמְּלָאכָה וְלֹא תַעֲשֶׂה וְעַתָּה תִּזְק אֶת־יָדַי :

"For they all wished to cause us to have *yirah*, saying, 'They will cease their hands from the work, and it will not get done.' So now strengthen my hands!"

Nehemiah 6:13

לְמַעַן שָׂכֹר הוּא לְמַעַן־אִירָא וְאֶעֱשֶׂה־כֵּן
וְחָטָאתִי וְהָיָה לָהֶם לְשֵׁם רָע לְמַעַן יִחָרְפוּנִי :

"Because he was hired, that I might have *yirah* and I would act thus and I would commit a sin, and so they would have a bad name with which to reproach me."

Nehemiah 6:14

וְכָרָה אֱלֹהֵי לְטוֹבָיָה וּלְסַנְבַּלֵּט כְּמַעֲשֵׂי אֱלֹהֵי וְגַם

לְנוֹעַדְיָה הַנְּבִיאָה וּלְיִתְרֵה הַנְּבִיאִים
אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ מִיְּרָאִים אוֹתִי :

"My God, remember against Tobiah and Sanballat these deeds of theirs, and against Noadiah the prophetess, and against the other prophets that they wished to cause me to have *yirah*!"

Nehemiah 6:16

וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר שָׁמְעוּ כָּל-אוֹיְבֵינוּ וַיֵּרְאוּ כָּל-הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר
סָבִיבֵתֵינוּ וַיִּפְּלוּ מְאֹד בְּעֵינֵיהֶם וַיִּדְּעוּ כִּי מֵאֵת
אֱלֹהֵינוּ נַעֲשֶׂתָה הַמְּלָאכָה הַזֹּאת :

"And so it was that when all our enemies heard it, all the nations that surrounded us experienced *yirah*, and they fell very low in their own estimation; and they realized that this work had been done by our God."

Nehemiah 6:19

גַּם טוֹבֵתִיו הָיוּ אֹמְרִים לִפְנֵי וַדְּבָרֵי הָיוּ
מוֹצִיאִים לוֹ אֲגָרוֹת שְׁלַח טוֹבָיָה לְיִרְאָנִי :

"They also used to speak well of him to me, and my words would go out to him. Tobiah would send letters intended to cause me to have *yirah*."

This third classification, which is unique in this book to the appearance of יִרָא within Nehemiah 6, serves as a warning not to have *yirah* falsely. As we have seen, throughout the Bible, Israel is warned not to have *yirah* of that which is not divine. In this chapter, there are opponents seeking to get in the way of Nehemiah's building by causing just such a false *yirah*. That is the aim of chapter 6 – a "campaign of intimidation."⁷ These references offer a contextual situation in which one might be tempted to incorrectly direct *yirah*: the intimidation by others can also cause a person to submit their will to that of the intimidator. As we have seen, situations in which one followed the will of a human source over that of

⁷ Joseph Blenkinsopp. Ezra-Nehemiah: A Commentary. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988. p. 265

God would be unacceptable from the perspective of the Hebrew Bible.

CONTEXTUALIZING THROUGH *YIRAH*

Grouping the use of the נָחַם into the three categories above helps to reveal a bit about Nehemiah in contrast to Ezra as a leader. Because Nehemiah describes his own experiences in so much of this book, we are offered a glimpse into the *yirah* from the perspective of one who is trying to understand and apply it to his life. The fact that Ezra does not mention *yirah* at all suggests that it either is not at the center of his actions, or that it is so fully embedded in his work that there it requires no special mention. This latter perspective would seem to be consistent with the ideal that the book of Proverbs puts forth for individuals to strive to accomplish. Yet, given how difficult it is to actually be so aligned to God's will all the time without struggle, only a person like Ezra could have accomplished such a feat. The vast majority of us are like Nehemiah, and we struggle to keep *yirah* at the forefront of our thoughts, needing reminders.

NEHEMIAH: A LEADER WITH *YIRAH*

The fact that נָחַם appears with Nehemiah so often and not at all with Ezra sheds light on the motivations behind each character's leadership. Looking at the occurrences of *yirah* in chapter 6 of Nehemiah reveals a perspective that one never encounters in Ezra. Nehemiah approaches with suspicion all the information from Tobiah and Sanballat and the rest of the "enemies" of Judah. In this section, which involves political posturing and games, and the use of "intimidation," Nehemiah reveals his own sense of a play for power between himself and his enemies. He claims to be fearless even as he seems to be fearful of their intentions and of what could happen to him and all his work should he fall prey to them. The Memoir portrays him as a person caught up in this battle of "intimidation" in this section - a battle that

Chapter 5: *Yirah* – A Difference Between Ezra and Nehemiah

reflects Nehemiah's own personal desire to be in power and to maintain his influence over the community.

