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FROM THE PAGES OF TRADITION

AVRAHAM ELIYAHU KAPLAN'S "BE-IKVOT HA-YIRAH": STEPS TOWARD THE FEAR OF HEAVEN

In 1889, at the age of 32 or 33, Rabbi Avraham Eliyahu Kaplan died suddenly, a few months before the birth of his son, who was named after him. The orphan was raised mainly by his maternal grandparents. Educated in the *yeshivot* in Kelm and Telshe, Lithuania, he grew especially close to Rabbi Natan Zvi Finkel, the "*Saba* of Slobodka" (1849-1927). In time, he grew into one of the geniuses in the Slobodka yeshiva and aspired to write a commentary on the entire Talmud.¹

It is said that, in 1914, at a *sheva berakhot* of another Slobodka genius, Rabbi Aharon Kotler, after the groom delivered a long and complex halachic discourse, R. Kaplan stood up on the spot and retold the entire discourse—in poetry and song. He missed not a single, subtle point.²

R. Kaplan had wide interests: Talmud (both halakha and *aggada*), *Tanakh*, *musar*, music (instrumental and vocal), literature, pedagogy, and poetry. In 1920, because of his talmudic expertise and broad interests, and because of his winning personality, he was called to the Hildesheimer Rabbinical Seminary in Berlin. After the death in 1921 of the seminary's rector and leading halakhist, Rabbi David Zvi Hoffman, R. Kaplan succeeded him as head of the Talmud department. In the space of two years, 1922-1924, R. Kaplan published the first pieces of his projected

¹ Biographical data on A.E. Kaplan (the son) are taken from Avraham Eliyahu Kaplan, *Be-Ikvot ha-Yirah* (Mossad HaRav Kook, 1988), esp. 3-4, 7-8, and *passim*; and from Marc Shapiro, *Between the Yeshiva World and Modern Orthodoxy: The Life and Works of Rabbi Jehiel Jacob Weinberg, 1884-1966* (Littman Library, 2007), 89-91.

² Nathan Kaminetsky, *The Making of a Godol: A Study of Episodes in the Lives of Great Torah Personalities* (Jerusalem, 2002), 1259-1260.

commentary on the Talmud and wrote literary criticism, poetry, and *musar*. He strengthened talmudic studies at the seminary dramatically. Evidence of this included the significantly higher number of seminary students whom he motivated to enroll in an East European yeshiva as part of their studies. In 1924, Rabbi Kaplan died suddenly—like his father before him. He was 34 years old.

Those who expressed deep mourning upon his passing included the rabbinic eminences, Yisrael Meir Kagan (the Hafetz Hayyim), Abraham Isaac Kook, and Isser Zalman Meltzer. At a young age, R. Kaplan's mind, heart, and pedagogical leadership had penetrated the highest levels of rabbinic scholarship and authority.

After R. Kaplan's death, many of his writings were gathered in one volume, *Be-Ikvot ha-Yirah*.³ The title was taken from its opening chapter, on *musar* generally and Fear of Heaven specifically. This chapter, translated below for the first time, reflects a decisive sense of confidence in the potential of Fear of Heaven and of the pitfalls in shunning it. The essay amounts to a commanding gesture. It is replete with allusions and references to Jewish sacred literature, summoned naturally, not in order to substantiate the argument, but simply, seamlessly, as part of the essay. R. Kaplan internalized the Torah in its many and varied branches.

