

Emotional Landscapes in Tanakh

Biblical Perspectives on Human Feelings and Relationships



Rivka Kahan

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This book of Torah is dedicated to the memory of

Fanya Gottesfeld Heller z"l

Beloved mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother.

A courageous Holocaust survivor, renowned lecturer and author, philanthropist and educator, and pillar of Matan.

Fanya inspired all who knew her. Her home was filled with Torah values and radiated hope and belief in the future of Am Yisrael and Eretz Yisrael. She brought a special light to the world, which she helped to make a better, kinder place.

The Heller Family



*This book of Torah
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*In deep appreciation of your valued partnership and steadfast
support for Matan and the Eshkolot Educators Institute,
and in tribute to your profound commitment to strengthening
women's Torah learning and leadership worldwide.*



Author's Dedication

In memory of my parents,

Jo Ann and Stephen Flaum



In the 1980s, Rabbanit Malke Bina began teaching a groundbreaking Talmud *shiur* for women, held around the dining room table of Lili Weil z"l. Inspired by this pioneering learning, Rabbanit Bina and her students envisioned an advanced Beit Midrash for women. This became a reality in 1988 with the establishment of Matan: The Sadie Rennert Women's Institute for Torah Studies. From its inception, Matan has been dedicated to cultivating high-level scholars, educators, and leaders, revolutionizing opportunities for women to engage deeply with Torah study.

Today, Matan has eleven branches, serving tens of thousands of students in Israel and worldwide. It offers intensive Beit Midrash programs in Bible, Talmud, Halakha and Jewish thought, continually raising the bar for women's Torah study. Additionally, there is a broad choice of weekly classes and series, Yemei Iyun in Israel and beyond, a summer learn-and-tour program, pre-holiday programming, an international mother-daughter bat mitzva program, and weekly *parasha* podcasts in Hebrew and English. Matan remains at the forefront of Torah study, inspiring and empowering the next generation through transformative Torah learning.

Kitvuni – Fellowship Program for Writing Torah Literature

In 2022 the Kitvuni Fellowship was launched, led by Dr. Yael Ziegler, a distinguished Matan graduate, senior lecturer and renowned author. The initiative nurtures exceptional *talmidot hakhamim*, supporting them in writing and publishing books of Torah scholarship across diverse fields. Kitvuni provides a structured framework, financial support, and professional mentorship for every cohort, ensuring that each scholar's work reaches its highest potential, in collaboration with Koren Publishers. The program is generously supported by Ann and Jeremy Pava, the Weisfeld Family Charitable Foundation, and additional donors.

The third Matan Kitvuni publication in English is *Emotional Landscapes in Tanakh: Biblical Perspectives on Human Feelings and Relationships* by Rivka Kahan. Through analysis of biblical narratives and their interpretation from ancient through modern times, this book explores the Bible's insight into experiences such as grief, personal change, happiness, identity formation, and other dynamics that shape human inner life.

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Introduction

This book presents an approach to learning Tanakh that focuses on its insight into relationships and emotional experience. This approach to Tanakh is not one that came intuitively to me, but one that has become important to me over the course of my years as a classroom teacher. When I began teaching Tanakh, I thought my primary role was to draw my students into the dazzling world of biblical interpretation through the lenses that I had most often encountered: philosophical and literary. While that kind of study is vastly meaningful and remains a love of mine, in time I came to realize that many of the most pressing issues in my students' lives and *avodat Hashem* were, first and foremost, personal. Once, when speaking with a student about a difficult loss in her family, we began to discuss the different ways Tanakh depicts experiences of grief (this book's chapter on narratives of loss and grief evolved from that conversation). Such experiences helped me realize that biblical analysis can help uncover the Bible's wisdom about inner life in ways that are both intellectually compelling and personally meaningful.

I have found that Torah students often turn to Tanakh for its theological and philosophical wisdom, and to *sefarim* about *musar* and *hashkafa* for insight into the human personality. In the context of Tanakh study, understanding of psychology is often understood as a path to analyzing the biblical narrative rather than as the goal of study. My

purpose in this book is to plumb the biblical narrative for its penetrating wisdom about people's inner lives and the dynamics of their relationships. Tanakh generally conveys its religious and ethical truths through human stories, and in so doing offers treasures of insight into emotions and personality. While the different layers and concerns of the biblical text are interwoven, they can be teased apart to yield perspectives that are often surprisingly distinct.