We contrast this view of leadership with Ezra, who seems to have spoken his mind in public, but lets the people decide what to do with the information he has given. The people are the brainstormers and the implementers, Ezra is essentially the catalyst who gets out of the way once the process has been set into motion (Ezra 9-10). He is not portrayed as facing direct challenge from opponents as is Nehemiah in chapter 6. Moreover, he gathers such strong public support that it would seem to be the role of the people as a whole to deal with such "intimidations" had they arisen, rather than a personal or an individual matter.

We further see that Nehemiah values *yirah* from his leadership perspective. A couple of places, Nehemiah compliments people by declaring them to “have *yirah* of God” (Nehemiah 1:11, 7:2). And he invokes God on his own behalf or on behalf of the Jewish people in a few other places by declaring God to be worthy of *yirah*. But Nehemiah also directed *yirah* towards the king, as revealed in Nehemiah 2:2. And we later see that Nehemiah makes an assertion of power by assuring the people not to have *yirah* towards their enemies - only towards God. This all fits into a hierarchical view of leadership, which seems to be consistent with the style of governance that Nehemiah attempts to establish for himself. It seems as though the struggle to achieve and act on *yirah* is not the only difficulty; it is just as important and challenging to avoid directing one's experience of *yirah*, and thereby the lessons and growth possible from that moment, towards the wrong source.

NEHEMIAH PRAYS WITH *YIRAH*

The first mention of נִיִּי comes early in the memoir and serves as a key for interpreting the figure of Nehemiah. We see this in Nehemiah 1:5 the first prayer uttered by

Chapter 5: *Yirah* – A Difference Between Ezra and Nehemiah

Nehemiah. Here he invokes God as being great and worthy of *yirah*. This is not the only time Nehemiah ascribes *yirah* towards God while invoking God in prayer; *yirah* seems to be a natural part of his process of requesting from God some kind of benefit, be it for himself, for the community at large, or for certain people.

We can contrast this, however, with Ezra. In Ezra's first prayer (Ezra 7:27-28), he simply blesses God and offers thanks. The next time God is described by Ezra, it is in reference to God's benevolence (Ezra 8:22), even though it too is in the context of a time of trepidation, with a great travel into lands filled with enemies.

The difference in prayer between the two figures could also reveal something about their backgrounds.⁸ Their prayers are presented as personal and can be tied to each one's distinct experience. Therefore, we can see a Nehemiah who has to fight and scrape for every bit of influence he gains, and who has to approach his leadership and achievements with an awareness that it might be taken away. At the same time, he has to fear no individual in order to preserve the audacity that allows him to accomplish his great reforms. Therefore, it makes sense that he would focus on *yirah* – inspired to work hard to do God's work while constantly striving to understand what that work might be. Meanwhile, Ezra is depicted as one who is blessed by God's benevolence (Ezra 7:9). He possesses the most distinguished pedigree, royal authority and divine blessing – fully set-up for success. And therefore, his prayers more naturally express thanksgiving and recognition of the blessings he had been offered.⁹ The difference with respect to how *yirah* appears in these depictions can be

⁸ A similar point is made by Neil Glover. "Your People, My People: An Exploration of Ethnicity in Ruth." Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Vol. 33.3 (2009), pp. 293-313

⁹ Nehemiah is also described as being blessed by God's benevolence, but only in self-referential statements (Neh 2:8; 2:18).

perceived as the contrast between the so called “self-made” man (Nehemiah) and one who has been, as it were, “groomed for success” by cultural codes (Ezra).

NEHEMIAH–*YIRAH* AS AN OUTLOOK ON LIFE

Nehemiah seems to use *yirah* as a motivating factor in life. He uses the term frequently. The examples catalogued above in the exploration of *yirah* involve some of the key moments in his life. The request from the king to come to Jerusalem grows out of a moment of *yirah* (Nehemiah 2:2), the defense of the work to build the walls involves defending himself from being subjected to false *yirah*, or intimidation (Nehemiah 6), and even his assessment of a worthy person involves some aspect of *yirah* (Nehemiah 7:2). In fact, all occurrences of *yirah* in the book of Nehemiah come from first-person narrative sections, straight from the mouth (or hand) of Nehemiah.

