

*Yirat Shamayim*  
*The Awe, Reverence,*  
*and Fear of God*

EDITED BY  
Marc D. Stern

Robert S. Hirt, Series Editor

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## **THE ORTHODOX FORUM**

The Orthodox Forum, initially convened by Dr. Norman Lamm, Chancellor of Yeshiva University, meets each year to consider major issues of concern to the Jewish community. Forum participants from throughout the world, including academicians in both Jewish and secular fields, rabbis, rashei yeshivah, Jewish educators, and Jewish communal professionals, gather in conference as a think tank to discuss and critique each other's original papers, examining different aspects of a central theme. The purpose of the Forum is to create and disseminate a new and vibrant Torah literature addressing the critical issues facing Jewry today.

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# 6

## What Are We Afraid of? Fear and Its Role in Jewish Adult Education

*Erica Brown*

*Yirat shamayim* – that mysterious co-mingling of religious awe, fear, and an exalted sense of the sublime – is becoming a more elusive aspect of spiritual life today. Religion for vast segments of the American population has become a feel-good hobby that generates harmony and happiness, community involvement, and lowers stress levels.<sup>1</sup> *Yirat shamayim*, however, is demanding. Fear of God involves another landscape of emotions entirely: humility, insecurity, submission, and surrender.

This sea-change in religious attitudes and expectations may best be described by a simple question posed by the art critic Michael Kimmelman. He wonders why we no longer paint pictures of mountains, why they no longer have a hold on us as a natural manifestation of religious dread.<sup>2</sup> He entertains the possibility that

the urbanization of society has made our attitude to mountains, among other awe-inspiring aspects of nature, less about fear and more about pleasure. Mountains are no longer wild, irregular, and asymmetrical natural structures that make us feel small through their vastness. Today we can cable-car or hike up mountains and then ski down them. We may even have cellphone reception at their peaks. It is hard to be in awe of something so easy to conquer.

Consequently, educators today rarely consider fear to be an active component of instruction. If anything, we are optimistic professionals who value ideas and will ply all the “tricks of the trade” enthusiastically. In Jewish adult education, specifically, educators aim for a satisfying class conversation with Jewish text at its center. Often we seek a dual outcome: a greater level of facility or familiarity with a written piece of our Jewish past coupled with an enhanced connection to the Jewish people generally and specifically with those in the room. Reflective educators keep up with research on adult education and consider practical applications of their research.<sup>3</sup> To achieve these ends, we sing and dance our texts so that we can bridge the theological and linguistic abyss between modern learners and ancient assumptions. These performance aspects of teaching have acquired a more pressing role in a culture of “edutainment,” where charisma and dynamism are highly praised in our instructors. Packaging and content today are closely aligned as priorities for good teachers. Often overlooked in this simple description is how much of this performance and teaching generally is unconsciously related to fear. Palmer Parker writes that, “From grade school on, education is a fearful enterprise.”<sup>4</sup> What is the fear that Parker so openly acknowledges is integral to the educational process?

This essay will not offer definitions of religious or educational terms.<sup>5</sup> It will, instead, use the first part of the expression *yirat shamayim* as a way to look at the role of fear in teaching – the fear of the learner and the fear of the educator, and only later connect that fear to the spiritual ends implied by the word *shamayim*.

Three educational fears will be addressed in this paper, with special emphasis placed on these fears in relation to but not limited to the adult education experience. Students fear learning, instructors

fear students, and educators fear their profession. Each of these statements appears counterintuitive and requires extensive unpacking. The only anticipated expression – students fear teachers – is noticeably absent. Why? Today, we have relinquished the Draconian measures once used in classrooms, namely physically beating knowledge into students and emotionally intimidating them. We have all heard stories of parents and grandparents hit by rulers, pinched on cheeks and ears and verbally pummeled by their instructors for not asking the right question or for offering the wrong answer. By and large, today's pervasive emphasis on educational self-esteem means that we have said goodbye and good riddance to this mode of learning. The most obvious of educational fears has been replaced by more subtle and elusive ones that are rarely analyzed in educational literature.

