

Fear of the Lord

In the Book of Deuteronomy Moses delivers a series of speeches as he prepares the Israelites for entry into the Promised Land.

In chapter 10, after a lengthy recollection of the people's poor behaviour during their desert trek, Moses seems to turn a fresh page and look to the future, beginning with the words "So now, O Israel..." (10:12).

*"So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? **Only** to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God and his decrees which I am commanding you today, for your own well-being." (Deuteronomy 10:12-13)*

In the reflections of the Jewish sages over many centuries, a subtlety in the wording of this text caught their attention. That Moses says "only" (to fear, reverence the Lord) posed a difficulty. Is Moses suggesting that God is asking for something minor? Yet holy awe or 'fear of the Lord' is a major matter indeed! Say some commentators, this passage sums up the essence of the whole Torah. Why would Moses appear to undervalue its weight? Creatively, prayerfully, let's enter the conversation with the rabbis...

Perhaps you are thinking that for Moses, who is so advanced in faith and virtue, fear of the Lord comes naturally and therefore to him it does seem a simple matter. This is one rabbinic opinion. Yet other commentators wonder why Moses would assume it to be a simple matter for everyone else.

Nahmanides¹ offers the explanation that "only" infers that what God asks of human beings is ultimately for their own happiness and wellbeing. The difficulties of reverencing God are a small price compared to the benefits. Like a parent offering guidance to a reluctant child, we can hear Moses saying "I'm *only* saying this for your own good!"

A different response comes from Joseph Albo, a Jewish philosopher of the Middle Ages. Albo's insight is that this text refers to the way in which people grow into a life of holding God in awe. No one can reach the spiritual heights of being a truly God-fearing person easily or immediately. To even contemplate the 'requirement' of our quoted passage is daunting! But God shows us a way to succeed; God gives us a way to follow: small daily acts of love which, over time, allow our entire lives to become infused with holy awe and reverence. We might say that God doesn't ask for sudden saintliness; God asks "only" that we commit ourselves to the unspectacular daily steps of living the values and teachings of our faith community. In Albo's words:

"The meaning of the passage is therefore this: Now, Israel, consider the wonderful kindness of God. What does he ask of you? God does not ask anything that is hard to acquire. He asks merely the performance of the commandments of the Torah, because the quality of fear [awe] through which one may obtain human perfection follows from the performance of the commandments of the Torah."²

Discuss the interpretations of the sages in conversation with your own thoughts on this text. Attend to the context, what goes before and after vv.12-13. Reflect on your own experience of awe/reverence/fear of the Lord. How does repeated action (a daily commitment to religious ritual, deeds of love, acts of justice) shape, confirm and deepen the experience of faith?

1. Also known as Ramban. His full name: Rabbi Moshe Ben Nahman (1194-1270).

2. See Leibowitz, 101-102.

Sources: Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (New York, 1996); Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Devarim* (New York, 1995).
Scripture: NRSV.

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