The portrait of Nehemiah reflects a person “in process” with respect to *yirah*. On the one hand, Nehemiah self-consciously focuses on *yirah* in relation to God as his sole motivation. On the other, he wrestles with the need to prove himself to enemies and supporters, which embroils him in situations where *yirah* involves such persons. His preoccupation with his standing is also suggested by his repeated cajoling God to remember him for good, in the long run (Nehemiah 5:19, 13:31), the words of one hoping to live a life that is so full of meaning that is worth remembering. His story illustrates the struggle that it takes to maintain *yirah* in the face of social and other pressures.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION – YIRAH IN OUR WORLD

The Hebrew Bible uses the word *Yirah* to capture the attitude that community or individuals experience in life-altering encounters. As we have seen in the forgoing analysis, the various translations of this multi-faceted word as “fear,” “awe,” or “reverence” are all inadequate, although “awe” is more appropriate than “fear.” Even if we were to put the three terms together, they still fall short of the magnitude of meaning that is encompassed by the word *yirah* as it appears in the biblical text. Ultimately, *yirah* has been shown to represent our response to those moments in life for which there are no words – for the experience of knowing that we are a part of something bigger than ourselves, connecting us to God. And perhaps that is why no succinct group of words can do this concept justice. Heschel refers to *yirah* when speaking about the “sense of the ineffable.” He writes:

Religion begins with the sense of the ineffable, with the awareness of a reality that discredits our wisdom, that shatters our concepts. It is, therefore, the ineffable with which we must begin, since, otherwise there is no problem; and it is its perception to which we must return since otherwise no solution will be relevant.¹

Today we continue to experience such concept-shattering and life-altering moments – times that have the potential to shift our paradigms. We could all use a little support in navigating the anxieties, fears, and challenges that accompany such moments in order to unlock the potential meaning and purpose that we can derive. *Yirah* is the attitude that is core to religion and it has the potential to be the source and solution for our ability to respond to life’s challenges with moral purpose by aligning our own will with what we can access as the perception of the Ineffable.

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel. Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion. New York: Noonday, 1951. p. 59

YIRAH – MOTIVATION FOR REFLECTION

Though a comprehensive definition for *yirah* might be futile, over the course of this analysis, we have acquired some additional paradigms that are possible to put into words. This language becomes of great value in trying to relate to and reflect on these moments of deep *yirah*. Since the central message of Proverbs teaches that *yirat Adonai* is the beginning of wisdom (Prov 1:7; 9:10), we can see that the potential that *yirah* offers is an opportunity to educate ourselves in the ways of God. *Yirah* is this process of education. Describing a different process of education, Lee S. Shulman offers a helpful analogy. He writes:

How is learning from experience possible? If you think about it for a moment, it's a miracle; odds are that only a tiny minority of experiences are really learned from. Therefore, what is the essence of learning from experience? . . . Think about playing peek-a-boo with a four-month-old baby. What happens? You do your initial peek-a-boo, and the baby cries. The baby is frightened, but nevertheless signals through the tears, "Do it again!" You do it again, and the baby cries some more. By the third or fourth time, however, the baby is *inducing* surprise, and you notice that the baby has started doing what we as a species do when we are working at our best – to seek surprise, to seek uncertainty, to seek complexity; and even though it is initially terrorizing, to figure out a way to manage it. We don't do away with the surprise; we learn how to deal with it, and we develop a variety of strategies.²

When we experience *yirah*, it is often described, like at Sinai, as a moment that has some terror to it – similar to Shulman's peek-a-boo example. And as we learned from the revelation of the Ten Commandments (in Exodus and Deuteronomy), we can make a choice to overcome our terror and embrace the motivation and inspiration that comes with *yirah*. Opening ourselves up to this surprise and uncertainty allows us to seek the more complex understandings that accompany our access to moments of ongoing revelation that emerge, as

² Lee S. Shulman. "Forgive and Remember: The Challenges and Opportunities of Learning from Experience." In L. Solomon & T. Schiff, (Eds.), Talented Teachers: The Essential Force for Improving Student Achievement. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2004. pp. 59-66, pp. 60-61

Chapter 6: Conclusion – *Yirah* in Our World

we attain bits of divine wisdom.