### **STUDENTS FEAR LEARNING**

Our first fear is a noble one if treated appropriately. Many adult learners are afraid of Jewish texts. They are afraid of the language and assumptions of traditional texts and also afraid to like them. Some teachers accommodate this fear of ancient texts; they believe that such texts cannot appeal on their own merit and must be dressed in modern idioms that stress relevance over authenticity.<sup>6</sup> We are afraid that texts left on their own will not be properly analyzed or understood or afraid that the language (Hebrew, Aramaic, or even halting English translations) will be an instant wall to learning. In its extreme form, we may fear embarrassment that is generated by certain texts and apologize for them;<sup>7</sup> in other words, we are afraid of teaching the texts as they are. Some of these fears have led to creative and elegant solutions. Others have stymied us from teaching naturally and comfortably. Some fears have stymied our adult students from appreciating Jewish teachings with their tensions and complexities.

Those of us in adult education must be trained to recognize these fears, and this section will put them on full display. The most overt of them is the fear of ignorance by those who have little acquaintance with Jewish texts, who are not quite sure why they are studying with us and who feel as insecure as if they had just stepped

back in time to early childhood. It is not the same fear as being cornered in an alley at gunpoint. Fear can be slippery. Yet fear of incompetence is an intense fear for adults, and we are not taught sufficient humility to encounter and confront the unknown of an inner world.

Adults sometimes enter learning situations apprehensively. They are not accustomed to feeling incompetent or ignorant. It is important that the learning atmosphere created by the teachers and other learners be accepting and affirming. Learners are to be accepted at whatever their entry point may be and respected for who they are and for wanting to learn and grow... There must be intellectual and emotional space in a learning environment to allow for growth and change.<sup>8</sup>

This fear can also be magnified by personal maturity and adult competence in other areas. Joseph Reimer discusses the adult process of “relearning” – going back to that which we may have studied as children as magnifying adult incompetence:

Jewish relearning can be very exciting because an adult may feel reconnected with his or her tradition in ways that allow one to feel more whole. At the same time relearning, and especially unlearning, may be threatening because it involves admitting how much one does not know, facing how unpleasant our initial Jewish education may have been and revising what may feel like our basic assumptions about Judaism. Adult Jewish learning is rarely an emotionally neutral event.<sup>9</sup>

Unless security cushions are put in place, educators risk losing adult students. Some years ago, two women in their fifties sat in the first class of a series I was giving at a JCC; one looked confused and neither returned the following week. The director of the program told me that there were too many Hebrew words in the class, words

loaded with religious assumptions. “Like what?” I asked, struggling with what I could have said that would have intimidated them since I so often simultaneously translate as I go along. “It wasn’t you. One of the other women in the class said *musaf* and it made them feel like they just didn’t belong.” One word, just one, moved two possible participants out of the room. Note that adults are not only looking for a relationship to their instructor; they are also gauging the appropriateness of the social context set up in the class. They are asking themselves, “Do I belong here?” The teacher’s sensitivity to translating terms and managing class conversations between students can make the difference between fear and friendship.

Adult resistance to learning can be a consequence of childhood associations and personal or professional stress.<sup>10</sup> The notion that study can be transformational often involves a sense of threat to current identity. R.E. Wickett in *Models of Adult Religious Education Practice* contends that adult learning is often to bring about social change, which can produce anxiety:

There are moments when adults perceive the difference between the world as it should or could be and the world as it is. Many learners will choose to learn in order to affect change in the world as they know it. These learners will frequently come together because the group will be able to accomplish more than any individual within the social context. The religious context of this type of learning should not be discounted... The impact of this form of learning on the faith community may be quite dramatic. The process of changing society may involve changes in the faith community which are exhilarating to some but threatening to others.<sup>11</sup>

Often it is not the language but the very act of being present that stirs powerful feelings of fear and inadequacy. Many adults are brought to a Jewish studies class by someone else. The power of the personal invitation is a key to enrollment in adult education classes generally. But the risk of the personal invitation is that there are often

people in every class who are there because someone else likes it or is willing to give it a try. The individual who is coming along for the trip at some point needs to make his or her own decision about whether to remain. This is based in part on the friendship and in large measure on the ability of the instructor to ease the way into a new and possibly frightening adventure. Adult instructors worth their salt do not ignore this fear of ignorance; they find respectful ways to address and even celebrate it. Lee Hendler, herself an adult educator who became Jewishly knowledgeable only as an adult, helps us understand the nature of this celebration:

For all new adult learners there is a moment of consciousness – when we suddenly acknowledge how ignorant we are of our tradition. In that moment we are incredibly vulnerable – on the verge of being able to receive wisdom or so frightened and overwhelmed by our inadequacies that we might deny them. We may all be inclined to mask or deny our vulnerability, but the admission is a magnificent moment of self-awareness that holds the potential for our adult Jewish liberation.<sup>12</sup>

From this perspective, our role as adult educators is not to deny, ignore or neglect the fear of our students but to acknowledge it openly and affirm ignorance as a moment of potential growth. Hendler writes that this “magnificent moment” when an adult first acknowledges ignorance has, “something sacred in it, pregnant as it is with remarkable potential for advancement and discovery.” But she worries that we put so many stumbling blocks in the way of these fragile learning situations that instead of openly inviting anyone to learn, we often imply that “only those who have prior knowledge need apply.”<sup>13</sup>

One such delicate encounter proved to be a powerful transformative moment for me as an adult educator, a moment when I felt the full wisdom of Hendler’s words. I was sitting in a well-established Reform synagogue social hall, among one hundred people in their twenties and thirties. The presenter distributed to all present a piece

of paper with one verse in English boxed on the top; the rest of the page was blank. The verse was from Genesis 28:16: "Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, 'surely God is present in this place and I did not know.'" Each of us was tasked with circling a troubling word in the verse, writing our name, and a comment on this word beneath the box. After one minute, we were told to pass the paper to our right where the next person would make a comment on our comment. The exercise was a wonderful way to have a written group-huddle around a piece of text that was speaking to each of us uniquely, while also offering insight into the function of commentary. The first minute was up, and the young gentleman to my left, who was dragged to the event by his girlfriend, passed me a blank sheet. "Aaron," I said, "nothing interests you in this verse?" He looked at me quizzically, "I don't get this. I don't know anything about the Bible. I never went to Hebrew school, and I just don't know what to do."

"Write that down," I replied.

"What do you mean? Write what?"

"Write down that you don't know."

"But that's not an answer. It's not even a question."

"But don't you see? It's O.K. not to know. Look at the verse. Jacob also did not know. It was the beginning of his own journey. Not knowing is the beginning of all knowledge."

This young man felt fear. He came to a Jewish event and felt vulnerable and inadequate. He didn't want to be there, and he did not feel comfortable with the task at hand. It reminded him of a Jewish education he did not have, of a community in the room he stood on the margins of, and of a table of people who could all do something that he thought he could not.

Lest we think that this fear is present only in those who are not Jewishly educated, let us remind ourselves that in practically any Orthodox Jewish grouping today, there are people who have varying levels of Jewish education. There are those who went to day schools their whole lives and those who became observant through a college Hillel. There are yeshiva graduates who have learned on the most advanced levels and those who sat through day school dreaming of basketball. There are women who have never seen a page of

Gemara, men who have only a fleeting knowledge of *Tanakh*, and men and women with every variation in between. Adult educators in the Orthodox community can rarely afford assumptions about the knowledge-base in a room full of people. If that is true then we have to acknowledge that fear may be a lingering element in any educational transaction.

In addition, there are other fears working independently and in parallel fashion for such adult learners: one is the fear of being the outsider. “Will I say something that will label me an outsider in this classroom or will my ignorance of a basic Jewish concept, book, ritual, belief, etc. affirm that label?” Barry Holtz acknowledges that definitions of a Jewish “insider” may be exhaustive, and, thereby, can minimize self-confidence even among those labeled or perceived as insiders by others:

To be an “insider” in Judaism, one needs first and foremost to master at least one language (Hebrew) in its various historical permutations ranging from biblical texts to the latest editorials in the Israeli press. One needs to know in addition to the choreographic movements of synagogue ritual (when to sit or stand or bow or sing), the skills of daily and festival practices, all of which insiders perform with a kind of second-nature ease. Add to that the musical tropes for the public readings of Torah and prophets, the languages that Jews have used both for religious and secular purposes over many centuries and the bits of knowledge that insiders always seem to have at hand – historical facts, aphorism and quotations, and so on – and it is no wonder that the challenge for education seems almost overwhelming.<sup>14</sup>

Each aspect of Jewish knowledge that defies mastery may not be regarded as “neutral ignorance” but as a source of guilt and possible failure. “It’s terrible that I never learned Hebrew. I really should take a class.” “I went to a Jewish wedding and felt so stupid because I had no idea what was going on.” “I have never even opened a page of Tal-

mud.” In preparing a group of young professionals for an upcoming Federation mission to Israel, I asked participants to take a little I.Q. test (Israel Quotient) together; they rated their own knowledge of Israel in terms of language, culture, personal connections, financial support and knowledge of current events based on a series of written questions. When the exercise was complete, I asked them by a show of hands how many of them felt badly about the score they gave themselves. Almost every hand in the room shot up. “Why?” I asked. “Would you have felt uncomfortable if we were preparing for a trip to an exotic location in Africa and you didn’t know much about the language and culture?”