The essay has a double fulcrum. On the one hand, threads of systematic thinking run through it, perhaps reflecting R. Kaplan's cultural exposure. On the other hand, it reflects the penchant of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter and his early disciples to avoid systematic thought in favor of metaphor and arresting expression. Sometimes the presentation is disjointed, designed to pull one up short, to catch one's attention, to compel scrutiny, in order to stimulate personal response and ultimately behavioral change. R. Kaplan's essay cannot be profitably read with the expectation of finding a thesis, coherently developed and carefully distilled. His essay, typical of many Salanterian writings, requires "soul work." It needs to be read a piece at a time (the discrete sections not necessarily identified as such), then re-read, perhaps several times, until the reader himself identifies the link between one piece and another (the two not necessarily adjacent). This is reinforced by the author's assumption that he is engaging in a dialogue or debate with the reader, and that the reader reacts in a certain way to his words, which then calls for a counter-reaction by the

³ *Be-Ikvot ha-Yirah* has been published in three editions by Mossad HaRav Kook: first edition 1960 (218 pp.); an expanded edition in 1988 (299 pp.); and in a slightly revised edition in 2018 (312 pp.). The translation below relies on the 1988 edition, pages 11–17. See Shapiro, n. 1.

author. Conversely, the reader often presumes that a seemingly inevitable phrase or conclusion is about to follow, yet it is not there. The reader must supply it himself.⁴

Through all these rhetorical and pedagogical devices, the reader grapples with the subject matter. The Salanterian literary effort, employed by R. Kaplan, is designed to render the reader an active participant, almost a partner, in its authorship, rather than a passive, edified recipient.

Beyond structure, the substance of R. Kaplan's essay reflects the second stage in the *musar* development of his teacher, the *Saba* of Slobodka—namely, the emphasis on the power of the human being to ascend spiritually.⁵ Also occupying R. Kaplan (and, contrary to popular image, the *Saba*, too) is a stark, unapologetic “seeing” (as R. Kaplan called it)—a direct fear of Divine punishment.⁶ Into all this R. Kaplan interweaves an approach all his own. Fear of Heaven, he is at pains to describe and prescribe, is a sobering brace, symbiotically interwoven with joy, good cheer, and the language of holiness and insight. Together with subtlety and suppleness in his *musar* thought is the straightforwardness, indeed the bluntness, of his belief in the possibility of its actualization. From out of the author's vivid illustrations, penchant for the poetic, and preference for personal response, we may distill his message:

Fear of Heaven is easily misunderstood as anguish and depression, which the author colorfully describes in its physical manifestations. True Fear of Heaven is undeviating attentiveness to one's obligations to God. Like a father balancing a child on his shoulders, that attentiveness imparts a sense of security, of interlocked joy and trembling which are mutually intensifying, and should constitute the Jew on Rosh Hashana. Together, fear and trembling enable the healthy soul to skip over the many gaps between oneself and one's Creator and it nurtures repentance. That repentance enables one to circle back to the trait of undeviating attentiveness which imparts trust in God and His steady presence. Even so, hopelessness and despair must always be overcome. Ultimately, if the Jewish nation does not listen, the fault lies with those who lack the courage that true Fear of Heaven imparts.

⁴ For more on the Salanterian writing style see, Hillel Goldberg, “Israel Salanter's Suspended Conversation,” *TRADITION* 22:3 (1986); *idem*, *Illuminating the Generations: From the Middos of the Patriarchs and the Matriarchs to the Musar Thinkers of Our Time* (Artscroll, 1992), 8–9 (n. 1).

⁵ Dov Katz, *Tenu'at ha-Musar*, vol. 3 (Tel Aviv, 1967), 54, 95.

⁶ Katz, *ibid.*, 168–179.

The essay's poetic reflections on the ultimate passage of the spirit, on death and afterlife, strike the reader retrospectively as eerie, given Rabbi Kaplan's early demise, though no sense of premonition is detected.

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter himself spent most of the last twenty-five years of his life wandering around towns in Germany, trying to strengthen halakhic observance there.⁷ It is fair to say that *musar* did not take hold in Germany, neither under R. Salanter nor under its other traditional rabbis. While R. Kaplan's successor at the Hildesheimer seminary, Rabbi Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg, was a student of *musar* and, indeed, his essays on the topic constitute a primary source of the history of the movement, R. Weinberg's interest in *musar* later in his life was more academic than personal.⁸ For Rabbi Kaplan, *musar* was a personal, spiritual imperative and a basic, if informal, part of the seminary's curriculum. *Musar* was both a motivating factor for a student to attend an East European yeshiva and a spiritual discipline that was strengthened there. A moment of *musar* in Germany came under the tragically brief tutelage of a multifaceted talent. The present translation is a modest attempt to perpetuate the beautiful memory, noble insights, and lofty aspirations of Rabbi Avraham Eliyahu Kaplan *zt"l*.