This is where obtaining language for aspects of the experience of *yirah* is critical to our ability to transform our momentous experiences into learning.

One thing that makes learning from experience terribly difficult is that experience is like dry ice: it evaporates at room temperature. As soon as you have it, it's gone. So, one of the big problems in learning from experience is that we need to be able to examine, to analyze, and to reflect on experiences³

The key to education is the merging of experience with reflection. *Yirah* represents our emotional response that urges us to take a step back (or fall back in the case of Exodus 20:15) and re-assess what has happened before moving forward again. Having language to break down and express what we have gone through, especially the paradigm-shifting moments accompanied by *yirah*, provides us the opportunity to do the reflection that is necessary for learning from our experiences. For example, if the Israelites had not been motivated to reflect on the messages from God at Sinai and internalize them, there would have been no change in their actions. *Yirah* was that motivation to reflect: assess the self, re-align our own will with the greater message that emerges from such an experience – the will of God – and to find the courage to display the learning that has been achieved by acting accordingly.

DESCRIBING *YIRAH*

If *yirah* encourages us to move beyond the moment and to reflect, it is important that we have an ability to express some aspects of our experiences of *yirah*. The various descriptions of *yirah* that we have uncovered help us to break down this evasive concept into more manageable aspects, providing us with additional language that helps us to talk about and reflect upon our experiences of *yirah*. Though we may never be able to fully describe *yirah*, we can describe its effects and where it leads, offering us paradigms to help us in our

³ *ibid* p. 62

Chapter 6: Conclusion – *Yirah* in Our World

own attempts to reflect on what moments of *yirah* have meant in our own lives.

In the book of Leviticus, *yirah* represents our access to creating holiness. We learn that everyone can experience *yirah*, not just the “religious class” of the priesthood. This teaching empowers each of us to establish our own connections with God, the only true source of *yirah*. Because everyone can access this relationship with God, being truthful about an experience of *yirah* should lead us (as Leviticus teaches) to seek equality for all people, inspiring us to support the disadvantaged and treat others with dignity, respect, and fairness. Opening ourselves to such *yirah* prevents us from becoming full of ourselves. The effect of this perspective is inspiration: instead of motivating us to act out of fear of punishment, *yirah* provides us a rationale and a vision for acting according to the laws set forth in Leviticus 19 and 25 in order to create a better world. From this, we gain a sense of accountability for our own actions upon learning how they fit into a greater system of holiness.

In the book of Proverbs, *yirah* is the beginning of knowledge and wisdom, and of understanding of God’s will. The point of learning, though, is to act – one has not truly chosen to follow one’s *yirah* if one does not act accordingly. When we act from a sense of *yirat Adonai*, we are motivated to align our own will with that of God, filling us with a sense of moral purpose. This is particularly important for helping us to navigate the myriad situations in life for which there is no explicitly prescribed law offering concrete direction on how to act. Following one’s sense of *yirah* in such moments demands that we take a longitudinal view of a situation and look beyond our immediate desires or cravings to that which will serve a greater purpose.

On a practical, even if perhaps miniscule level, in today’s world we choose to follow our sense of *yirah* when we choose not to buy a product made by children in sweat shops in

Chapter 6: Conclusion – *Yirah* in Our World

foreign countries, even if it is the exact item we have been searching for. Making such a decision based on God-derived values provides us with a sense of certainty that we are living with meaning and purpose, which is the point of attaining wisdom, as described in Proverbs. *Yirah* is our access to God's will and is one of the ways we can still relate to God in today's world.

As the episode surrounding the Ten Commandments shows us, *yirah* is essential for the ongoing relationship with God. Being open to this sense of the divine, reflecting on the moments in which we experience *yirah*, and setting forth to align ourselves with what we have learned from the experience through reflection, provides us with an ongoing access to revelation. We just have to choose wisely. The Exodus text (20:15) makes it clear that our sense of sight is connected to our access to *yirah*. What we see provides us with options for which to direct our sense of *yirah*. Our challenge is to choose to align ourselves with God and choose not to align our will with that which is not “Godly,” e.g. other people who are not seeking to serve God or worldly pursuits (money, power, etc). And if we are to perceive and participate in the ongoing revelation, we are required to constantly choose to respond to God through our experiences of *yirah*, which is no easy task (especially when it is such a difficult experience to describe).