“But it’s different,” one young woman replied. “We’re *supposed* to know.”

Just how much are we supposed to know? We have no clear markers, despite strong intuitive feelings that we never know enough. Jewish guilt – emphasizing that we are not good enough because we do not know enough – can be a wonderful motivator, but it can also be a remarkable source of distance and intimidation. Jewish adult educators engage in risky behavior when using ignorance as a repeated “tool” to leverage Jewish study. There are limits to how much any of us are willing to invite the full weight of ignorance into our mental landscape without the accompanying paralysis. Adult educators beware.

The second adult fear is that knowledge will provoke behavioral change; since change precipitates anxiety, there is a natural suspicion of Jewish text and value teaching lest it generate change. Once we are knowledgeable, theory may turn into practice. Learning stimulates us to think more expansively and openly and change our ideas, opinions and possibly, our way of acting in the world. As John Dewey writes in *Education and Experience*:

Experience does not go on simply inside a person. It goes on in there, for it influences the formation of attitude of desire and purpose. But this is not the whole of the story. Every genuine experience has an active side which changes in some degree the objective conditions under

which experiences are had.... When this fact is ignored, experience is treated as if it were something which goes on exclusively inside an individual's body and mind. It ought not to be necessary to say that experience does not occur in a vacuum.<sup>15</sup>

Yet the very source of anxiety for a student can make an adult educator feel wonderfully accomplished; adult learners have really taken us seriously. Our students are not only listening; they are *really* listening. They are *doing* things differently. For educators associated with *kiruv* [outreach] organizations, behavioral change is regarded as the barometer of success. Michael Rosenak, in his chapter, "The Scholar, the Believer and the Educator" draws attention to the fear that is generated for the student that should become a source of caution for the educator:

Secular Jews fear the "hidden ideology" of a religious discussion (i.e., the view that Judaism is a religion), whereas religious Jews suspect academic attempts to reduce religion to culture (i.e., the view that it is not "really" a religion).<sup>16</sup>

Hidden ideologies are rarely welcome. Adults appreciate direct communication and an understanding of the teacher's reason for teaching. When teachers have a secret agenda to make adult students observant, they often minimize the very impact of what they *are* teaching because of the fear of change that their adult learners feel. Adults feel respected when they are able to explore ideas and draw their own conclusions without having conclusions drawn for them.

These two fears, the fear of being an outsider and the fear of change, work against each other in ways that inhibit authentic learning. The desire to be an insider – to use the right language in the right contexts – is mitigated by the fear that being an insider will demand a change of behavior to mimic the behavior of insiders. I want to learn to be part of a collective that eludes me, but if I do, I may need

to change myself to be a more authentic part of that collective. When educators deal with this dialectic openly with their students, they invite a more profound quality of learning in their classrooms.

### **TEACHERS FEAR STUDENTS**

Teachers fear students. On first blush, this makes no sense. Teachers do not fear students; if they did, they would never become teachers. They would become paralyzed every time they walked into a school by an irrational trepidation that would make them forego the profession. Yet, teachers *are* afraid of their students. They may be afraid that they will not keep a student's attention. They are afraid of not being liked. They may be afraid of what students say behind their backs or to their faces in front of others. They may be deathly afraid of difficult students who challenge their authority or competence in front of others. They may fear that their students do not really respect them. In this age of self-esteem and consumerism, teachers can easily be made to feel afraid of parents. When not sufficiently protected by administrators, a teacher's competence can be called into question for relatively minor "offenses" or judgment calls. The fear of losing a student, tarnishing his or her attitude to Judaism or even losing tuition dollars can be a strong motivator for administrators to pressure teachers to rethink grades or opinions.