Translator's note: R. Kaplan divided the essay into six parts, but the title of each is mine. Sometimes R. Kaplan cites his sources in the body of the text and sometimes not at all; I have relegated all citations to footnotes, although there are additional allusions to biblical, talmudic, and other sources not referenced here. Instances of ellipses appear in the original; they are part of the author's style, not an indication of a deletion from the original.

STEPS TOWARD THE FEAR OF HEAVEN

Let us seek serenity and pursue it, so that we know the origin point of Fear of Heaven and what prompts it. —Rav Yisrael Salanter z"l

The masses will not read my words. But I do not need the masses and the masses do not need me. Do they have time for the things that I am about to expound? At best, the masses will squeeze out a few moments for me before sleep, for a quick reading and a perfunctory approval, to be followed by a shrug of the shoulders and a superficial, somewhat exasperated

⁷ Immanuel Etkes, *Rabbi Israel Salanter and the Mussar Movement: Seeking the Torah of Truth* (JPS, 1993), chapters 16–17.

⁸ Y.Y. Weinberg, *Seridei Esh*, vol. 4 (Mossad HaRav Kook, 2003), 276–340.

response: “What is this one trying to teach us? Why do they publish such material anyway? It just rehashes well-worn ideas.”

Indeed, they are correct. I am not here to teach anything new. But woe to the person who only wants new ideas at a time when the old ones, the foundation of his life, are wearing thin with age, untended, unimproved, weakening, collapsing...

My words are for the few, the special. And there still are people like this in the Jewish world. People still subject to the influence of R. Yisrael Salanter, those who proceed on the trail of the Fear of Heaven to know what prompts it.

I. The Definition of Fear of Heaven: The Basis of Joy

When a father dances with his child on his shoulders

For most people life is mundane. But life can be sanctified by thought, which is assisted by language, which in turn cradles holiness, transfiguring and sanctifying deeds.

There are other types of assistance. One variety is expansive, full, open. Another variety is constricted, inferior, stingy. One who gives expansively, fully, and openly eventually satisfies; another, who gives in a constricted, inferior, and sparing way simply misleads, and to what gain? Sometimes one loses more than one gains.

Pure thought resides in a high place, hidden and humble. In its heart, pure thought prays, “Grant me the first type of assistance, full and open, since it will achieve great things; save me from constriction.”

Often the prayer of pure thought is not accepted—it falls into the constriction and its voice is unheard. At that moment its anguish is great, and its losses are great. The God of eternity is in eclipse! “Who is like You among the mighty—who is like You among the mute?”⁹

And there is a third type of assistance. It stretches beyond the second but does not yet reach the first. Its language is transparent-opaque: transparent from within and opaque from without. For itself and those admitted to its inner circle it is expansive and open. For others peering at its surface, not fathoming its ultimate knowledge, it possesses none of these traits, only their substitutes.

Within this middle ground—transparent-opaque—falls the thought process of Fear of Heaven.

For a person full of light, with radiance reaching from over the heads of prophets via the shoulders of sages to his faithful hands, language is

⁹ *Gittin* 56b.

sufficient. His language is rich and expansive, full and open. He can keep track of all of the movements in his mind and name them all. However, someone not full of light, as radiance is external to him, somewhat distant, has little of this [rich and expansive] language. It would have been better for him never to have known this kind of language, let alone to come forward to teach it. This is his loss: He knows the language that is rich and expansive, but not fully. He mistranslates it, seeing only a damaging inflection within every one of its terms, and cannot escape their malevolent effects.

