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Introduction

Life can be challenging at the best of times and one of the most frequent emotions described in Jewish literature is the word 'fear'. There are two main Hebrew words that are used to describe this feeling – yirah and pahad -- - the former more than the latter, and rabbis talk about how the idea of Fear should be a key part of our relationship to God.

One thing we learn throughout the history of Jewish thought is that it is through our human relationships that we are supposed to understand and develop our relationship to the Divine, so once we have experienced a human emotion, we are then able to apply it to our spiritual consciousness.

OBJECTIVES:

- i. To learn about the different contexts where Fear arises in Jewish literature – beginning with the Purim story – and to become more familiar with different areas of Jewish literature as a result.
- ii. To gain an emotional connection to parts of rabbinic literature so that we really understand the texts with our feelings rather than just our heads. This will be more integrated than the standard intellectual connection we get from lots of Jewish learning.
- iii. To become more comfortable with the Tanach (Bible) and certain rabbinic texts.

Target audience: This programme is designed for a slightly older group and will be referring to more adult-oriented ideas, so it is more suitable for people who are 16 and over. Nevertheless, it can be modified for a younger age group as well.

The project consists in five activities:



Activity one:
Fear of the Jews



Activity two:
The Fear of Man



Activity three:
The Fear of God



Activity four:
The Fear of God vs
the Fear of Man



Activity five:
Purimspiel

Activity one: Fear of the Jews

GROUP DISCUSSION/ACTIVITY:

1. How do you understand the word fear?
2. When have you been fearful in your life? (let everyone give an example).
3. What do everyone's experiences of fear have in common (ie perhaps all of the fears turned out to be unfounded).

Here is an example of an unfounded fear:

When I was 16 years old I was particularly nervous of attending parties where I didn't know anybody. It can be extremely nerve-wracking to walk into a room of strangers when you are completely on your own and sometimes it can be hard to start up a conversation when everyone is already talking to one another! I used to go to the front door with my heart beating quickly and little drops of sweat formed on my forehead – I sometimes thought about turning away and going home again! I was scared of the following things; people wouldn't like me, people would ignore me, I would look stupid, I wouldn't get invited back, I would be stuck on my own the whole night, I would have a really bad time.....but I walked into the parties nonetheless. Sometimes it was a fun night and sometimes it wasn't...and then I realised that most other people were also a bit nervous and sometimes they weren't worth speaking to anyway! I'm now very happy to go to a party and stand on my own – let other people come up to me!!!

What's your story of fear?

4. Some people explain that FEAR is actually an acronym for

- F else
- E vidence
- A ppearing
- R eal

Discuss this – what do you think? Do you agree or disagree? Can you give more examples?

5. There are some curious phrases that appear towards the end of the Book of Esther. Remind everyone of the story of the Book of Esther up to and including the 8th chapter.





i. Please give everyone a copy of these texts and read them out together;

“And in every province and in every city, when the king’s command and decree arrived, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, and a feast and a holiday. And many of the people the land professed to be Jews, for the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them...

Esther 8:17

Throughout the provinces of King Ahasuerus, the Jews mustered in their cities to attack those who sought their hurt, and no one could withstand them, for the fear of them [the Jews] had fallen upon all peoples

Esther 9:2

Indeed all the officials of the provinces – the satraps, the governor, and the king’s stewards – allowed deference to the Jews, because the fear of Mordechai had fallen upon them”

Esther 9:3

What do you think this means, ‘fear of the Jews’? How do you understand it?

ii. Do you think people have a fear of the Jews today? Who? How?

(there are some examples of scary Jews in the book ‘Tough Jews’ by Rich Cohen¹ – it talks about Jewish gangsters in the USA during the 1920’s – 1940’s, but we’ll be looking at them in another JCC Online project at some point in the future!).

iii. If you have a Jewish reference library, try to find some rabbinic commentaries on the verses above. You might look at the comments of Rashi or Ramban, or perhaps the Sfat Emet on Purim. In separate groups, do some research and then present your ideas to the whole group.

iv. Is ‘fear of the Jews’ a good thing or a bad thing? Discuss why.

v. Finally, what is the best way of defeating fear? What would you recommend?

