

My friends, I have no adjectives to describe the intensity of our reactions to the horrific story that has been in the news of late, the story of the thirteen children who had been kept in conditions to which none of us would subject an animal, let alone a human being. I have to admit, it has had a profound affect on me on several levels. One of those levels is how I understand an idea in the Torah.

On Rosh HaShanah, we read the story of the binding of Isaac. In that story, an angel says to Abraham, “Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me.”¹ I have never liked the translation “fear God.” I did not like the idea that Abraham was afraid of God; I did not like the idea that I should be afraid of God. I preferred to translate the phrase as “...now I know that you are in awe of God...” I far preferred the idea of being in awe of God to the idea of being afraid of God. I knew I was on solid ground in translating the Torah that way, because the standard Biblical Hebrew dictionary used in seminaries offers “reverence” as a possible translation for that particular Hebrew word, and one of

¹ Gen. 22:12

the best English translations of the Torah, the one I think best captures the essence of the Hebrew, translates this verse using the phrase “in awe of God,” not “fear God.”² For the purposes of this talk, however, I want to acknowledge that the verse I quoted is the second time this phrase appears in the Torah. Let’s take a look at the first time.

The first time it appears is when Abraham and Sarah were in the city of Gerar, and Abraham told Sarah to pretend to be his sister, not his wife. Why? Because he feared for his life. He was afraid that the men of Gerar would kill him so that someone else could marry Sarah. As Abraham explained to Avimelech, the king of Gerar, “I thought,” said Abraham, “surely there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.”³ This goes to the heart of my new perspective regarding the fear of God.

Why did I prefer that idea of being in awe of God, or revering God? Because feeling a sense of awe about God, because revering God, because **loving** God, can lead us to *chesed*, to the highest level of kindness one can imagine. When

² The Schocken Bible, Fox translation

³ Gen. 20:11

one loves God, one is moved to do good in the world. Is there anything more important than doing good in the world? There may well be.

Let me share a famous Jewish story with you. When the great Talmudic sage Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai was dying, his students asked him for a final blessing. He said, “May your fear of God be as great as your fear of man.” The students were confused. “Rabbi, surely you mean may our fear of man be as great as our fear of God.” But Yochanan ben Zakkai said no. “When you are about to do wrong, do you not look to make sure no one is watching? But you forget that God watches all that you do.”⁴

The moral of this story, that which may be more important than doing good in the world, is preventing evil in the world. Abraham was afraid of evil in a place where no one feared God. Yochanan ben Zakkai knew his students worried more about whether a wrongdoing would be witnessed by another person, not about it being seen by God. So let me ask you a question. Mao was one of the most heinous people who ever lived. He was the cause of the deaths of between sixty and eighty million

⁴ Paraphrased from B'rachot 28b

people, more than Hitler and Stalin combined. What if Mao, or Hitler, or Stalin believed that there was a God who would judge them by their actions and they were afraid of that God? What if the parents of these thirteen children were afraid the consequences of their actions because they feared God? Fear of God prevents evil. Fear in general prevents wrongdoing. Why do police patrol the roads? Are there not signs posted telling us the speed limit on a road? But some people still speed, while others do not speed because they are afraid of getting a ticket. Yochanan ben Zakkai was right. Far too many of us fear human authorities and do not fear God. If more of us did fear God, there would be less evil in the world. So I have changed my mind. Fear of God, not only awe of God and reverence for God and love of God, but fear of God is an important force in decreasing evil in the world. I now echo the sentiment of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai. May our fear of God be as great as our fear of human authorities.