For example, when one says to such a person, *yirah*, “Fear of Heaven,” the term inevitably conjures a person whose head is bowed, his forehead creased, eyes agape, left hand trembling and right hand beating the breast with hardened knuckles, chained knees, and ankles turned.

Such a person does not know that this stands in opposition to the true meaning as understood by one who knows well what Fear of Heaven is, what it means, from whence it springs, and what prompts it. No, he merely mouths his distortion and does not give it a second thought. He just speaks, and brooks no contradiction, not even Isaiah’s: “Can such be... what I choose? Can it be merely bowing one’s head like a bulrush, and wearing sackcloth and ash? Do you call this... a favor to God?”¹⁰

And Isaiah son of Amoz did not differ from Joel son of Petu’el, who cried out and said: “Return to me with all your heart, and with fasting and with weeping and with mourning.”¹¹ Yes, certain things require weeping and mourning, a head that is bowed, and sackcloth and ash. Yes, at certain times such things occur and our sins require this response. But these do not constitute Fear of Heaven in whole or in part. These only prepare one to accept it.

“When a person is in anguish due to his sins, what expression does the Divine Presence use? ‘Pain afflicts My head, pain afflicts My arm’.”¹² Anguish has no place in the community of those who fear Heaven. Fear of Heaven is not anguish, not pain, not bitter anxiety. Fear of Heaven is like a father’s concern for his little child when he is dancing with him on his shoulders. He is so careful that the child not fall. We have here incomparable delight and joy, all wrapped up in the sweet fear—taking care that the child not fall. Fear here does not hold the father back from dancing freely, and does not infect either of them with a scintilla of melancholy.

¹⁰ Isaiah 58:5.

¹¹ Joel 2:12.

¹² *Sanhedrin* 46a.

To the contrary, the fear of falling encourages them both, pervades them both. It is like the spine that stands them upright and provides stability. The fear of falling envelopes them, like a humble netting projecting charm and pleasantness. Fear extends life. It holds its own. "Fear of the Lord extends one's days."¹³

It is clear to a father whose child is firmly ensconced on his shoulders that this passenger of his will not fall, for the father keeps the child in his mind every moment. He does not take his mind off him for a second and is sensitive to the child's slightest movement, to prevent him from sliding or tipping sideways. The father is confident—and he dances and plays.

Likewise, it is clear to a person that if he bears his life in full on the heights of consciousness, not letting his life slip, not taking his mind off it even for a second—always attuned—then, with fear protecting him, his heart is secure. He dances and plays.

"And I played before the Lord."¹⁴

II. The Day of Fear of Heaven: Rejoicing and Trembling

The more a person is bent over, the higher he is

When the Torah was given to the Jewish people, seriousness and exaltation descended—intertwined, interlocking, inseparable. This is the secret behind "Rejoice with trembling."¹⁵ Dancing became partnered with justice; song united with judgment. "Lift up in song! Beat the drum! Sweet lyre with flute. Sound the shofar at the month [of judgment], on the first day of the month, our holiday, for it is a decree for Israel, judgment by the God of Jacob."¹⁶

This interlocking partnership of rejoicing and trembling, of joy and judgment, is not for the Jewish people alone, but for all the nations of the world as well. "Let the nations be delighted and burst out in song, for He will judge the nations fairly."¹⁷ And not only humanity, but also the environment: "Then all trees of the forest will burst out in song before the Lord, for He has arrived—arrived to judge the earth."¹⁸

¹³ Proverbs 10:27.

¹⁴ II Samuel 6:21.

¹⁵ Psalms 2:11.

¹⁶ Psalms 81:2–3.

¹⁷ Psalms 67:5.

¹⁸ Psalms 96:12, 13.

And not only below, but above as well: “[Celestial bodies] are delighted in their going forth and happy in their return, performing the will of their Creator with dread”¹⁹—delight and dread, intertwined.