The biblical figure of Nehemiah provides a personal example of one who has attempted to navigate this challenge. Sometimes, he was able to access *yirah* that was directed towards God in order to gain the confidence and moral purpose needed to achieve significant milestones. However, he also falls into traps of acting out of a misguided sense of *yirah* – directed towards that which is not God. His struggles reveal a person who is human, trying to bring holiness to this world but still connected to his own personal desires for power

and legacy. His story exemplifies the dilemma that is often part of cultivating *yirah*. David Hartman speaks to this challenge when he writes: “The intellect of man, however, is tied to his body. The awareness of being human and the inability, even during sublime moments of intellectual love, to transcend the human condition constitutes this experience of *yirah*.”⁴ Though we may try to constantly align our will with that of God, even to do so out of love, we still cannot always successfully do so.

LEVELS OF *YIRAH*

Because we are human, it is not always possible to achieve the ideal of ongoing covenantal loyalty – choosing to constantly suppress one’s own desires for personal gain in order to follow God’s will. The ideal of *yirah* is that one will learn to desire what God desires. But not everyone can reach this state or sustain it. Reflecting on such a condition, *Orchot Tzaddikim*, the anonymous author from the 16th century, identified three levels of *yirah*.

The first level is when one acts out of *yirah* as fear in the typical understanding of this word.⁵ Such behavior is not even connected to the divine.

It is that exhibited by one who does not fear God but who when he does a good deed does it for fear of people, knowing that if he did not do it – whether it be learning, giving charity, praying, or the like – they would not trust him and would scorn him. . . . What he does is only to find favor in their eyes. . . . His end is destruction.⁶

⁴ David Hartman. *Maimonides: Torah and Philosophic Quest*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publishing Society, 1976. p. 208

⁵ The English translation of *Orchot Tzaddikim* uses “fear” for the Hebrew *yirah*. I have chosen to leave the translation as is and trust the reader to know that the term is not to be reduced to “fear.”

⁶ *Orchot Tzaddikim: The Ways of the Tzaddikim*. Ed. Rabbi Gavriel Zaloshinsky. Trans. Rabbi Shraga Silverstein. Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1995. p. 609

Chapter 6: Conclusion – *Yirah* in Our World

The second level is when one fears God, but primarily out of punishment. This is the reason for “adhering to good deeds.” One does good deeds for this reason, but it does not represent “genuine Divine service.”⁷

The third type of fear is the *yirah* we have been exploring throughout this work. Orchot Tzaddikim describes this as:

fearing the Holy One Blessed be He for no reason in the world, but trembling before Him, all of his limbs quaking in awareness of His greatness and His strength. . . this type of fear is beyond the depth of most people, as men are not accustomed to doing things without thought of gain or the warding off of potential injury, so that if neither of these elements is present the deed seems meaningless to them; and because this type of fear is so difficult to attain, therefore they have been permitted to do mitzvos out of fear of punishment or hope of reward. . . .[The Torah recognized the difficulty in reaching this level of fear, and therefore uses fear of punishment/reward as a pedagogical tool to help stimulate people to strive for the fruits of Torah and upon tasting them hopefully recognizing its worth] But if a young child were assured: “Learn and I will give you a beautiful wife, or a home, or great wealth, or a throne,” he would not learn for this, and would be much more motivated by one fruit than by all of these, lacking an appreciation [for any of them]. The Torah, likewise, motivates one . . . when his intellect is small and weak and he lacks proper discrimination.⁸

Clearly, this third level is the ideal. However, one must continually be motivated solely by God and not by any worldly pursuits. This is a major challenge. Therefore, the first two levels of *yirah*, though not ideal, represent genuine expressions of how we sometimes find the motivation to follow-up on our initial sense of *yirah*. Both paths still lead to the desired actions of God’s will. And so the tradition presents them as backup routes that keep an individual on the right path, even when straying from the ideal motivation.

These levels of *yirah* are important for helping us to do God’s work on this earth, even when we are not feeling as connected. But one must be on guard. Level one is

⁷ *ibid* pp. 609-611

⁸ *ibid* pp. 611-613

Chapter 6: Conclusion – *Yirah* in Our World

problematic as related to our earlier analysis, because it is submitting one's *yirah* towards that which is not God: other people. In doing so, it is easy to be led astray, to false ideas of what one should be doing. Still, as long as one does not live in these perspectives too often, they help us to remain in the favored third level.