Two specific teaching fears will be presented here, as they relate to adults. The first is a relatively superficial fear that requires experience and technical competence to overcome. The other is a profound fear that may never be mastered. The first is the fear of the difficult adult student. The second is the fear that we as educators are imposters. We are not who others think we are. The difficult adult student is, I believe, an undiagnosed fear for adult teachers. Difficult students challenge our ability to manage a class. Since educators cannot discipline a difficult adult student by calling parents or a principal, reminding them vigorously of the "homework" or testing their mastery of the subject, we keep this problem to ourselves and often suffer in silence. We all know the signs of difficult adult students, but no one is really talking about the problem in a deliberative way. The challenging adult student can be so by virtue of any

number of qualities. An adult learner can be considered a difficult student if he or she:

- Dominates class discussion or needs to be the center of attention.
- Shares strong opinions worded in an offensive way.
- Has obvious emotional baggage and is there for emotional support and not for the subject matter.
- Claims directly or indirectly to know the subject better than the teacher.
- Has a hygiene problem, nervous ticks or overt health issues that alienate other participants.
- Continuously challenges the knowledge or assumptions of other adult learners in the room.
- Arrives perpetually late and enters the room with a crescendo of noise, breaking up a learning atmosphere.
- Tries repeatedly to move the subject to an area of personal interest.

This is the short list. The variations and combinations are virtually endless. Why, though, should a teacher be afraid of such students? Within moments, any or all of these problems are glaringly obvious to everyone in the room. No one faults the teacher. Or do they? The teacher is not held responsible for another adult's behavior but is held responsible for *managing* that behavior. The lack of self-consciousness on the part of the student turns into acute self-consciousness on the part of the teacher.

This dynamic may be best compared to a manager in a corporate environment whose job is to make sure that people are working efficiently and to task. The manager minimizes distractions, solves problems, encourages results and massages bad tempers so that the outcomes desired will be achieved. The teacher is the manager in a classroom. His or her response to a difficult student will be regarded as a sign of competence or incompetence. Because a difficult student can stand in the way of creating a community of learners and get in the way of learning itself, teachers fear that these difficult students

will show the rest of the class – as they so often do – their own incompetence as a classroom manager.

We have all had such students. Many of us have them on a regular basis. Years ago, I remember getting stomachaches every Monday afternoon before a series of classes dominated by two adult women. One woman constantly corrected me and the other used the class as a way to work out her own “Jewish aggression,” tensions she had about her Jewish past. Our subject was *Tanakh*, and there was little room for either of these voices with a very packed syllabus. I could sense the squirming of others and the rolling of eyes each time either of these women opened her mouth. The irony of the class was that each woman, separately, asked me after class to do something about the other. More than the subject, this management challenge occupied my attention for an entire semester. I devoted a great deal of reflective time to finding and making a mental list of effective techniques for stopping each woman’s behavior from hijacking a potentially wonderful educational exchange. I discovered the gifts of using humor, body language, small group work, polite phone or after-class personal interactions (Let’s discuss this later. Here is my contact information.), and direct and firm requests to get back on track. Other adult learners appreciated my efforts to keep the learning space clear of inappropriate distractions. They supported my role as manager so that I could go back to my role as teacher.

We have all had moments when we thought that a sign of good teaching is getting the worst participant in the room to perk up and take note of our intelligence, our creativity, or interesting presentation. We measure ourselves by the interest or lack of it in one difficult person in the room. But we cannot afford to concentrate on one person and ignore the learning needs of the others; they have just as much of a right to learn as those who challenge us. Fear of particular students can make teachers do very foolish things in a classroom. The need to impress the most difficult of people is not a teaching issue, it is a matter of personal ego. Without any research to support this thesis, I am always struck by how much new teachers want to display their knowledge and creativity – look at how smart I am – and how much veteran teachers move the focus to the

learners – what will help them learn the most. Teaching is not about making other people be wowed by our brilliance; it is about finding the right balance between study and discussion around interesting material that helps students learn better.

### **EDUCATORS WHO FEAR TEACHING**

In 1978, two researchers studied a group of successful women and coined the phrase, the “imposter syndrome,” to describe a set of doubts and inadequacies that did not match the actual competence of the women studied. These individuals were highly capable but, nevertheless, were afraid to be “found out.” Someone would catch on to the fact that they were not really that talented or smart or competent.<sup>17</sup> The authors make recommendations for overcoming this fear and acknowledge how pervasive and ultimately untrue this fear is among successful individuals. Perhaps the fear is best distilled in a joke. “What do you call an imposter ten years from now?...Boss.”