To analyze Tanakh's insight into emotional experience, I employ a range of techniques used in all serious Tanakh study. These include literary analysis of the biblical text as well as exploration of the writings of Midrash, traditional commentators, and modern exegetes. The writings of modern thinkers – most prominently Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, a master of weaving together existential concerns with interpretation of the biblical text – are another important source.

The coming chapters analyze how the biblical text, through the lens of its commentators, treats a variety of emotional experiences and relationship dynamics. We will analyze topics including the complex relationship between fear and faith, the interplay of shame and guilt and its impact on life trajectories, and the paths through which joy is achieved and experienced.

While Tanakh's approach to each of these topics is distinct and nuanced, there are some overarching qualities and perspectives that characterize its exploration of emotional experience. Tanakh approaches emotional experience with enormous honesty about the complexity of people's inner lives. Nearly every topic we will explore brims with this quality. For example, in its narratives about truth telling and dishonesty, Tanakh considers the tangle of values, choices, and unintended consequences that wends its way through some of the foundational stories of biblical relationships, and it explores the consequences of lying to oneself in the stories of some of our greatest heroes. In its analysis of the narratives of the binding of Isaac and sale of Joseph, rabbinic interpretation probes parallel experiences of trauma in two episodes that, from a religious perspective, stand at opposite moral poles.

Woven into the biblical perspective is a fundamental optimism about people's ability to change, redefine themselves, and choose anew. For example, biblical narratives about family relationships are imbued

not only with realism about deep-seated human tendencies toward competition and discord, but also with the promise of paths toward stunning, transformative reconciliation. In chapter 8, we will analyze how the entire narrative of *Humash* can be read as one continuous story of rupture, renewal, and redemption. The interlaced strands of honesty about the complexity of human experience, alongside belief in human dignity and capacity for change, contribute to the uplifting richness of the Bible's approach.

It is important to note that, by their nature, both the biblical text and human emotions are multifaceted, and there is no doubt that a text may yield many compelling interpretations. The ideas in this book are intended to offer an approach to thinking about Tanakh that has capacious room for further exploration and *hiddush*. My deepest hope is that this approach to Tanakh study will contribute to appreciation for the gift of a *Torat ḥayim* that sheds its light on all areas of life, and a *Torat ḥesed* characterized by the most profound sensitivity.

All biblical translations in this book are taken from the Magerman Edition of *The English Koren Tanakh*, except where indicated in the footnotes that the translations are my own. Translations of talmudic passages are taken from the *Koren Talmud Bavli*. Translations of *midrashim* and commentaries are my own.

Acknowledgments

Many people contributed to this book over the long and short term, and I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to them. First, my students. Being a Torah teacher has been one of the greatest joys and privileges of my life. The experience of learning with many students over the years has been a source of enormous meaning and happiness, and has inspired the approach to Tanakh that informs this book.

I am deeply grateful to my friend and former colleague, Dr. Oshra Cohen, who read nearly everything I wrote and offered perspective and knowledge based on her extensive research and experience as a psychologist. Her expertise enriched the book profoundly, offering research-based insight and often encouraging me to reconsider and refine my assumptions and to think in new ways. Most of the psychological research and articles referenced in the book were pointed out to me by her. Her enormously generous and gracious sharing of time, experience, and wisdom improved this book greatly.

I am indebted to Matan's Kitvuni Fellowship for the support and opportunity to write this book. Matan generously provided me with a host of practical and intellectual resources to allow me to devote myself to research and writing. I am deeply grateful to Matan, headed by Rabbanit Malke Bina, Matan's founder and President, for the vision to create this program and for giving me this opportunity. Dr. Yael Ziegler's insightful, professional, and kind leadership of the program made it feel

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like a true intellectual home. Thank you to Chaya Bina-Katz, Matan's CEO, for her passionate and tireless work in advancing Matan's mission and expanding opportunities for women's Torah scholarship. Thank you to Sherry Fox-Begner, Matan's Head of Resource Development, for her dedication and talent in strengthening Kitvuni and all of Matan's programs. Thank you to Aviva Cohen, Matan's Head of Programming, for skillfully ensuring that Matan's programs run seamlessly and with consummate professionalism, and to the whole Matan administrative team for their hard work in providing the incredible opportunities offered by Kitvuni.

