MASTERING FEAR

B.S.D.

By: Rabbi Noach Weinberg, Z"tl

The Hebrew word yirah means both "to fear" and "to see." Way #6-Yirah -teaches that the essential choice of life is to open our eyes to available opportunities, and to fear the consequences of avoiding that reality.

Fear of consequences can be a great motivator in getting the job done quickly and efficiently.

Ask a teenager: "Please take out the garbage." His response: "Later!"

Now say it like this: "If you don't take out the garbage, you can forget about borrowing the car." The teen's response? He's running with the garbage!

Fear is like any other emotion-there are both positive and negative aspects. Negative fear is debilitating. Positive fear is exhilarating. The adrenaline gets the blood running in your veins. It gives you power to accomplish what you want to do. If you're walking along and spot a snake, fear propels you to run with blazing speed and hurdle the fence like an Olympian. With fear, you are out of the dream world and 100 percent into reality.

Making the right choice is a constant human struggle. We have an inclination to take the easy way out, and to ignore the coming consequences. "To see or not to see?"-that is the Jewish question.

BE AFRAID OF MEANINGLESSNESS

Remember the old TV program where you had 10 minutes in a supermarket to grab whatever you could?

The woman was running up and down the aisles, looking for what is most valuable. She didn't want to end up with a cartload of soap suds.

That show is a metaphor for life. There are eternal consequences. Each moment can be lived to the fullest-or wasted into nothingness. Life is serious business.

The ultimate human fear is to live without meaning. We all want to have an impact, to help others, to change the world. Try saying the words: "I'm happy being mediocre." You can't say it!

Remember the time you asked yourself, "What does it all add up to?" We have this moment of clarity, and then what do we do? We run for the ostrich hole, start playing tennis, put on the music, call up a friend.

Don't run for the ostrich hole. Be afraid of being mediocre. Be afraid of not having self-respect. Be afraid of waking up one morning and saying to yourself: "What did I do with my life?"

Use this fear to inspire you to figure out what counts most in life. Then go get it.

FEAR OF MORTALITY

Each of us knows we will die one day. But we fool ourselves into thinking that those who die belong to a separate sector
of humanity. "They are the mortal ones. We are immortal." Underneath it all, we have this illusion.

Did you ever have a friend who died? Maybe he was 17 and got killed in a motorcycle accident. How did you react? "But I just talked to him yesterday! He can't really be dead. He was so full of life!"

What does that mean—"It can't be"? What we're really saying is that it's too close for comfort. I'm not in the mortal group. And now my friend is dead. That's too close. It can't be.

Realize that each of us can be dead in one minute. You don't need an airplane crashing through the ceiling. You don't need a heart condition. All it takes is one blood clot and ... bang! These are the facts of life. But we don't feel like looking at it. "I am immortal. Other people get mugged, other people die. Not me!"

When someone we know dies unexpectedly, we feel our own sense of vulnerability. It makes us think, "Am I using my time efficiently?"

Take a close look at your life history. Trace the years back, and see how well you've used your time. Often our past is a blur, and as you get older, this becomes even more pronounced.

We all have a clock ticking and don't know how long it's going to run. How many years do you figure you have left? Don't think it's open-ended. Someday you will have only one year left. And someday you will have only one day left. So plan for it now. As the Sages say: "Put your life on track one day before you die."

Some Jews have the custom of visiting their future burial plots once a year, usually before Rosh Hashana. Why? It's not morbidity. It makes the point clear: "I am mortal, and this is where I'll end up. So what do I want written on my tombstone?"

Live every day as if it's your last—because one day it will be. Tick, tick, tick...

WIPE OUT PETTINESS

Use this realization to correct the way you're living now. Wipe out pettiness, irritations, illusions, trivialities.

How do you wipe out pettiness? Imagine you're fighting with your parents or siblings, and then find out you have only one day to live. What will you say? Or if they were dying, what would you say? Too often we don't appreciate what we have until we lose it. When they're dead, we say, "I should have treated them better. I should have called more often."

If you live with this reality, you will not fight with your parents anymore. You will not hold a grudge against your brother. If you had a terminal illness, you will even treat a stranger differently. You won't waste your time arguing with someone who cut in line. Life is too precious to be petty.

Be motivated by the fear of losing what is precious. Imagine losing your eyesight. Walk around with a blindfold for an hour.

If you envision dying tomorrow, what will you do with today? Will you waste it on frivolous things—or try to achieve something more lasting, more meaningful, more eternal?

Do you see how that fear pushes you a bit?