AN END AND A BEGINNING

As this ideal third level of *yirah* reveals to us, though it is the beginning of wisdom, *yirah* is also the main purpose of acquiring knowledge. Each moment that we choose to reflect on and grow from our *yirah* helps us gain more tools for being open to *yirah* in the future. This is why *Orchot Tzaddikim* places *yirah* as its last chapter. Each chapter represents another gate for the individual to pass through that, for the most part, leads to the next. As the last chapter, *yirah* becomes the culminating point for the journey in *Orchot Tzaddikim*. Yet, the very first sentence of the book cites Ecclesiastes 12:13, "The end of the matter, all having been heard: have *yirah* for God and keep God's commandments, because this is the whole of humankind." *Yirah* is the beginning and the very end of the book: the first inspiration to learn its contents, but also the lasting legacy of the journey. It transforms our relationship with God from fear to a sense of love, being wholly and fully aligned with God's will through constant choices to do God's commandments.

Maimonides describes a similar journey to that put forth by *Orchot Tzaddikim*, and in doing so offers a strong description of the experience of *yirah* in general:

And what is the way that will lead to the love of Him and the fear of Him? When a person contemplates His great and wondrous works and creatures and from them obtains a glimpse of His wisdom which is incomparable and infinite, he will straightaway love Him, praise Him, glorify Him, and long with an exceeding longing to know His great Name. . . . When a man reflects on these things, studies all these created beings . . . and realizes the Divine Wisdom manifested in them all, his love for God will increase, his soul will thirst, his very flesh will yearn, to love God. He will be filled with fear and

Chapter 6: Conclusion – *Yirah* in Our World

trembling, as he becomes conscious of his own lowly condition, poverty, and insignificance . . . He will then realize that he is a vessel full of shame dishonor, and reproach, empty and deficient.⁹

While the last portion of this perspective seems bleak, it is actually quite consistent with the findings of our analysis. How would *yirah* motivate us to constantly seek it out? *Yirah* exposes us to our limits and inspires us to go beyond comfort or complacency. Having tasted the fruits of meaning and purpose that *yirah* has led to in the past serves to contextualize our previous worldly desires as fruitless pursuits.

YIRAH IN OUR LIVES

Standing on a cliff, looking out into an ocean at sunset; staring deeply into the eyes of a loved one; tasting the sweetness of an apple – these are all moments that have the potential to elicit wonder. They can make us feel small in the scope of a bountiful and beautiful creation, or like an important, valued member of this world, or even an appreciator of the small miracle that an apple provides energy needed to sustain our very lives.

At the same time, all of these experiences can be a part of our ordinary days, at times even an obstacle. When the sunset gets in our eyes while driving, when we stare into our loved ones' eyes in anger, or when we really want the apple we are eating to be, instead, some chocolate, it becomes more challenging to experience a sense of wonder from which we can access God and God's will. So much depends on our perspective and how we choose to be aware of the world around us. Ultimately:

Ignorance is not the cause of reverence. The unknown as such does not fill us with awe . . . Nor is it might or mass that arouses such an attitude . . . Nor do we revere an object for its beauty . . . Nor do we revere the known, for the known is within our grasp, and we revere only that which surpasses us. We do not revere the regularity of the year's seasons, but that which makes it

⁹ Hartman, p. 207 – Citing Maimonides. *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot YeSodei Ha-Torah, IV, 12*, p. 39b.

Chapter 6: Conclusion – *Yirah* in Our World

possible.¹⁰

When we choose an attitude of *yirah*, we allow ourselves to be open to the miracles around us, along with the source of those miracles. This is one way we connect with God. Doing so elicits an emotional response of *yirah* that motivates us to reflect our experiences to help us to understand more about that which was previously unknown to us.

Each person may connect, however, in a different way, as we learned in our analysis of *yirah*. That which sparks one person into relating to the divine might not necessarily affect another. This is part of the reason *yirah* is so difficult to describe – every individual is left to his or her own reflection. Meaning each person can reach different wisdom, even from the same experience. It is my hope that the language we have acquired in this analysis to describe aspects of *yirah*, and the awareness of the processes that can follow, will equip us with the ability to be a resource for others and to ourselves as we attempt to reflect on each of our individual moments of *yirah*.