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My dear friends Tamar Appel and Dena Rock offered invaluable feedback and insight with their characteristic sensitivity to both ideas and human experience. I am grateful for their wise contributions and especially for their friendship.

Margot Botwinick and Zahava Bauer read parts of this book and discussed many of its ideas with me, consistently deepening my

perspective. Their encouragement to write a book was the impetus for my pursuing this project; it would not have happened without them. I am grateful for our learning and friendship over the course of many years.

My sincere gratitude to alhatorah.org and its creators, Rabbi Hillel and Neima Novetsky. The vast resources of Al HaTorah were indispensable to me in my research and writing; I don't think I closed the website once during the time I worked on this book. Having had the privilege of working at Al HaTorah, I know that its scholarship is suffused not only with precision but also with *yirat shamayim*. My learning and writing are richer because of it.

I am grateful to Dr. Judith Pieprz, who contributed resources and insight to the chapter on shame and guilt. Her expertise and help, as well as her encouragement of the project, were very meaningful to me.

This book is dedicated to the memory of my parents, Jo Ann and Stephen Flaum. My parents' honesty, curiosity, bone-deep independence, and unparalleled open-mindedness shaped my world in ways that I continually come to appreciate more deeply. While my parents were atheists, it was the model of their profound integrity and love that taught me what it means to really be able to believe in someone, and that formed the basis for my religious life. They would have been more excited than anyone at the publication of this book, and I feel their absence deeply.

My children and grandchildren, Yosef Aryeh and Orli, Avraham and Rachel, Miriam, Sara, Yeshaya, Devora, Dov Mordechai, Yehuda Binyamin, and Tiferet Sara, fill my life with love, meaning, and joy. My children, through the flowering of their own personalities and individual paths to God, have taught me more than anyone about the interaction between Torah and emotional experience.

Words can never express my love for and gratitude to my husband, Moshe. His belief and support make all my dreams possible, and his love, wisdom, and goodness are the bedrock of my life.

My deepest gratitude is to the *Ribbono Shel Olam* for guiding me with endless mercy throughout my life and for His countless blessings morning, noon, and night. May the ideas in this book find favor in His eyes. *Yiheyu leratzon imrei fi vehegyon libi lefanekha Hashem tzuri vegoali.*

PART I

EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE

Chapter 1

Fear and Faith

Fear is an inherently complex emotion for a religious person. How does anxiety about the future interact with the belief that the world is in God's hands? Is fear a reflection of insufficient faith in the ultimate goodness of God's plan? Is it simply a realistic orientation to a world in which frightening things happen – and if so, what role does it play in religious life and *avodat Hashem*? Can fear actually contribute in some way to the development of faith and a religious personality? Is it an emotion to be accepted or overcome?

In a striking midrash, *Hazal* note both the instinct to view fear as contradictory to faith and the ways in which that perspective is insufficient in helping people make sense of their emotional experiences. Commenting on the verse that describes Jacob's fear before his encounter with Esau, the midrash says:

“Jacob was acutely afraid and distressed” (Gen. 32:7). His wives said to him, “If you are afraid, why did you take us out of our father's house? Rather, trust in the [protection] of your Creator, who said to you, ‘Return to your fathers' land and I will be with you’ (Gen. 31:3).” Immediately, “Jacob was acutely afraid and

distressed.” He was afraid of the external [opponent] Esau and distressed by the internal [opponent] – his wives.¹

The religious perspective enunciated by Jacob’s wives is voiced by nearly all classical commentators on this narrative, who question why Jacob was afraid of Esau’s threat when he had already been promised God’s protection. The midrash does not impugn Jacob’s wives’ belief that, in light of the explicit divine promise bestowed upon Jacob earlier in his story, he should feel confident rather than anxious. Nonetheless, it expresses the profound truth that this approach did nothing to assuage Jacob’s fear; on the contrary, it simply added a new level of pain to the anxiety he already felt. The midrash calls upon us to look deeply into the biblical narrative to understand the role of fear in the life of the *oved Hashem*.

