

Yirah: Fear and Vision:

One of the things I love best about studying Torah is that, even though the text is the same each year, I notice different things based on my own state of mind and the state of the world. This winter, since the beginning of the book of Exodus, I have been noticing the recurrence of the concept of *yirah*, which is often translated as “fear” or “awe.” The midwives are described as “fearing God” when they choose to defy Pharaoh’s order and kill the baby Israelite boy in Chapter 1 of Exodus. The Israelites are also described as “fearing God,” after they cross the Red Sea, right before they break into song. After receiving revelation, in chapter 20 of Exodus, the Israelites are again described, as “fearing God,” when they promise to keep the *mitzvot*.

I am intrigued by the Biblical model of *yirah*. The fear, such as it was, that the midwives felt was not one that made them cower, but one that enabled them to defy a king who had every power to kill them. The *yirah* that the Israelites felt at the sea inspired them to burst into song. The *yirah* they felt at Mt. Sinai encouraged them to embrace obligations.

In this time, I have been trying to emulate that Biblical *yirah* in my own leadership of the congregation. I have been motivated by that *yirah* to expand my work not just within the synagogue, but also beyond the synagogue. I have been working with a small interfaith team to host the “Stronger Together” interfaith potlucks, which in the next two months will include attempts to begin organizing interfaith caucuses dealing with regional and national issues. I have been reaching out to more non-Christian clergy to invite them to join our interfaith group. I have brought my *yirah* to testifying at the County Commission for the rights of our trans and immigrant community members. And it is with great *yirah* that I have agreed to serve on the Hatikvah Slate in the World Zionist Congress elections this spring.

Perhaps *yirah* functions differently from how I often think about fear because it accesses not just fear of how terrible things could be if we act (or fail to act) in immoral ways, but also a positive vision of the beauty that we can create when we do take action. So if you’re feeling frightened, I encourage you to channel that fear into *yirah*: What vision do you want to protect? What support do you need to take action?