Activity two: The Fear of Man

Jewish wisdom teaches us not to 'fear man' and the Purim story shows where a group of people were able to have faith and see beyond the physical realm. This section will look at whether we would have done the same!

i. REMIND EVERYONE OF THE STORY OF MEGILLAT ESTHER.

Discuss; who are the people who could have been most fearful during the megillah? (if people don't have any suggestions, you could recommend the following –

VASHTI: Fear of what would happen to her when the king called her into the palace and asked her to show her body to the assembled guests.

ESTHER: might have been scared of being killed, or messing up, of lacking the confidence when coming face to face with the king.

MORDECHAI: fear of what was going to happen to Esther. It could have gone very badly wrong!

JEWISH COMMUNITY: fear of what was going to happen to them if Haman's orders had come true.

HAMAN: towards the end of the story, fear of what was going to happen to him.

GOD: the one 'character' who isn't mentioned in the story, but whom the rabbinic commentaries say is present throughout. What might God's fear have been?

Create pieces of art showing fear from different parts of the Purim story and write the verse beneath your piece.



Activity three: The Fear of God

i. WE LEARN IN PIRKEI AVOT, THE ETHICS OF THE FATHERS;

“let the fear of heaven be on you” (Pirkei Avot 1:3)

How do you understand this idea?
What is your explanation of it?
Why is it important to fear heaven?
Most importantly, what would happen if there was no fear of heaven?

ii. There is a quote in Pirkei Avot where it says that it is important to fear the government or people would ‘eat one another alive’.

Give your group a siddur (Jewish prayer book) and turn to the section where Pirkei Avot is (usually just after the Shabbat afternoon section). If they can’t find it, here is the answer:

“Rabbi Chanina, the deputy Kohen Gadol [High Priest], says: Pray for the welfare of the government, because if people didn’t fear it, a person would swallow his fellow alive”

Pirkei Avot: 3:2

Discuss whether or you think this is relevant in the country you live in?

iii. LET US NOW CONSIDER A CLASSIC INDIAN STORY;

A man is walking alone at twilight and sees a snake on the ground. His heart beats, he gets nervous, he is overcome with fear and falls to the ground in a faint. The next morning he wakes up, and, suddenly realising where he is, leaps to his feet. He looks down at the ground but sees the thing he was so scared of; it was an old piece of rope.

How can fear be helpful? Can it be helpful and positive?

In the next activity we will be looking at the idea of fear and awe, in relation to our understanding of God.



Activity four: The Fear of God vs the Fear of Man



i. GROUP DISCUSSION

- Who is the human that you've most been in fear of?
- Tell the story, ie a school teacher, parents etc.
- Which humans are you in fear of now? Do a 'fear audit' in pairs, ie
 - I want to buy a new car but I'm scared of what my wife will think.
 - I'd like to marry this girl but I'm scared of what my community will say.
 - I'd really like to be an actor and go to drama school but I'm afraid of my parents' reaction.
 - I want to tell people that I'm gay but I'm scared of what my father will think.
 - I wake up at night scared of what the bank will do if I don't get more money to pay off my credit cards more quickly.
 - I'm scared of the mortgage company in case they repossess my house!

Write some more of your own and then discuss the following;

- Which of them are F.E.A.R. (ie False Evidence Appearing Real)? Is it possible that any of these aren't real fears?
- Discuss your real life fears in the context of the following verses, and read this entire psalm...