Imposter is a strong and morally loaded term, and therefore, may not adequately describe the nuanced sense of self-generated insecurity felt by many educators. Jewish educators can add another layer to this syndrome because, like any other instructor of religion, the role modeling expectation is profound.<sup>18</sup> In that case, we may not really be the role models of religious “best practices” that we have set ourselves up to be. Michael Rosenak presents questions that those who recruit teachers must answer with conviction and confidence:

Is a specific conviction or life-style a pre-requisite for teaching in a religious school? If so, will this be a requirement for instructors in all subjects or only for teachers of subjects stipulated as “religious?” Or does it suffice for the teacher to have a firm intellectual grasp of the tradition, its texts and its recommended experiences?

If a teacher is committed to religious practice and has religious conviction, is doctrinal conformity required or merely commitment to using the community’s theological language? Does commitment to a religious life-style

require that the teacher be loyal to its *details* or “only” to its principles?<sup>19</sup>

In adult education, these fears can be more subtle and elusive. The adult classroom can be a more honest place for a teacher to admit ignorance or discuss a challenging life situation in the company of peers without fear, but every time we stand up in front of a room to expose ideas, we are also exposing ourselves and making ourselves vulnerable in the process. The fear of this vulnerability is intense and we do many things to overcome, control or disguise it.

After thirty years of teaching, my own fear remains close at hand. It is there when I enter a classroom and feel the undertow into which I have jumped. It is there when I ask a question – and my students keep a silence as stony as if I had asked them to betray their friends. It is there whenever it feels as if I have lost control: a mind-boggling question is asked, an irrational conflict emerges, or students get lost in my lecture because I myself am lost. When a class that has gone badly comes to a merciful end, I am fearful long after it is over – fearful that I am not just a bad teacher but a bad person, so closely is my sense of self tied to the work I do.<sup>20</sup>

This honest confessional speaks to two fears: the fear of inadequacy as a teacher that emerges when we have not mastered our material or figured out a way to present it coherently and compelling. But there is another fear here that is profoundly entangled in identity formation: am I a fake? Am I good at what I do? Do I dare ask myself that question?

Because teaching is so closely aligned with being for many educators, these questions are more troubling than mere professional angst. For Jewish studies teachers the issue of fear may be compounded by institutional loyalties. We may find ourselves teaching to please our administrators and thereby saying or intimating

things that we don't ourselves believe to be true. We may find our work environments mediocre but without any means of disassociating ourselves with mediocrity, we become afraid that others will assume that we are our institutions. In more academic contexts, the fear of not getting tenure and not achieving professional security can hijack one's mental space. For others, the fear of not being brilliant enough to impress colleagues and justify one's position can be intense. But again, this fear needs to be mined for all that it can do to raise the bar on good teaching and prevent it from distracting us professionally.

My fear that I am teaching poorly may not be a sign of failure but evidence that I care about my craft. My fear that a topic will explode in the classroom may not be a warning to flee from it but a signal that the topic must be addressed. My fear of teaching at the dangerous intersection of the personal and the public may not be cowardice but confirmation that I am taking the risks that good teaching requires.<sup>21</sup>

The fear of asking ourselves if we are good enough should be eclipsed by the bigger fear of educators who do not ask that question, who are not sufficiently humbled by their work to ask if they are good enough. We have once again changed a fear into a potential strength. The fear of the adult learner that he or she does not know enough has metamorphosed into the beautiful sacred moment of transformation. The fear of the adult educator that he or she is not living up to a set of ideals forces an internal questioning that promotes reflection and professional growth. We cannot be afraid of fear. We have to harness it. It is telling us something.

### **TURNING FEAR INTO *YIRAT SHAMAYIM***

A discussion of fear in adult education will miss the mark if it does not turn into a reflection on *yirat shamayim*. We have identified the fears: the student's fear of the text, the teacher's fear of the student,

and the teacher's fear of teaching. Now we must connect them to heaven.

D.H. Lawrence, in his poem "The Old Idea of Sacrifice," muses on the nature of giving up something of ourselves for a higher purpose:

Sacrifice is the law of life which enacts  
that little lives must be eaten up into  
the dance and splendor  
of bigger lives, with due reverence and acknowledge-  
ment.