And not only in theory but in practice: “R. Hanina and R. Joshua say: Which nation is like the Jewish nation, which knows the face of its God?... A defendant from the other nations dresses up in black and wraps himself in black and lets his beard grow unkempt and does not trim his nails because he does not know how his case will turn out. But Jews are not like this. They dress up in white and wrap themselves in white and trim their beard and nails and eat and drink on Rosh Hashana [judgment day] because they know that the Holy One, blessed be He, will work a miracle for them.”²⁰

They know this because they see His miracles every day, His wonders and favors every moment. These fortify intellectual conviction, enabling it to vanquish the vanities tethered to the human heart. No one could overcome them without God’s assistance.

“And, therefore, it is customary to take a haircut and to wash one’s clothing on the eve of Rosh Hashana, and to eat more than usual on Rosh Hashana. This is the correct response to those who [improperly] fast on Rosh Hashana.”²¹

And this is the correct response to those who are in anguish, in pain, on the great day of Fear of Heaven [Rosh Hashana]. Let a person fast on the eve of Rosh Hashana, and his fast will prepare him to accept Fear of Heaven, just as the fast on Yom Kippur prepares a person for a new life. Yom Kippur is the Day of Repentance and Mercy, when Fear has no foothold. Not so Rosh Hashana, the Day of Fear itself, the Day of Judgment. On Rosh Hashana, the more a person is bent over, the higher he is.²² Rosh Hashana is the day that places one’s Master right in his presence.

It is the Day of Remembrance, and there is no remembrance other than Fear of Heaven (on which more below).

However, Maharshal wrote: “Some ask: According to R. Hanina and R. Joshua, let a person take it one step further on Rosh Hashana and dress up in his best embroidery and nicest garments. But it seems that this

¹⁹ From the Shabbat morning *piyyut*, *El Adon*.

²⁰ *Tur*, O.H. 582, end.

²¹ *Ibid*.

²² R. Kaplan here cites R. Yehuda’s view that one should sound a rounded shofar on Rosh Hashanah. The Gemara says that a bent shofar teaches that the more a person bows on Rosh Hashana, “the better it is, *tefei me’ali*” (*Rosh Hashana* 26b). Rashi and Tosafot understand this to be a bowing of the body in submission (another text of the Gemara would have it be the bowing of the mind, the *da’at*, in obeisance). Apparently, R. Kaplan homiletically read *me’ali* as *me’ule*, yielding “when a person is bent over he is elevated.”

would not necessarily demonstrate his trust in God; perhaps he has no fear of the Day of Judgment at all... He is not worried... But a person who dresses up in white has his mind on the day of death or shows his desire for pardon, in the sense of ‘Let your sins, now scarlet, whiten like snow’ (Isaiah 1:18).”²³

Indeed, this is the balance, the marvelous complementarity: the thread of a noble Fear of Heaven, which weaves its way through rings of cheerfulness (do not forget, it is written, “Be cheerful before Him!”²⁴). This is the main element in the conscience of mankind, from one end to another—to graft together life’s unadulterated joys (eating, drinking, earning) to life’s ultimate passage (remembering the day of death)—producing fruits of Eternity!

Ascribe greatness to the garden that is Judaism.

III. The Acquisition of Fear of Heaven: Skipping Over the Gaps

Search Him out where He is found

A certain Swedish sage spoke about holiness. He said: “The holiness of the human being is evidence that he possesses the strongest possible direct relationship with the roots of existence.”

In my opinion, this point, put in Jewish terms, points to Fear of Heaven (granting that holiness is higher than fear, a matter whose exposition is beyond the present purview). What is Fear of Heaven? It is skipping over the immense gaps between me and my Creator, as it were. The search is not the essence (how can human beings search after God?), but, rather, the withdrawal [from smallness]. Take wing over the barriers—the partitions of steel erected by sin and foolishness that separate us from our Father in Heaven. The withdrawal of which I speak is the withdrawal from smallness. Fly over the barriers! Then, from there, search out God. It is from that vantage point that you shall find Him. “Search Him out where He is found”²⁵—and He is found nowhere but there. There, a straight line emanates from you to the imprint of His holiness. That line is not disconnected, not damaged, when one walks with dignity straight to Him, the singular master of the world.