FEAR OF GOD

One of the primary obligations in Judaism is to fear God. We fulfill this Mitzvah by paying attention to reality and seeing
the consequences of our actions.

Imagine hidden cameras monitoring your progress through life. The whole world is watching. People cheer when you succeed and boo when you fail.

With all those people staring, won't you be careful with every move? Won't your motivation to succeed increase tremendously?

Walk with a constant awareness of God. Everything is recorded on videotape. Are we maximizing life's opportunity, or are we wasting it? One day we'll have to answer for our actions.

That fear can motivate you to greatness.

Unfortunately, human nature is to become distracted. Each of us has a self-doubting inclination, called the Yetzer Hara. It's like a vicious dog, always threatening you: "You're overextending yourself. You'll have a nervous breakdown and fall apart." We hesitate to act because we're frightened by his threats.

Fear of God gives you full freedom. Nothing will stand in your way. The dog is insignificant compared to fear of God. You just push right ahead. You're free from all other fears.

Fear of God is the key to everything we want to accomplish in this world. So what's holding us back?

Consider the following four myths:

**MYTH #1 - FEAR IS PAINFUL**

On one hand, people say that fear is uncomfortable and threatening. We structure our lives to avoid it. On the other hand, people ride roller coasters and watch horror movies—paying good money to get scared out of their wits!

How do we understand this contradiction?

It's a mistake to think that fear is painful. Yes, fear is uncomfortable, but it delivers great pleasure. When they shove you out of the airplane before the parachute opens, you forget all the nonsense of this world. The brush with death makes you appreciate how good it is to be alive. You're plugged into reality. Suddenly life is a thrill!

Counteract the discomfort of fear by focusing on the positive side—every moment is lived with awareness and excitement. Gather your powers. Use your potential. Be motivated by fear. It is thrilling to be afraid!

Go to an amusement park and watch people getting off the roller coaster. Everyone's giggling for the first block: "It's great to be alive." By the second block, they're getting more serious as they begin to remember their problems. By the third block, they're into petty nonsense, back to their old depressed selves...

Life is boring without fear. Notice how "successful" people inevitably look for new risky ventures. It may be a risky financial investment, or it may be hang-gliding lessons.

What's the key to getting the most out of life? Feel like you're constantly getting off the roller coaster.

**MYTH #2 - FEAR IS PARALYZING**

People think that fear is paralyzing and reduces your potential.
Actually, the opposite is true. Fear can generate super-human feats. We've all heard stories about a mother who picked up a car to save her child trapped underneath. Facing fear is empowering. It gives you strength you never knew you had.

Fear is only damaging when you run away and don't confront it.

Imagine watching bullies beat someone up, and you just stand by watching. You'll wince every time you think about it. If you don't face the fear and stand up for what's right, you'll suffer that experience for the rest of your life.

But if you face the bullies and they back down (or even if you fight and get a little bloody), you'll enjoy that moment for the rest of your life. You were afraid, but you stood up. You did the right thing. That's true pleasure.

Better to try and fail, than to have feared to try.

"Shock" debilitates, "fear" motivates. Imagine a cowboy riding a bucking bronco. The fear of being tossed makes him alert to every move, so his response can be accurate and quick.

You have to look at life the same way.

AVOIDING THE CHALLENGE

Too often, we miss an opportunity to excel because we say: "I can't. It's too much effort." For example, imagine you're asked to memorize one page of the phone book in 24 hours. "Impossible!" you say.

But what if you're held hostage and they say: "If you don't memorize one page of the phone book by tomorrow night, you're dead." No question you'll do it!

Here's a practical example. Do you want to get out of bed in the morning with a bang? Sure, but it's too much effort. How about if I come with a gun every morning? You'll get up with a bang, no problem!

Now how much would you pay to wake up like that every day for the rest of your life? $5,000? $10,000? You really want to get up that way! So come on! Let's go!

Take advantage of the power of fear as a tool to tackle all your "I can'ts." Make a list of these "I can'ts" and put a price tag on them. What is the reward, and what is the consequence? Having this clarity will turn you into a very effective human being.

MYTH #3 - FEAR MEANS LOSS OF FREEDOM

People avoid fear in order to preserve independence. We think if there's an outside force telling us what to do, we'll be intimidated into becoming a robot. We'd rather choose to do the right thing on our own.

Fear of the Almighty is different. When you fear violating God's word, that frees your potential. Why? Because God doesn't want to control you, He only wants what's good for you. So fear of God becomes freedom from nonsense, from silly fears, from pettiness. If you fear God, you're free from all other fears in the world.