“Where are you, God?” When this question is asked on an intellectual level, it leads to numerous theologies, philosophies, and philosophical-theological debates. However, it has an entirely different context when asked on the emotional level, as the husband I encountered in the hospital was asking – with a genuine yearning for a connection with the divine. Combining the intellectual and emotional levels – *yirah* is our answer. *Yirah* is our connection to finding God, even in today’s world. But it requires an openness to experiencing it. During moments of *yirah*, we have the opportunity to acknowledge a simple, yet profound truth – that we are not at the center of the universe, but are a part of a greater whole. The true impact of such epiphany hits not just on the intellectual level, but

¹⁰ Abraham Joshua Heschel. Between God and Man: An Interpretation of Judaism. New York: Free Press, 1959. p. 54

Chapter 6: Conclusion – *Yirah* in Our World

merges with the emotional response, as well. It is the beginning of wisdom and the place to which it leads, allowing us access to an ongoing cycle of meaning-making that helps us to live fulfilled lives, knowing that we are doing God's work in this world.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barré, M. L. "'Fear of God' and the World View of Wisdom." Biblical Theology Bulletin. Volume 11, 1981, pp. 41-43.
- Becker, J. "*Gottesfurcht im Alten Testament*." Anbib (25). Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965.
- Blenkinsopp, Joseph. Ezra-Nehemiah: A Commentary. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988.
- Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A Briggs. The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: Tenth Printing. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006.
- Casuto, U. A Commentary on the Book of Exodus. Trans. Israel Abrahams. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1951.
- Christensen, Duane L. World Biblical Commentary, Volume 6a: Deuteronomy 1-11. Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1991.
- Clines, David. The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew, Volume IV ח-ז. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998.
- Cox, Dermot. "Fear or Conscience?: *Yir'at YHWH* in Proverbs 1-9." Studia Hierosolymitana 3, 1982. pp. 83-90
- Craigie, Peter C. The Book of Deuteronomy: The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976.
- Drazin, Israel and Stanley M. Wagner. Onkelos on the Torah: Leviticus. Jerusalem: Gefen, 2008.
- Durham, John I. World Biblical Commentary: Volume 3, Exodus. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987.
- Elliger, K. and W. Rudolf. Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia. Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997.
- Eskenazi, Tamara Cohn. In an Age of Prose: A Literary Approach to Ezra-Nehemiah. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988.
- Fox, Everett. The Five Books of Moses. New York: Schocken Books, 1995.
- Fox, Michael V. Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary. Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 2000.

Bibliography

- Friedman, Richard Elliott. The Bible with Sources Revealed. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2003.
- Fuhs, H. F. “יָרָא *yare*’; יָרָא *yare*’; יִירָא *yir’a*; מוֹרָא *mora*’.” Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament. Eds. G. Johannes Botterwick and Helmer Ringren. Trans. David E. Green. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990, pp. 290-315
- Glover, Neil. “Your People, My People: An Exploration of Ethnicity in Ruth.” Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Vol. 33.3. 2009. pp. 293-313
- Greenberg, Rabbi Irving. The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988.
- Hartley, John E. World Biblical Commentary: Volume 4, Leviticus. Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1992.
- Hartman, David. Maimonides: Torah and Philosophic Quest. Philadelphia: Jewish Publishing Society, 1976.
- Heschel, Abraham Joshua. A Passion for Truth. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1973.
- Heschel, Abraham Joshua. Between God and Man: An Interpretation of Judaism. New York: Free Press, 1959.
- Heschel, Abraham Joshua. God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1955.
- Heschel, Abraham Joshua. Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion. New York: Farr Straus and Giroux, 1951.
- Hirsch, Samson Raphael. Hirsch Commentary on the Torah: Volume 4 Vayikra/Leviticus (Part Two). Trans. Isaac Levy. London: Judaica Press, 1986.
- Kasnett, Rabbi Nesanel, *et al*, eds. Ramban – Nachmanides/Commentary on the Torah Artscroll Series Volume 7: Devarim/Deuteronomy. New York: Mesorah Publications, 2008.
- Kravitz, Leonard S. and Kerry M. Olitzky. Mishlei: A Modern Commentary on Proverbs. New York: UAHC Press, 2002.
- Levine, Baruch A. The JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989.
- Longman III, Tremper. Proverbs. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006.