FEAR IN THE BIBLICAL TEXT

Tanakh contains many narrative and poetic sections that explore fear in the life of the religious believer. Abraham,² Jacob,³ and Moses⁴ are all described as being afraid at various points in their lives. The simple sense of the biblical text neither condemns nor praises these figures for their fear.⁵ Even when God instructs Abraham and Moses not to fear, there is no tone of censure in His command. On the contrary, He reassures them with blessings of protection and reward that obviate the need for fear.⁶

1. *Midrash Ner HaSekhalim*, cited in *Torah Shelema* on Genesis 32:7.

2. In Genesis 15:1, God instructs Abraham not to fear, which implies that he felt afraid. In the words of Genesis Rabba 76:1: “One only says ‘Do not fear’ to one who is afraid.”

3. Genesis 32:8.

4. Exodus 2:14; Numbers 21:34; and Deuteronomy 3:2. In the latter instances, as in the case of Abraham in Genesis 15, Moses’s fear is implied by God’s command not to fear.

5. Note, however, that several commentators suggest that Jacob’s struggle with the angel was a punishment for his fear or a means of preventing him from acting on it. We will explore their interpretations in the next section of this chapter.

6. Abraham is told: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield. Your reward shall be very great” (Gen. 15:1). Moses is assured: “Do not be afraid of [Og king of Bashan], for I have given him into your hand, with all his people and his land” (Num. 21:34; Deut. 3:2).

In fact, whenever God tells a character in the biblical narrative not to be afraid, He attaches to this injunction a promise that renders fear unwarranted. Isaac is promised that he has no need to fear because God will bless him out of loyalty to Abraham;⁷ Jacob is assured that his fear of descending to Egypt is unnecessary because God will make him a great nation there.⁸ The Israelites are enjoined not to fear the pursuing Egyptians because God will save them.⁹ Moses, Joshua, and the Israelites are told many times that there is no cause to fear the Canaanites because God will help them conquer the land.¹⁰ When Joshua finds himself entering into battle against multiple kings who have allied against him in Joshua chapter 11, God does not tell him, “Do not be afraid; rather, believe in Me.” Instead, God promises, “Do not fear them, for by this time tomorrow, I will have rendered them into corpses before Israel.”

One can interpret this feature of the biblical narrative in one of two ways. Perhaps the many commands not to fear, all of which are accompanied by God’s promise of salvation, imply that there is never reason to fear because God will always intervene to save His people. Alternatively, one might make the opposite argument, namely, that the command not to fear is never stated as a categorical principle of faith. Instead, in certain situations God provides a specific reason that fear is misplaced. In the absence of such reassurance, fear is not fundamentally an emotion to be eschewed.

The notion that belief provides protection against fear finds its most explicit biblical exploration not in narrative sections of Tanakh, but in poetic and prophetic sections of the Prophets and Writings. Many passages, particularly in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Psalms, declare that one who fears God need not fear anyone or anything else.¹¹ The psalmist thus declares:

7. Genesis 26:24.

8. Ibid. 46:3.

9. Exodus 14:13.

10. For a few examples, see Deuteronomy 3:22, 7:18, 21, 20:1–4, 31:6;; Joshua 10:8, 25, 11:6.

11. For example, see Isaiah 8:12–13, 41:8–14, 43:1–5, 51:7–13; Jeremiah 17:5–8, 30:10, 42:11, 46:27–28; Psalms 3, 23:4, 27, 49, 56, 91, 112:7, 118:6–9. See also Proverbs 3:24–26 and 29:25.