Sort of like a circle surrounding its central point, the healthy soul rests around its source. And when that great moment arrives in that great, coming world, all intellectual achievements will fall into a circle, surrounding

²³ Maharshal, comment on *Tur*, O.H. 582, end; cited by *Bah* and *Perisha*.

²⁴ Psalms 68:5.

²⁵ Isaiah 55:6.

that essence, as everyone will see for himself—here it is! “In that great future, the Holy One, blessed be He, will make a circle around the righteous [and He will sit amidst them in the Garden of Eden], and each and every one will point Him out.”²⁶ Yes, this is the straight line, the true seeing, which we call “Fear of Heaven.”

“And Israel saw—and the people feared.”²⁷

That is why we spend so much time dealing with Fear of Punishment. It, too, is seeing things as they are. Yes, the expectation of the soul who sins cannot be other than that of a vineyard going up in flames. He who tries to avoid seeing his future ensnares only himself. Indeed it is so: “I will take away its [my vineyard’s] hedge, and it shall be eaten up.”²⁸ However, the grace that is repentance mends the breaches a person has created; still, how can one repent fully if he does not perceive the breach, the result of his twisted acts and the punishment awaiting them? Only when a person sees can he fear; and only when a person fears can he repent.

“And Israel saw the [punishing] hand—and the people feared.”²⁹

With that, we can attain that other fear, the awe of Divine Majesty, which is also, of necessity, seeing things as they are—a majestic seeing. “A lowly maidservant at the splitting of the Reed Sea saw that which even Ezekiel the Prophet did not see.”³⁰

From this vantage point one can “see straight,” through all the intervening prisms, to the root of existence. This is the inner seeing, transparent from within, steadily focusing a person on his responsibilities—that he take care not to fall, not to fail (see above, part I).

This level of seeing is linked to remembrance, and this remembrance is linked to carefulness, and this carefulness is linked to trust in God, and this trust in God is linked to strength, inner strength, daring, struggling upward (“God will give strength to His people”), and this strength is linked to peace, internal and external, in thought and deed (“God will bless His people with peace”³¹).

Indeed, this is the wisdom within life—and “the beginning of wisdom is the Fear of the Lord.”³² Fearing which is seeing, *yirah* which

²⁶ *Ta’anit* 31a.

²⁷ “And Israel saw the great hand of God against Egypt, and the nation feared the Lord, and believed in God and in Moses His servant” (Exodus 14:31).

²⁸ Isaiah 5:5.

²⁹ See note 27. The parenthesized interpolation in the original.

³⁰ *Mekhilta* on Exodus 15:2.

³¹ Psalms 29:11.

³² Psalms 111:10.

is *re'iyah*. “That you may see”—“that you may remember”—“I set the Lord before me steadily.” “And your remembrance of Him restores your soul, elevating you above the snares of this insensate earth.”³³ About a person who surrenders to those snares, it says: “You tossed Me behind your back.”³⁴

Such a person never saw. Never feared. Never remembered. Never set the Lord before him. Until... tossed behind your back. I would not say such a thing had the verse not given me the authority.

Awesome, this matter of man.

IV. The Stumbling Block to Fear of Heaven: Small-Mindedness

When you forget that you forgot how great you could become

... But even these matters can be tossed behind one's back.

Human beings know that the yearnings they express are neither new nor invented. Nevertheless, it is inaccessible and distant. This is a quandary, much pondered by experts. They struggle and struggle, but see how little they understand (“if you grind a fool in a mortar... yet his foolishness will not depart from him”).³⁵ Can I, a pygmy, succeed at that which giants have not succeeded?

However, I cry out to God! If only we could forget for just one moment this piece of wisdom: that everything already was, many thousand times over. Giants already spoke and pygmies already stuffed their ears shut. Nothing helps and nothing fructifies; there is no repair for a tempted and wayward heart. There is no escape from this confusion and no exit from this [suffocating] circle of smallness. If only we could forget this hopelessness for a moment!

