



IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF OUR FATHERS
THE FEAR BEHIND FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Avos Perek 3 Mishna 11
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The family sits around the Shabbos table. Three generations sing zemiros with typical gusto. Then the main dish is served, a whole chicken surrounded by kugel and tzimmes. The family looks to the Zaidy to take the first piece when all of a sudden a sweet but determined voice is heard.

“I can’t eat that chicken; there is something wrong with it.”

“Anyone whose fear of sin precedes his wisdom, his wisdom shall endure.

All turn their heads to find these words have come from none other than the youngest of the family. The six-year-old boy Yanky has a decidedly huge frown on his normally angelic face.

“It can’t be kosher, Mommy; it doesn’t look kosher.”

By now everyone’s jaw has dropped.

“I won’t eat that, it looks goyish.”

Everyone starts to talk at once. “Why do you say that?” “What can be wrong with the chicken Bubby made, sweetheart?”

It soon transpires that the little fellow had never seen a whole chicken before. His entire experience in the world of kosher edible fowl has been the cut up variety that comes in bite-size pieces. The fact that all those pieces were once part of a whole creature never entered his mind. What astounded all, and gave no end of nachas as well, is that at such a tender age he was ready to stand his ground and refuse to eat something he thought was suspect. To this six-year-old (going on thirty) child's mind, it wasn't kosher and therefore it cannot be eaten. No amount of cajoling would put the youngster's mind to rest until Zaidy offered his choice piece of pulka, which was already severed from the said suspicious bird.

After Shabbos the youngster's father took him to the butcher shop so that he could see how the whole bird becomes rendered into small bits. He then called his Zaidy to say that not only was the whole chicken kosher, but he had also been told that one could eat- now wait for this- the neck as well!

This little story speaks volumes. In these difficult times, it is vital that we consider our children's earliest impressions. Notwithstanding all the teaching aids we have, there is one dynamic that must precede everything: the child must have a fear or awe of Hashem!

How can this become part of your child's identity? That is a loaded question that is the subject of many a scholarly treatise. As a father and a grandfather, this question has long vexed me. After much thought I can only think that the early fear of Hashem comes from the environment in which the child is raised. It is amazing when you consider this. You can think about all kinds of ways to raise your young, but in the end it is the thousands of little nuances that decide in which direction they will be drawn. This Mishnah speaks to this dilemma.

The building block of our bond with Hashem must be an underlining fear of sin. Our little boy has no knowledge of the niceties of kashrus laws, or the ins and outs of poultry anatomy. He only feared doing something that would be wrong. That fear is his, and hopefully will grow deeper as his wisdom flowers. Knowledge is an interesting commodity; it can be transient, or permanent. If we use information as part of our reality then it becomes rooted to our thinking. If, however, it is just some more "stuff" that we have acquired, then it won't endure. It will become just another stockpile of trivia that we carry about with us. Wisdom endures if it is actualized in real life. There is no dearth of people who know a lot but have no real depth. Fear of sin isn't about walking about waiting for some Divine bolt of thunder to strike us down. I am referring here to another deeper fear.

The Kotzker Rebbe was asked, "When they stood on Har Sinai, the people said to Moshe Rabbeinu, 'You speak with us and we will hear; but let not Hashem speak with us, lest we die.' And Moshe answered, 'Fear not.' He went on to say that Hashem had come in order 'that His fear may be on your countenance so that you will not sin.' Is that not a contradiction?"

The Rebbe replied: 'Fear not' - that means that this fear of yours, the fear of death, is not the fear which Hashem wants of you. He wishes you to fear Him; He wants you to fear His remoteness, and not to fall into sin which removes you from Him.

The Kotzker “truth” tells us that the fear of Hashem should be predicated on the anguish incurred by the gap created when we sin. Our misdeeds create a chasm between Hashem and ourselves and it is this abyss that we should fear. Understanding this comes with wisdom, but the kernel of fear of sinning must be there before you start.

The only thing Hashem does not give us is fear of sinning; this must be achieved on our own. Moshe said, “What does your G-d ask of you but to revere Him?” Fear of Hashem is something which Hashem must ask of mankind, because it is the basis of free will, with which Hashem does not intervene.

So that little Yanky, and I am sure the many like him, has shown that in his brief young life, he has gained that certain special something that we call ‘fear of Hashem.’ Hopefully he will go on to learn and grow. He will one day understand the entire vast ocean that is the Torah, and he will use that wisdom to strengthen his connection with Hashem. As his knowledge of Torah expands, so too the profundity of his fear of Hashem will grow and will turn into awe. Hopefully, it will be far reaching, way up high, spreading in all directions, affecting all his actions and enriching his life with constant meaningful contact with Hashem. All of that will sprout forth from the original kernel of innocent Yiras Shomayim instilled in his childhood. However great it will grow to be, its solid roots will be those which took hold when he was that little boy.

This sort of wisdom will endure, not only for Yanky but for his future children as well. This comes about because he will live that sort of Torah life that will create an ambiance of gentle holiness in his home, and who knows, one day his little six-year-old may refuse to eat a chicken as well.

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