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Show me grace, God, for mortals hound me;
all day long my foes oppress me;
all day long my oppressors trample me;
so many attack me, Exalted One!
On the day that I fear,
I trust in You –
in God, whose word I praise,
in God I trust; I do not fear –
what can mere flesh do to me? ...
You count my wanderings;
You store my tears in Your vial;
are they not in Your records?
Then, on the day that I call,
my enemies will retreat;
this I know, for God is with me.
In God, whose word I praise,
in the Lord, whose word I praise,
in God I trust; I do not fear –
what can man do to me?¹²

The psalmist describes a process in which his initial distress and fear lead him to turn to faith: “On the day that I fear, I trust in You.” His powerful belief in the presence and protection of God, in turn, obviates any fear of man. Over the course of the psalm, its mood becomes more exuberant, moving from a desperate plea for salvation from the violent enemies to a declaration of his certainty that they will ultimately fail and retreat. As Malbim comments on verse 5, “Because of my faith, it is appropriate that He save me, for He saves all those who trust in Him. Thus I will not fear, for what can man do to me?”

This psalm describes a spiritual process in which the psalmist’s pain, worry, and fear are supplanted by a faith so complete that it fills him with certainty of God’s eventual salvation. This certainty does not eliminate the enormously painful challenges that the psalmist

12. Psalms 56:2–5, 9–12.

encounters – described vividly through the image of his tears that are stored in God’s vial – but they give him confidence for the future.

Yet even in the context of psalms that express such exuberant and confident faith, one often finds an element of complexity. It is clear from human experience that the assertion that God always protects those who believe in Him cannot be understood straightforwardly. Thus, woven together with David’s frequent affirmations of confidence in God’s salvation, are hints that he knows that God’s ways are not quite so predictable. An example of this complexity is found in psalm 23:

The Lord is my Shepherd;
I lack nothing.
He lets me lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside still waters.
He refreshes my soul,
guiding me along the right paths
for the sake of His name.
Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil, for You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff encourage me.
You set a table before me in the face of my foes;
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup brims over.
May only goodness and kindness follow me
all the days of my life;
let me live in the Lord’s House
for evermore.

This psalm expresses the serenity of faith through peaceful, pastoral imagery. It is thus striking that in verse 4, the green pastures and still waters of the earlier verses give way to the haunting image of “the valley of the shadow of death” before the psalmist returns, in the closing verses, to describing a life suffused with God’s bounty and goodness. Additionally, the psalmist’s mention of the encouragement and comfort offered him by God’s rod and staff is perplexing; generally, a shepherd’s rod is used for discipline rather than succor.

The unexpected images of verse 4 lead *Metzudat David* to comment poignantly: “Your rod and your staff’ – When you strike me with the rod of suffering, and then You support me, [both of] these [actions] comfort me, because through this I see that You have not abandoned me to chance.” While the psalm ostensibly describes a life of tranquil belief crowned by God’s blessings, woven into its poetry is the recognition that even such a life may include profound, incomprehensible struggle. The psalmist’s hope is to find meaning in his challenges through his sense of God’s hand in his experience.¹³ While many psalms declare unshakable faith not only in God’s presence but in His protection, they subtly incorporate a recognition that the two are not always connected.

While psalm 23 weaves together faith with an awareness of the unknowability of God’s ways, psalm 27 goes further. This psalm includes the book’s most nuanced exploration of the interaction of faith and fear in the emotional experience of the believer. It is worth reading the psalm in full to appreciate the profound self-revelation of the psalmist:

Of David.

The Lord is my light and my salvation –
whom need I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life –
whom need I dread?

When evildoers close in on me to devour my flesh,
it is they,
my enemies and foes,
who stumble and fall.

Should an army besiege me,
my heart would not fear.

Should war break out against me,

13. Similarly, Netziv (Copperman edition, available at <https://mg.alhatorah.org/Full/Tehillim/118.6#eon60>) comments on Psalms 118:6 (“The Lord is with me; I have no fear. What can man do to me?”) that the psalmist does not mean to suggest that no one can harm him, but rather that he understands his suffering as a manifestation of the hand of God.