It is possible to forget everything. Look how far forgetfulness reaches! “Guard yourself, lest you forget the Lord”³⁶... yet, we do not guard ourselves; we forget the Lord. Like a blind man groping along, unable to navigate exits or entrances, we appear to be creation's surprise failure. A wasted wonder, just floating along, sprouting in the air, neither uprooted nor rooted, forgetting where we came from and where we are going. It is possible to forget everything—save, singly, this insanity, this emaciating despair whose only constant is emptiness; the view that everything is of no use and no benefit, that everything that is already has been, many thousand times over; that I shall always be as I am now, and so too with

³³ Rabbeinu Yona, *Sha'arei Teshuva*, II, 1.

³⁴ I Kings 14:9.

³⁵ Proverbs 27:22.

³⁶ Deuteronomy 6:12, 8:11.

you and with him. Never changing. Without escape. No exit and no freedom...

If only we could forget this moment of hopelessness! For in forgetting this small-mindedness we may suddenly remember greatness. In destroying this despair, we may suddenly revive our souls. Yes, wickedness would perish, foolishness would perish. Yes, a bridge would arise between people, a ladder would arise between Heaven and earth.

Yes, forget this small-mindedness! You rememberers of God!

V. The Breakthrough to Fear of Heaven: “The Moment”

There is no generation more despairing than our own

A moment... thus I have spoken: “Who would give us the power to forget despair and small-mindedness for just a moment!” That one moment of forgetting that one can abandon hope is more glorious than all the times overcome by desolation. This one moment can achieve more than can be achieved over years. Let a person know: If he has this moment in hand, life is at his disposal. For if he spends many years preparing and expends countless days perfecting himself, his life will still not be complete—until this moment comes. [Overcoming despair] is a gift from God. Only through it does one become a human being, only through it is one transformed into a different person. Ascribe greatness to this moment [of letting go of despair]!

Every person of sound mind can remember (if he is honest) the essential moment of that great “today” when he attained clarity of understanding³⁷—permanently. Some earn their spiritual keep in one hour and others in many years; but either way this acquisition is progressive, it is a becoming—from “today” until more than thirty years later, from “today” until more than sixty years later—yet, the human self does not acquire its character until the coming of this moment.

However, one should not wait for it. If it tarries do not wait. Sometimes it takes too long to come: from “today” until after a crisis, from “today” until after life’s stages... one must be very concerned lest it be from “today” until after death. We should not wait until we are shamed—until we are left waiting eternally in vain [for not having reached this moment in our lifetime]... like armed soldiers, like men of valor, let us go out to greet the moment!

And if the moment does not arrive, let us create it!

³⁷ Hullin 7b; *amad al da’ato*.

"If they so desire, the righteous could create a world"³⁸—if they desire...

It is said about the Vilna Gaon, of blessed memory, that any person who heard him at *Kabbalat Shabbat* when he recited, "Today, if you heed His call,"³⁹ immediately repented.

Today! The moment! Immediately—and for all generations.

But when will this moment come? When will it be sought out? When will it be found? Such is the question in each and every generation. And there is no generation more despairing of the answer to this question—the question of when—than our own. Who knows...

But one thing I know. This answer is insufficient unless it pertains to humanity as a whole or to Jewry as a whole. [Even so, the answer starts with the individual.] The isolated individual, writing or reading these simple lines, can only answer the question with the answer of Hillel the Elder, "And if not now, when?"⁴⁰

Now. At once. Immediately—and for all generations.

"Yes, suddenly, I can feel the burden of all of my mistakes and crooked acts weighing me down—my tolerance of vanity and evil. Yes, suddenly, I can free myself from all of this burdensome suffering; I can stand up straight and lift up my head, prepare to go forward with powerful self-confidence, free and clear. Who can intervene? Yes, I can!"

These simple things—let a person speak to himself. Let the nations speak. Let the nation of Israel speak.

