

The Olah Vis-à-Vis the Shelamim

In summary, if the *shelamim* is about sharing, the *olah* is about surrender. Surrender and sharing are in *some* ways the same — they both entail a merging of domains — but they work in very different, almost opposite, ways. When I share, I give to you and you give to me. I have to have a space that’s mine, you have to have a space that’s yours, and then we can each give something we can share. Awe is something else entirely. It is the surrender of my domain to yours. It is a recognition that there is, and always has been, one domain only: *Yours*.

To put this in terms of relationships, we might say that sharing, or the love that arises from it, is in some ways similar to awe. Both evince the quality of adoration, and nowadays, if we aren’t careful, we can slip into using the two words almost interchangeably: We sometimes might casually say, “I am so in awe of you” almost as a synonym for “I love you so.” And yet, awe is, in truth, a very different quality from love. Love, characterized by giving, is a relationship of equals: I give to you, you give to me. And so we meet in love on a level playing field. Love, at least of the romantic variety, implies a certain prizing of the individuality of the other. I must be “I,” with a real sense of separateness and independence, in order for me to be able to give to you, or for me to be able to receive from you. If we each have that independence, then we can share. When it comes to awe, though, all this changes. I *don’t* see myself as your equal, separate and independent. If I am truly in awe of you, I see you as completely above and beyond me; independence is the last thing on my mind. Awe compels me to abandon my sense of separateness in the face of your overwhelming presence.

Yirah: A Relationship Between Sight and Awe

The Torah presents the *Akeidah* as an episode in which Abraham is said to have demonstrated awe of the Almighty. At the climax of the *Akeidah*, an angel addresses Abraham and tells him: עָתָה יִדְעָתִי כִּי יִרְאֵ אֱלֹקִים אֶתָּה —

(Gen. 22:12). Abraham’s passing of the *Akeidah* test is cast in terms of his willingness not to “withhold” the child from the Parent who wants Isaac with Him.

“Now I know that you are **in awe of God**”¹⁰ (Gen. 22:12). But the careful reader will note that this is not the first time the text of the *Akeidah* uses that particular word. It has appeared earlier, albeit in a different form.

Interestingly, one of the three-letter combinations that appears over and over again in the story of the Binding of Isaac is *yod-resh-alef*.¹¹ Earlier in the story, though, this combination of letters meant something else. It invariably meant “to see.” By way of example:

בְּיוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וַיִּשָּׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת עֵינָיו וַיִּרְא אֶת הַמָּקוֹם מֵרָחוֹק:	On the third day, Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the place from afar.
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Genesis 22:4

But at the end of the *Akeidah*, the same combination of letters suddenly means “to be in awe of,” as in the verse we saw above. The Torah thereby seems to be signaling a connection, of sorts, between the experience of being in awe, on the one hand, and seeing, on the other.

What is the nature of this connection? Well, think, for a moment, of something that might leave you awestruck. And now consider how sight might affect that experience. Let’s say you *see* that something from up close. Would you say that you are *more* likely to feel awestruck by it, or *less* likely?

The answer probably is: it depends.

Some things leave me with a sense of awe on account of deception or illusion, like a magic trick, for example. I may find myself staring, with mouth agape, at a magician who pulls the card I’ve picked out of an un-sliced orange, but the magician will never perform the trick twice. He or she will never do the trick for me in slow motion. Because *if I observe it too closely I won’t be in awe of it anymore*. We can rightfully, then, call this

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- 10 An alternative translation: “Now I know that you fear God.” Both awe and fear have a certain commonality — seeing oneself as small in the face of something much larger or more powerful than oneself, except that fear includes the perception of threat in a way that awe does not.
- 11 Note: These *yod-resh-alef* combinations are not always permutations of the same root. In the first example, given above (awe), the *yod* is part of the root; however, in Genesis 22:4, quoted here, the same letter combination means “to see,” the root is different *resh-alef-chet* and the *yod* is a prefix.

fake awe. The awe is illusory, for the closer I see the thing, the more diminished my sense of wonder.

With true awe, however, the reverse is true. *The closer I see the thing, the more profound my sense of wonder.* Consider a human cell. View it under your average high-school-grade microscope, and it looks like no big deal. There's a little dot for a nucleus, some cytoplasm around it, and a little round cell membrane to hold it all together. But now look at it under an electron microscope, where each atom is the size of a tennis ball, where the cell as a whole seems to extend for miles, and where the manufacturing capacity of the system dwarfs that of New York City — and suddenly a sense of boundless wonder emerges. With true awe, the closer you look, the more speechless you become.

Awe, Sight, and God

And so it is with God, the Master of the Universe. For the most part, in this world of ours, God remains safely out of sight. Indeed, the Almighty is invisible to the human eye. A good thing, too, because the Torah tells us that a human being cannot truly see the Presence of God and survive the experience. But this invisibility also fosters certain illusions. We can, if we are not careful, overplay our hand in the world. We humans dominate other forms of life and are stewards of this planet, but we can easily succumb to the hubristic notion that we have ultimate power, that our “I” is entirely self-sufficient. That is a fiction made possible by God's being so difficult for us to perceive.

Other fictions are more subtle — like the notion that we can meet God on level ground, as it were, as if we were two co-equal, independent beings. Yes, we, like God, are beings possessed of free will, and hence, a certain kind of equality exists between us and the Master of the Universe — enough equality, perhaps, that the notion of our having a relationship with God characterized by love and mutual giving is not completely laughable. But the closer one comes to actually encountering God — the closer our brush with transcendence — the less our sense of independence becomes possible to maintain.

It is for that reason, maybe, that *yirat Hashem* is, perhaps, a double entendre. The phrase can be read as “awe of the Almighty,” on the one hand, and “seeing God” on the other. To encounter God as if one could see Him right there before you is to feel dumbstruck with awe. It is to feel a