"Put not your trust in great people, in mortals/humans who cannot save.
His breath departs; he returns to dust. On that day his plans come to nothing.
Happy is the person who has the God of Jacob for his help. Whose hope is in the Lord his God" (Psalms 146:3-5)

ii. HELPFUL FEAR

Discuss: In the last activity we discussed the positive aspects of fear and how can it help us. How does this work in relationship to God? (ie it can motivate us to be more respectful of people. Fear of God and a monotheistic system that is based on ethics means that I will not take actions that are entirely self-serving but rather are going to help other people and improve the world).

iii. TWO TYPES OF FEAR – YIRAH AND PAHAD

There are two words for fear in Hebrew; 'Yirah' and 'Pahad'. Our quotations from the Book of Esther were all 'Pahad' while the quotations from the Book of Psalms and Proverbs are all 'Yirah'. Read through the following set of quotations (all 'Yirah' and see if you can work out the difference between the two types of fear. [The answer: Pahad is a deeper, darker, more sinister fear, whilst 'yirah' is awe of God. Both types can make you nervous and anxious, but yirah is generally seen as more positive in the eyes of the rabbis because it is the kind that makes us more impressionable and affected by God.]



[Yirah-Fear]

“Fear of God is the beginning of knowledge. Fools despise wisdom and discipline”
(Prov. 1:7-8)

“Fear the Lord and shun evil. It will be a cure for your body, A tonic for your bones”
(Proverbs 3:7-8)

“You will not fear sudden terror or the disaster that comes upon the wicked for the Lord will be your trust he will keep your feet from being caught”
(Proverbs 3:25-27)

“Fear the Lord, my son, and the king”
(Proverbs 24:21)

“Jacob awoke in that place and was very scared”
(Gen 28:17)

“The Lord is my shepherd. Though I walk through a valley of deepest darkness, I fear no evil because you are with me”
(Psalms 23:4)

“When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, his face was radiant and they were afraid to come near him”
(Bamidbar 34:30)

“I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, and so I hid”
(Genesis 3:10)

[Pahad -Fear]

Rav Nachman of Breslov:

“All the world is a very narrow bridge but the main thing to remember is to have no fear at all..”

“Had not the God of my father – God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac – been with me, you would surely have now sent me away empty handed. God saw my wretchedness and the toil of my hands, and he admonished you last night”
(Genesis 31:42)

Activity five: Purimspiel

It is traditional to celebrate Purim by creating a short play, so your challenge is to devise a piece of theatre with the following title:

“FEAR AND FEASTING”

Resources

To get ideas for your play, use any of the pieces of text from this project, such as the extracts from the Book of Esther or from Proverbs or Psalms.

Costumes

Try to use things that you can find rather than buying anything – why not set your play in the nearest big city and find a way of translating the text so that it is relevant to your current society. For example, Haman could become a bad politician and the Jews could be any persecuted part of society who get revenge on the baddie!

Style

You could set the play in a particular style, which will make the whole thing more fun. For example;

- Soap opera
- Film noir
- Cartoon
- Musical
- News report
- Puppet show
- Opera
- Wrestling match

Actors

Try to give everyone a part so that at some point every member of your group will appear in the play.

Timing

It can be a lot of fun to do a ‘scratch’ performance, where you tell the audience to come at a particular time on a particular evening, and give yourselves one day to create the entire production from ‘scratch’!

And now...

Perform it!



Bibliography and Recommended Reading

Days of Joy: Sfas Emes: Ideas and Insights of the Sfas Emes on Chanukah and Purim by Yosef Stern (Hardcover - Dec 1985)

Purim Anthology (Holiday Anthologies Series) by Philip Goodman (Paperback - 31 Jan 1994)

One Hour Purim Primer: Everything a Family Needs to Understand, Celebrate and Enjoy Purim by Shimon Apisdorf (Paperback - Dec 1995)

The Torah, with Rashi's Commentary; translated, annotated, and elucidated by Y.I.Z. Herczeg. (The Sapirstein Edition; ArtScroll Series) by Rashi and Yisrael Isser Zvi Herczeg (Hardcover - May 1994)

Ramban (Nachmanides): Commentary on the Torah (5 Vol. Set) by Ramban (Nachmanides) and Rabbi Dr Charles Chavel (Hardcover - Jan 1974)

Tough Jews by Rich Cohen (Paperback - April 1999)