VI. The Program of Fear of Heaven: Beyond the Sins of Humility

When you sound the message in simple terms

And now, it is not pride that makes trouble for us, it is humility. "Those humble ones"—people without gumption, souls like widows, unsupported, insecure, without courage of conviction. Humility not for its own sake; rather, humility serves the laziness within despair, and of the despair within laziness. "The poor, satisfied with their portion"—that is, their spiritual portion. The Lithuanian Jew is satisfied with his magnificent apprehension of Torah; the Polish Jew—with his splendorous mysticism and lightning-flash *pilpul*; the Hungarian Jew—with his fanaticism for Torah and exactitude in his spiritual bailiwick; and the German

³⁸ *Sanhedrin* 65b. Thanks to Joel Unger for this reference.

³⁹ Psalms 95:7 (and see *Sanhedrin* 98a).

⁴⁰ *Avot* 1:14.

Jew—with his punctilious observance of *mitzvot* and well preserved intellectual horizon. The common denominator among them is that they are satisfied with little; each is in his own world, tranquil, quiescent, serenely asleep. Take a bad dream, ascending from the depth of exile, arousing us from our complacency; or a pleasant dream, descending from Heaven, breaking open constricted perspectives—neither has sufficient life force to awaken, to encourage, to sustain, to take us forward.

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to our first Patriarch: “Do not be afraid, Abram!”⁴¹ *Tanna de-Vei Eliyahu*: “One does not say ‘do not be afraid’ other than to one who fears Heaven truly.”⁴²

Someone proceeding on the trail of Fear of Heaven until he gets it will sense in his soul the great calling of God: Do not be afraid! Do not slacken! Do not be inadequate in your own eyes, nor humble in the eyes of others. Tithe that you become wealthy; travel among mankind. Be like your first Patriarch in the days of Nimrod—call out in the good name of God. Open an inn for wayfarers. Pray for Sodom and Gomorrah.

Then, when you face the Jewish community—even ascending onto a partisan, political stage—call out to the nation to renew its heart, to open it to His Torah, to fill it with love and fear of God—that’s right, use those simple terms. Sound these messages, straightforward and clear, unmaneuvered, unsarcastic, from every rostrum, to every attentive heart. Inform. Announce. Be informed. For we have but one slogan: Fear of Heaven and good deeds. That is to say: Judaism of Torah and *mitzvot* aspires to elevate the masses until they acquire stature, such that not a single failed or foolish thought can invade their consciousness. Then men and women of integrity will be educated and elevated, will emerge as serene and glad, holy and beautiful. Faith will be their conviction. Instability and vanity will be distant. They will dwell in peace and will love Eternity.

Naïveté, you say? Correct. He who is steeped in the rust of recent generations will put to me an even sharper accusation: Foolishness! Mere naïveté and foolishness, for fixing this kind of ideology as the communal agenda.

However, after someone whispers these dismissive words, you may whisper back: Only one whose heart is gripped by the clutches of despair can say such things.

We know well that the single redemptive solution to the material and spiritual crisis of our people is the healthy return to an elevated, Jewish fear [of Heaven]. What? Have we the right to be embarrassed before

⁴¹ Genesis 15:1.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 25:7. Thanks to Joel Unger for this reference.

TRADITION

mockers? Do we have the right not to declare openly the single solution: “Stand up, do it!”

Who promised that the nation will not listen to us? If it will not listen by the hundreds, perhaps it will listen by the tens. Who seduced us into denying the possibility of a tremendous group of ennobled Jews, including the youth, who will begin to truly and wholeheartedly steep themselves in the purification of heart and deed? Why not?

It is possible! And if it is genuinely impossible, there can be only one reason: We, the few, aspiring to these heights, deny the possibility of sustaining them.

No, the Jewish people are not empty—but if they are, that stems from you, the aspiring few. From you, not from the people. No, the Jewish people are not widowed, not divorced from the Edenic garden that is Judaism. The separation from God (the “divorce,” the “widowhood”) is within us, not within the people.