Bibliography

- Merkle, John C. "Worship, Insight and Faith In the Theology of Abraham Joshua Heschel." Worship (49), December 1975. pp. 583-596.
- Milgrom, Jacob. Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004.
- Murphy, Roland E. World Biblical Commentary: Volume 22 Proverbs. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998.
- Orchot Tzaddikim: The Ways of the Tzaddikim. Ed. Rabbi Gavriel Zaloshinsky. Trans. Rabbi Shraga Silverstein. Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1995.
- Otto, Rudolf. The Idea of the Holy. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1967.
- Plaut, Gunther W. Book of Proverbs: A Commentary. New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1961.
- Propp, William H. C. The Anchor Bible: Exodus 19-40. New York: Doubleday, 2006.
- Rosenberg, Rabbi A.J. Proverbs: A New English Translation. New York: Judaica Press, 1988.
- Sarna, Nahum M. The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991.
- Shulman, Lee S. "Forgive and Remember: The Challenges and Opportunities of Learning from Experience." Talented Teachers: The Essential Force for Improving Student Achievement. Eds. L. Solomon and T. Schiff. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2004. pp. 59-66.
- Stahlt, H. P. "אֵיִרָא' To Fear." Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament: Volume 2 אֵסֶד – סִיּוֹן. Ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann. Trans. Mark E. Biddle. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997, pp. 568-578.
- Tigay, Jeffery H. The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996.
- Van Leeuwen, R.C. Proverbs. The New Interpreter's Bible, Eds. Keck, L.E., et al. Nashville: Abingdon, 1997.
- Wenham, Gordon J. The Book of Leviticus. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979.
- Weinfeld, Moshe. The Anchor Bible: Deuteronomy 1-11, volume 5. New York: Doubleday, 1991.

Bibliography

Williamson, H.G.M. World Biblical Commentary, Vol. 16: Ezra, Nehemiah. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With a deep sense of gratitude, I recognize that this exploration could not have been possible without the help of those around me. As Martin Buber writes in his theory of the “I-Thou” relationship, we find God in the connection between people. Along my own personal theological pursuits, I have found his words to ring true for me – it is through the following people that I am able to give thanks to the Source of *Yirah* in the universe.

I would first like to thank Dr. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, who has been more than just an advisor in this exploration, but a partner. Her investment in this project and in the overall pursuit of wisdom allowed this analysis to emerge and helped me to come out of it with more knowledge and understanding. She encouraged me to critically analyze from my own point of view, and allowed me to bring my engineering training in scientific methods of hypothesizing and testing to the process of biblical analysis.

I owe Rabbi Richard Levy a debt of gratitude, as well. He is a model of a person who lives a life full of the highest level of *yirah* and is constantly helping others to choose the path of *yirah*, as well.

To Reverend Dagmar Grefe, my supervisor at Children’s Hospital while serving as a chaplain, is the person who encouraged me to pursue the concept of *yirah* further than I thought I could. I thank her for being a reflective presence and a supportive one. And I thank all my patients, nurses, advisors in the Clinical Pastoral Education program and my cohort who all helped me to discover and begin my path towards understanding *yirah*, particularly the individuals who provided me with the *yirah*-filled responsibility of being with them as they opened their hearts during in the midst of their suffering.

To Dr. Rachel Adler, who provided me with some key sources for a contemporary analysis of *yirah*, as well as some key conversations to help me shape my own ideas for exploration and for always pushing me, theologically, I am ever appreciative.

To Dr. Michael Zeldin and Rivka Ben Daniel, who provided a key article in an incredibly timely fashion, I give thanks for their commitment to their students.

To my classmates and cohort, I thank them all for being sounding boards and at the very least pretending to be interested in my rantings about *yirah* as I was formulating my thoughts.

To the entire HUC-JIR community in Los Angeles, I am incredibly appreciative of the environment that has allowed me to explore and grow within its supportive community.

To Rabbi Denise Eger and the staff and congregants at Congregation Kol Ami, I am grateful for your support and patience with me as I completed this work.

I thank my parents, grandparents, and siblings for their eternal support and love in any endeavor I take on.

To Rachel, who bore the brunt of my time investment in this pursuit of knowledge, I could never put in words the amount of thanks and gratitude I have for being blessed to be together. She always helps me to be wiser and to accomplish what I set out to do.

And to Laila, my daughter who was born during the creation of this work and my process of trying to understand *yirah*, I thank her for her timeliness and for opening my heart to an emotional understanding of the concept of *yirah* that I had previously not been able to know.

Through all these people, I acknowledge with a deep sense of *yirah* the thanks I have for God, the true and only source of this study’s key concept. I pray that it serves God’s will.