



Torah Reflections: Conversations on the Weekly Parsha  
Parshat Ekev 5785: The Beginning of Wisdom

Integrating Torah into one's life through reflection and conversation can be an incredibly fun and engaging experience. It's a journey of discovery, where ancient wisdom and timeless teachings come to life in our daily experiences. Through reflection, we have the opportunity to dive deep into the rich tapestry of Torah, extracting profound insights and lessons that resonate with our modern lives. The joy lies in the 'aha' moments, those instances when a Torah verse or story suddenly connects with our personal challenges, aspirations, and values. And when we engage in conversations about Torah with others, it becomes an interactive exploration, where diverse perspectives and interpretations enhance our understanding. These dialogues often spark excitement and intellectual curiosity, making the learning process both enjoyable and fulfilling. Torah becomes a vibrant and dynamic part of our lives, offering not just guidance but also a source of endless fascination, connection, and growth.

NOTE: Don't feel obligated to go through every source or answer all the questions—unless you want to. Even one source, or one question will give you plenty of material for discussion and meditation. Enjoy this!

### Some Thoughts from the Parsha

*12 And now, Israel, what does the L-RD your G-d require of you, but to fear the L-RD your G-d, to walk in all His ways, and to love Him, and to serve the L-RD your God with all your heart and with all your soul (Devarim 10:12)*

The fear of G-d is probably the most basic, irreducible element of religiosity in any religion. King Solomon said, *"in summary, this is known: fear G-d and guard His commandments, because this is the totality of man"* (Ecclesiastes 12:13). This can be understood to mean that one can acquire as much information as he or she wants, and certainly King Solomon, described as the "wisest of all men" (see I Kings 3:12), had a broad knowledge base, but the essence of our existence is to develop the characteristic of yirah, or fear, of G-d.

This is conveyed in the phrase, *"the beginning of wisdom is the fear of G-d"* (Proverbs 9:10)—an idea that totally contradicts the contemporary notion of wisdom informed by scientific, mechanical materialism and its therapeutic counterpart, psychoanalysis. For this reason, being G-d-fearing in certain circles is a basis for the de-legitimization of one's capacity for intellectual contribution. Freudians consider religiosity as a whole to be a neurosis! The image of the patient, logical genius who is amoral, doubting, and objective has been held in the mind's eye as the trusted source of wisdom and sanity since the second half of the 19th century. The entire human historical record since then testifies to how horrific the ramifications of science and progress without the fear of G-d are.

The name of the holiest city in the world is a composite of its original name *Shalem* ("perfection") and the name given to it by Avraham Avinu, *Yireh* ("He will see," which is identical in spelling to the word "fear," see Genesis 22:14). Together, these render "perfect fear" — *Yerushalayim*. The word that we commonly use to mean "religious" in the Orthodox Jewish sense is the Yiddish word *frum*, which actually means "G-d-fearing." The fear of G-d certainly holds a coveted place at the center of Judaism.



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The fear of G-d is generally conceived as a multi-dimensional mode of being, as follows (see the Ramchal's *Mesillat Yesharim*):

1. Yirat Ha'Onesh – fear of punishment for transgressing G-d's commandments. This level tends to evoke the most negative reaction among contemporary, educated people, who view obedience from fear as primitive and immature. But even within our tradition, this level is considered a starting point; service through love is higher. Yet as Rebbe Nachman of Breslov said, "Would that we would even reach *this* level!" At least such fear restrains us from sin. We avoid double-parking because of the fine—why not avoid sin for the same reason? It is this level that enables the rule of law and order.
2. Yirat HaRomemut – awe of G-d's greatness. This comes from contemplating the greatness of G-d and the smallness of man. As Avraham said, "*I am but dust and ashes.*" This awe makes us aware that we live in the presence of the Eternal and follow His commandments to connect to His eternity.
3. Yirat HaChet – fear of sin itself. This is when a person so values closeness to G-d that the very idea of sin is abhorrent because it creates distance from Him. In human relationships, once trust and love deepen, we avoid actions that could harm the bond; so too with G-d.

Contemporary life presents unique challenges here. Another major theme of the parsha is the danger of wealth and how it can create distance from G-d:

11 Beware lest you forget the L-RD your God, in not keeping His commandments... 12 lest when you have eaten and are satisfied... 17 and you say in your heart: 'My power and the might of my hand has gotten me this wealth.' 18 But you shall remember the L-RD your God, for it is He that gives you power to get wealth... (Deuteronomy 8:11–18)

When society celebrates the "self-made man," the fear of G-d doesn't come easy. Wealth can be a buffer from discomfort, masking our constant dependence on G-d. That's why the Torah warns us to maintain loyalty despite abundance. Only those who recognize that all comes from the One "Who suspends the universe over nothingness" can hold wealth safely.

May G-d bless us with perfect *yirah*, true prosperity, and the wisdom to use it for the purposes He intends.

Now, reflect on the following questions:

1. Why does Moshe begin by asking Israel to "fear G-d" before mentioning love and service?
2. What practical value does *Yirat ha'onesh* (fear of punishment) still have in our lives today?
3. How does *Yirat ha'romemut* (awe of G-d's greatness) change a person's daily perspective?
4. Why does the Torah warn that wealth can cause us to forget G-d, and how does *yirah* guard against this?
5. Which of the three levels of *yirah* most challenges people in an age of self-made success?

Shabbat Shalom!



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