*Shamayim* is the "dance and splendor of bigger lives." It means placing God above us at all times, valuing the expansiveness of a spiritual life and sacrificing to have that expansiveness. It takes work; it involves loss.

There are practical reasons that this expansiveness is not highlighted in the adult education classroom. The emphasis on covering material rather than discussing it, the awkwardness the teacher feels in using terms like "fear" and "sacrifice" in the adult classroom,<sup>22</sup> and the simple lack of time provided for reflection:

One of the most frequently reported lamentations of learners after they have experienced a formal educational course is how the richness of the experience was reduced so drastically by their being forced to do too much in too short a time. Teachers seem to err in favor of breadth over depth, no doubt because of frequently being constrained by the need to fit learners into a series of institutionally prescribed, progressively taken curricula teachers rush through masses of content...the "mulling over" period is neglected.<sup>23</sup>

Considering these issues as practical recommendations may create some desired changes that stimulate more thinking about *yirat*

*shamayim*. More than any particular technique, however, is the need for fear to be more openly acknowledged in the adult classroom. Harnessing the fears described above and using them as a portal into the inner landscape of teaching both requires and generates humility. To me, humility is at the heart of *yirat shamayim*. It is humility that makes us tremble during *U'netaneh Tokef*, cower before the majesty of nature, think twice – three times – before bending our integrity or transgressing a commandment. *Yirat shamayim* for adults must be more than the fear that lightening will strike us when we do something wrong. As we mature, that lightening rod must be activated within us, not outside of us. As we muse over texts and traditions, we are nurturing an internal barometer that allows us not to fear less but to fear more.

Jewish adult education at its finest attenuates adult learners to be exquisitely sensitive to the call of the spirit, to the presence and needs of others. It inculcates profound reverence for good teaching and humility before sacred texts. It makes us afraid because we may have to change the way we think and the way we act; that fear is a great blessing and prevents the onset of moral and spiritual stagnation. This is critical for the Orthodox community that often – and often falsely – characterizes itself as a spiritual denomination when, in actuality, it nurtures a sense of superiority to other forms of Jewish observance which can undermine genuine spiritual growth.

...moral concerns are often not as great as they should be in the religious community...Judaism is often transmitted to children not as a *moral* way of life but as non-rational habits which become a social way of life. Many children raised in observant environments come to observe Jewish law not from an appreciation of the laws' moral and spiritual bases, but out of simple habit, out of fear of being "caught" violating a law, and because everyone around them is doing it. They are not taught to observe Jewish laws with the intention of becoming moral through them, and the laws, therefore, cease to have the morally elevating effect which they are meant to have.<sup>24</sup>

We can substitute “moral” in this passage with “spiritual” and arrive at the same conclusions. The admission that we value habituation over growth is a painful one, but one at the core of any discussion of *yirat shamayim* in education.

The ineffable dimensions of learning discussed in this paper tell us something very important about fear of heaven. Fear must not be treated as a pejorative word. We must take it out of the old religious lexicons, dust it off, hold it up and acknowledge its integral role in promoting personal growth and a deepening relationship with God. Fear of heaven can only be discussed in adult education when we can talk about fear unabashedly and acknowledge the fears in the heart of every student. But no teacher can discuss the fear of the student without first examining his or her own fears as an educator. The fear of failure, the fear of being inauthentic, the fear of not living up to our own truest selves – these are the fears that when confronted honestly allow us to fear heaven with increased humility.

In Exodus 20, in the aftermath of the giving of the Decalogue, the children of Israel stood at a distance from the smoke covered mountain. Moses explicitly addressed their fear of approach. *Be not afraid; for God has come only in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may ever be with you, so that you do not go astray.* Fear is important. Do not be afraid of this emotion. Moses could not convince them. He could only do what they would not: *So the people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was.* Moses entered the *arafel* – the murky, diaphanous fog that God occupied. Moses anticipated fear, spoke of it explicitly and then, when rejected, confronted it alone. As educators, we can address fear and create safe space to learn, but ultimately, we can only experience *yirat shamayim* without the company of our students.