I would still be confident.
One thing I ask of the Lord;
this alone I seek:
to live in the Lord's House all the days of my life,
to gaze on the beauty of the Lord,
and to worship in His Temple,
for He will keep me safe in His shelter in times of terror;
He will hide me under the cover of His tent;
He will set me high upon a rock.
Now my head is high above the enemies around me –
I will sacrifice in His tent with shouts of joy;
I will sing and chant praises to the Lord.
Hear my voice, Lord, when I call;
show me grace and answer me.
Of Your heart whispers, "Seek My presence" –
Your presence, Lord, I will seek.
Do not hide Your face from me;
do not turn Your servant away in anger.
You have been my help –
do not reject or forsake me, God, my savior.
Were my father and my mother to forsake me,
the Lord would take me in.
Teach me Your way, Lord;
lead me on a level path
because of my oppressors.
Do not abandon me to the will of my foes,
for false witnesses have risen against me,
breathing violence.
Were it not for my faith that I will see the Lord's goodness in the
land of the living....
Hope in the Lord;
be strong and brave of heart,
and hope in the Lord.

While the aforementioned psalm 56 moves from expressions of anxiety to declarations of confident faith, psalm 27 follows the opposite

trajectory. The psalm begins with full-throated statements of certainty in God's salvation that leave no room for fear. For the first three verses, the psalmist asserts his unshakable conviction that God will protect him from every misfortune and that no human being poses a threat to him. Fascinatingly, as the psalm continues, the psalmist does not explicitly reverse course but increasingly expresses vulnerability and anxiety alongside his faith.¹⁴ The image of God vanquishing the psalmist's stumbling foes gives way to the image of God hiding the psalmist under the cover of His tent and placing him high on a rock – still rescuing him, to be sure, but in a way that feels more precarious and less grand.

Just a few verses later, the psalmist shifts to pleading with God not to forsake him, as he feels his enemies breathing down his neck and imagines even his father and mother turning against him. The psalm concludes with the psalmist's contemplation of the desolation he would feel were it not for his faith – a thought he finds too terrifying to carry to completion, leaving it dangling as an unfinished statement. Instead, he voices a plaintive call to maintain the strength and courage to believe in God despite all the breathtaking challenges of the world.

This psalm gives eloquent voice to the way in which even one who is filled with the jubilant strength of belief can feel a chilling, existential fear intertwined with his faith. Like all of life's deepest and closest relationships, the relationship with God is filled with vagaries and complexity, and cannot be distilled to a single emotion. With endless honesty, David expresses both the conviction and vulnerability of the believer.

Throughout many sections of the Prophets and Writings, then, we find statements that faith in God liberates the believer from fear. At the same time, this notion is interwoven with an acknowledgment of the unknowability of God's actions and the emotional experience of fear that is intrinsic to human experience and may accompany even the most abiding belief. The honesty of Tanakh is such that it makes space

14. I am grateful to Rachel Besser, who pointed out some of these ideas in a lecture. See also Rabbi Elchanan Samet's "Psalm 27: The Lord Is My Light and My Salvation" (<https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/ketuvim/sefer-tehillim/psalm-27-lord-my-light-and-my-salvation>).

for all these truths. The transcendent joy and fortitude offered by faith may live side by side with a profound sense of fragility and vulnerability in the life of the *oved Hashem*.

We will now turn to interpretations of biblical narratives about fear that have been developed by commentators over the ages. We will explore three general approaches found in the works of the Sages and commentators.¹⁵

**“ONE WHO TRUSTS IN GOD DOES NOT
FEAR FLESH AND BLOOD”**

A first school of thought embraces the notion that a thoroughgoing faith obviates fear. This idea is captured by Rabbeinu Bahya ibn Pakuda:

There are two types of fear [of God]. One is fear of His punishment and testing [of man]. This is [the experience of] one who fears [God] because of how He will aggrieve and oppress him. If he were sure that he would not be afflicted, he would not fear God.... And this is what the Rabbis warned us against: “Do not be like servants who serve the master in order to receive a reward.”

...The second [type] is awe of His glory, exaltedness, and power, and [this fear] does not depart from a person or abandon him all the days of his life, and this is the highest level of those who fear God.... *One who arrives at this level does not love or fear anything aside from the Creator*, as one of the pious ones would recount about a God-fearing man whom he found sleeping in the wilderness. He said to [the God-fearing man], “Are you not afraid of the lions, that you are sleeping in this place?” He said to him, “I would be ashamed before God if He saw me fear any other than Him.”¹⁶

15. In the interest of conceptual coherence, I have chosen to present the following commentaries in an order that lends itself to comparison and contrast, rather than in historical order.

16. *Hovot HaLevavot* 10:6.