

Facing Our Fears

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Soon after leaving Aram, the home of Laban his father-in-law, along with his wives, children, and possessions, Jacob instructed messengers to go to his brother Esau in Edom and say: “Thus says your servant Jacob: With Laban I have sojourned and I tarried till now. And I have gotten oxen and donkeys and sheep and male and female slaves, and I send ahead to tell my lord, to find favor in your eyes” (Gen. 32:5–6). Upon returning, the messengers relate that Esau himself is coming to meet Jacob and bringing four hundred men!

Hearing this “Jacob was **greatly afraid**, and he was **distressed**, and he divided the people that were with him, and the sheep and the cattle and the camels into two camps. And he thought, ‘Should Esau come to the one camp and strike it, the remaining camp will escape’” (32:8).

Translators and commentaries have considered how to understand the apparent redundancy or superfluity of “greatly afraid” and “distressed.” Further, they ponder the trigger for these emotions, especially since Jacob had just received God’s assurances. Through the commentators’ responses to Jacob, we can learn about what drives our own emotional responses.

A Psychology of Fear

Rashi (Rabbi Shelomoh Yitzhaki, France, 1040–1105), who regularly addresses questions of superfluity, does not disappoint and makes a distinction between “fear” and “distress,” stating that Jacob “became frightened that he might **be killed** and distressed that he might **kill others.**” Rashi presents a psychology of one who is in a possibly dangerous situation and is doubly concerned: for his own life and for the ostensible ramifications of taking another’s life.

Fear for Self vs. Fear for Others

Beer Yitzhak (Yitzhak Horowitz d.1864, Yaroslav) expands upon Rashi’s interpretation, distinguishing further between the concern for one’s own life and the concern for taking the life of another:

“He [Rashi] resolved the issue of redundancy in his usual beautiful way: Fear and distress are both emotional reactions occurring as a result of some potentially troublesome outcome in the future. . . . Fear, however, is greater than distress. Therefore, he [Rashi] explained that fear is referring to the great(er) pain related to one’s [personal] misfortune in the future while concerning the misfortune of others the word distress is used. . . .”

Toledot Yitzhak (Yitzhak Karo, 1458–1535, Spain) offers a textual support for Beer Yitzhak’s interpretation, noting the lack of parallelism: “concerning the possibility that he might be killed, the text states that he [Jacob] ‘feared GREATLY’ while concerning the [possibility] of killing others the text did not state GREATLY distressed but simply distressed” since the act would be in self-defense. As the rabbis state, “if someone is coming to kill you, *hashkem lehorgo*, kill him first.” Nevertheless, as *Divrei David* (R. David Halevi Segal, 1586–1667, Ukraine, Poland) states, “it is still painful to him that by his own hand it comes to this.” Danger to oneself understandably causes the greatest fear, but killing another person is a traumatic event, even in self-defense or where otherwise justified by the circumstances.

Radak (R. David Kimhi, 1160–1235, Provence), on the other hand, disagrees with Rashi and the others stating that the two words—fear and distress—highlight the extreme nature of Jacob’s fear. The repetition is a stylistic device of emphasis rather than reflecting two different aspects of fear. His

comment is best reflected in the New Living Translation (NLT) where only one word, “terrified,” is provided in place of the two.

A Psycho-theological Interpretation of Fear

The Malbim (Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Mikhael Weiser, Russia, 1809–1879) takes a different approach and sees the two words as causally linked: “one who trusts in God has no need to fear humankind, meaning that fear indicates that one’s trust in God is not as it ought to be . . .” In Jacob’s case, “he was assured by God, he should not have feared . . . and once Jacob realized that he **feared**, it consequently **distressed** him . . .” In other words, Jacob was distressed because he realized that his fear of Esau indicated that his faith in God was deficient.

The Mei Hashiloah (R. Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izbica, Poland, 1801–1854) offers a psycho-theological interpretation similar to the Malbim’s. Commenting on Exod. 1: 21, “since the midwives feared God, He made houses for them,” the Mei Hashiloah notes that the midwives disobeyed Pharaoh’s command to kill the male babies, and that “when a person fears another person, he has no peace of mind. Fear of God, however, has within it a sense of peacefulness. The houses God made for the midwives are emblematic of peace of mind . . . and when [the midwives] experienced this sense of equanimity because of [their] fear of God, they had no fear whatsoever of Pharaoh’s decree.” This psycho-theological interpretation is a meaningful one on a theoretical level though implementing the lesson may be challenging; many of us tend to be overly concerned by the reactions and impressions of others.

A Psycho-political Interpretation of Fear

Keli Yekar (Shelomoh Efraim Luntschitz, 1550–1619 Poland, Prague) also addresses the question of why Jacob was afraid even “after God had promised him twice that He would protect him!” He suggests the answer can be found in the Talmudic passage “whoever flatters his friend, in the end will fall into his hand” (Sotah 41 b):

Jacob realized on his own that he had sinned by flattering the evil one [Esau] by saying ‘thus says your servant, Jacob’ and by addressing Esau as ‘my lord’ by way of flattery; he therefore feared because Jacob knew such is the way of those who flatter an evil one:” in the end they fall into his hand.

Is this, perhaps, a psycho-political interpretation whereby one is being cautioned of the potential dangers of flattery and thereby revealing weakness to one’s enemy?

Immobilizing Fear

Finally, Bekhor Shor (Joseph ben Isaac Bekhor Shor, France 12th century) suggests that Jacob feared and was distressed because he did not know what to do. If Esau’s intentions were dangerous, Jacob would consider the possibility of fleeing. However, since Esau might be coming to honor him, if Jacob were to flee, Esau’s hatred could be aroused and cause him to pursue Jacob. On the other hand, if Esau’s intentions were dangerous, Jacob felt that he could not prevail over Esau and his 400 men. Therefore, Bekhor Shor concludes, Jacob “was distressed that he didn’t know what to do: whether to flee or to remain!!!” He decided to split the people with him into two camps so that Esau “would not sense that it was being done” on his account. Have we all not encountered situations where we are unable to make a decision because we are uncertain of the correct path to take.

Vicariously Experiencing Torah

Reading the details of the Torah text sensitively, along with the insights of the commentators, can provide us with opportunities to examine personally relevant real-life situations and reactions. We all have moments when we are seized by fear and distress but the nature of and trigger for these emotions may vary. The commentators’ analyses of Jacob’s reactions allow us to consider when and why we have felt fear and distress in our own lives.