## NOTES

1. Multiple studies have arrived at these conclusions. For a useful overview, see Robert Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (New York: Seabury, 1975) and Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven Tipton, *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 219–49. See also James Davison Hunter, *American Evangelicalism* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1983) and Theodore Caplow, *All Faithful*

- People: Change and Continuity in Middletown's Religion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).
2. Michael Kimmelman, *The Accidental Masterpiece* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), pp. 66–67.
  3. Lee S. Shulman, “The Practical and the Eclectic: A Deliberation on Teaching and Educational Research,” *Curriculum Inquiry*, 14:2 (1984), pp. 183–200 and Donald Schon, “How a Reflective Practicum Can Bridge the Worlds of University and Practice,” *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1987), pp. 305–26.
  4. Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), p. 36.
  5. For a discussion of definitions relevant to the world of education, see Israel Scheffler, “Definitions of Education,” *The Language of Education* (Springfield, Illinois: Charles C. Thomas Publishers, 1968), pp. 11–35.
  6. For more on this tension, see the section on “text” in Seymour Fox, “The Art of Translation” in *Visions of Jewish Education*, eds. Seymour Fox, Israel Scheffler, Daniel Marom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 265–70.
  7. For more on this, see Sol Schimmel, “Some Educational Uses of Classical Jewish Texts in Exploring Emotion, Conflict and Character,” *Religious Education*, Vol. 92, no. 1 (Winter 1997), pp. 24–37 and, by the same author, “Ethical Dimensions of Traditional Jewish Education,” *Studies in Jewish Education*, Vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1983), pp. 91–111. For a view of this issue from an adult education perspective, see Meredith Woocher, “Texts in Tension: Negotiating Jewish Values in the Adult Jewish Classroom,” *Journal of Jewish Education*, Vol. 70 (Summer 2004), pp. 22–31.
  8. Roberta Louis Goodman, Betsy Dolgin Katz, *The Adult Jewish Education Handbook* (Denver: A.R.E. Publishing, 2004), p. 67.
  9. Joseph Reimer, “Toward a Theory of Adult Jewish Education,” *Pedagogic Reporter* (January 1990), p. 23.
  10. See Patricia Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994), p. 7.
  11. R.E.Y. Wickett, *Models of Adult Religious Education Practice* (Birmingham, Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1991), p. 14.
  12. Lee M. Hendler, “In the Beginning...Lessons for Adult Learners,” *Sh'ma* 28/550 (March 1998), p. 3. See also Lisa Grant and Diane Tickton Schuster, “The Impact of Adult Jewish Learning in Today's Jewish Community,” a UJC synopsis (September, 2003) in *A Journey of Heart and Mind: Transformative Jewish Learning in Adulthood* (New York: JTS, 2004) and B. Kegan and L.L. Layeh, “Adult Leadership and Adult Development: A Constructionist View,” *Leadership: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. B. Kellerman (Englewood, 1984). See also. Observations made by Steven Cohen and Aryeh Davidson in their report for J.T.S. and the Florence G. Heller/JCCA Research Center: “Adult Jewish Learning in America: Current Patterns and Prospects for Growth” (December 2000).

13. Ibid, 1.
14. Barry W. Holtz, "How Do Adults Learn? The Catholic-Jewish Colloquium and the Possibilities for Personal Transformation," *Religious Education*, Vol. 91, 4 (Fall 1996), p. 577.
15. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1974), pp. 39–40.
16. Michael Rosenak, *Commandments and Concerns: Jewish Religious Education in Secular Society* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1987), p. 85.
17. To learn more about this research, see Dr. Pauline Rose Clance, *The Imposter Phenomenon: When Success Makes You Feel Like a Fake* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986). She did the original research that coined the phrase with Suzanne Imes.
18. For more on this issue, see, by this author, "Sincerity and Authenticity in Teaching," *The Torah u-Madda Journal* (November 2002–2003), pp. 264–72 and the references cited.
19. Rosenak, p. 86.
20. Palmer, p. 36.
21. Palmer, p. 39.
22. For more on the use of religious terminology in adult teaching, see, by this author, "Religious Language and Modern Sensibilities: Teaching the *Akeidah* to Adults," *Wisdom from All My Teachers*, eds. Jeffrey Saks and Susan Handelman (Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2003), pp. 213–28.
23. Michael Galbraith, *Facilitating Adult Learning – A Transactional Process* (Malabar, Florida: Krieger Publishing Co., 1991), p. 44.
24. Denis Prager and Joseph Telushkin, *The Nine Questions People Ask about Judaism* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1986), pp. 72–3.