Fear is only enslaving when someone else is purposefully trying to be fearsome and controlling. But fear of reality-the possibility of missed opportunities-is a motivation to get us where we want to be. We all say: "I want to be good, but I don't want to make the effort." Fear motivates you to get the job done.

At work, you know that if you don't show up, you'll get fired. So you get out of bed early. Fear of failing a test makes you study harder. In the end, this fear helps you succeed and have more self-respect.
We all want greatness. We want to be tough, disciplined, organized. Fear leaves you unencumbered. For the right amount of money or for survival, you will do whatever it takes to succeed.

MYTH #4 - FEAR IS DEMEANING

People think that if a certain act is right, you should do it because it's right, not out of fear of consequences. It seems demeaning to respond based on fear.

Ideally, we should all do the right thing simply because it's right, and avoid what's wrong, irrespective of the consequences. Indeed, the Sages say: "Someone who serves God because he seeks reward, or to avoid punishment, is a bad servant." He's only serving himself. If the devil could pay more, he'd be loyal to the devil. (In reality, there's only God. But if there was an option, this person might choose to serve the devil.)

So why is there a special Mitzvah to acquire fear? Shouldn't we get full motivation from love of God?

Yes, someone who serves God out of love is on a much higher level. And we should strive to do the right thing because it's right, not because it will "get you to heaven." But we have to be realistic as well. Love is often insufficient motivation to do good. As long as you will march faster and do the right thing by getting paid $100,000, it's better to take the money and do the right thing!

Suppose there was a program to help bring homeless people into the community shelter. Ideally, you would do this for free. But if you were offered $100 for every homeless person you brought to the shelter, you'd bring in more. Did the reward "corrupt" you? No. It just gave you a stronger motivation for doing what you already knew was right.

And there's an added consideration as well. Hopefully, acting out of fear will eventually lead you to do the right thing out of love.

THE PAIN REFLEX

Everyone is born with the ability to sense pain. If we're stuck with a pin or burned by fire, our hand jumps back instinctively. But some people are born without a pain response. They feel nothing if their hand is put into fire.

Sure, it's nice not to feel pain. But someone who feels no pain is in constant danger. He's black and blue all the time. He puts his hand in the fire and says, "You smell something burning? Hey! It's my hand!" But he's in trouble, the hand is gone already.

Pain is essential to our survival. And that's the purpose of fear of God, of keeping ultimate consequences clearly in mind. It's not the goal in life, but a means to an end. It helps us think twice before we insult someone or yell at our parents.

Imagine you're speaking to someone and he starts spewing filthy gossip. You know it's wrong to listen, so you ponder, "Maybe I'll just politely stand here for a few minutes..." But if someone is ready to smack you on the head with a baseball bat for gossiping, you'll immediately say, "I'm getting outta here!" You don't make calculations. You just do the right thing.

Fear of punishment is like a pain reflex. It keeps us from doing things that will cause us harm later on. It gets you where you want to be.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

The single most important goal in life is to have clarity, to live in reality. And of course, reality exists objectively-outside of our own subjective perception of it.
Reality itself is very thrilling. It wakes us up and puts things into perspective. Imagine someone addicted to nicotine. How do you motivate him to stop? Show him an x-ray of tarred lungs. That fear gives him the freedom to break out of the rut and do what he knows he needs to.

Just as you are motivated out of personal fear, do the same for your family, your community, and for all humanity.

You see a divorce. You see parents nagging their children. You see people in depression, people hurting each other. We see this all the time. So what do we do? We use the ostrich syndrome. We see but we don't see. We say: "Not me, I will never nag my children. Not me, I will never be depressed. Not me, I will never get divorced."

Do you really think you are going to be different? Be real! You are one of them!

Whenever you see tragedy, learn how to avoid it. If you see someone getting mugged, you know not to go down that street again. Whatever it is, draw a lesson. When you see a divorce, fear the possibility that this will happen to you. That's called "being real."

Apply the same thing to the Jewish people. In 1967, there was a worldwide recognition that the Jewish state was in high jeopardy of being wiped out. People came to Israel or offered help in other ways—to donate money, time, influence, activism. The fear, the threat, brought them to a sudden realization of how deeply they care about the Jewish people.

How would you feel if, God forbid, the State of Israel was wiped out?

Be real with the consequences of life. You don't need a roller coaster. All you have to do is to take a subway at midnight. Or remember that Saddam has the atom bomb. Look around and read the headlines. It's a threatening world. Carry that fear with you and use it as a positive motivator for greatness.