

Two Pockets

Erev Rosh Hashana, Rabbi Toba Spitzer

I'd like to share with you a Hasidic teaching that I talked about 11 years ago on Yom Kippur (just in case any of you have really good memories). I've decided that after 10 years I'm allowed to recycle a teaching! It's good environmental practice, so that we don't have an overflow of rabbinic words clogging up the atmosphere.

But seriously, it's a beautiful and important teaching, and worthwhile to bring again. And this year I see some new things in it. This teaching comes from Rabbi Simcha Bunem of Pershyscha. It was said of Reb Simcha Bunem that he carried two slips of paper, one in each pocket. On one he wrote: *Bishvili nivra ha-olam*—"for my sake the world was created." On the other he wrote: *V'anokhi afar v'efer*—"I am but dust and ashes." He would take out each slip of paper as necessary, as a reminder to himself.

I think the notion of these two slips of paper can be very helpful to us in our work of *teshuvah*. The two pockets suggest a kind of balance that we need to achieve, as we walk through this world. You may want to think about which pocket you need to look into this Yom Kippur. My suggestion would be to look into the one that feels a bit difficult, or alien. The one that is less natural to you.

Some of us are quite comfortable with the idea that the world was created for our sake. Maybe it's hard to admit, but if you carry yourself with a certain sense of entitlement, an expectation that the world's doors should open easily before you, if you tend to think that most of the time you're right and the world around you is getting it wrong, then perhaps it's time to spend a little time in the "dust and ashes" pocket.

"Dust and ashes" helps cut through our arrogance; our conviction that we're always right or that we need to be right. It helps put our life and our ego in perspective. It's a really important reminder to think about how much of life's bounty we really are entitled to, and do we perhaps enjoy a far greater share than any one person might reasonably expect. Once we have that realization, it's amazing how generosity and abundance can open up in our hearts and in our lives.

V'anokhi afar v'efer—"I am but dust and ashes"—is also a call to an awareness of our finiteness, our mortality, our smallness in the cosmic scheme of things. If this thought frightens you, then that might be another reason to spend some time in this pocket. We all struggle so mightily against this reality, and that struggle causes us a lot suffering. To know that really truly we are of this earth, that we will one day return to this earth, and that ultimately that's okay, is a real spiritual achievement. It's a reminder that it is a great gift to just to be alive each day. It's something to cultivate.

But there are those of us for whom the "dust and ashes" pocket is a bit to familiar, who live with this awareness to an excessive degree. Those of us who never attend to our own needs, who are

constantly putting ourselves down, feeling worthless, small, as if we and our lives amount to very little indeed.

If that is your tendency, then your challenge over these next 24 hours is to dive into the pocket of “for my sake was the world created.” This pocket reminds us that we are all created in the image of God. It is a reminder that as *bnei Adam*, children of the first human, our inheritance is all the blessings of Creation. This world is here for us, too.

There is another Hasidic teaching, brought by Martin Buber, that echoes this message:

“Every person should know and consider the fact that you, in the particular way that you are made, are unique in the world, and no one like you has ever been. For if someone like you had already been, there would be no reason for you to be in this world. Actually, everyone is something new in this world, and here we must work to perfect our particular being, for because we are still imperfect, the coming of the Messiah is delayed!” (*Ten Rings: Hasidic Sayings*, Martin Buber)

For those of us who spend too much time in the “dust and ashes” pocket, we may forget that we are unique and necessary creations. For our sake the world was created. And not only that—we each have our own particular work to do. Our task is not to become someone else, not to achieve what the people we are forever comparing ourselves to are achieving. No, each of our tasks is to simply become our full selves—what is called here “perfecting our particular being.” Not being perfect—there is no such thing. But doing what it is that we are put here to do, that which is unique to each of us. Each of us has some work to do in this world, something to repair, that only we can do. To ignore or shirk that task by pleading our own incompetence or unworthiness is a kind of affront to God, to the Source of Creation.

Shame can be a very great obstacle on the road to *teshuvah*. It is not the same as taking responsibility. Each of us needs to take responsibility for what we have done right, and what we have done wrong. But the kind of shame that cuts at our very sense of self, that convinces us that we have nothing to offer, or that we’ll only mess up if we try make our offering—that is the voice of doubt, the negative urge that keeps us off our path. When it rises in your mind, in your heart, pull out this piece of paper, and say to it, *Bishvili nivra ha-olam*—“for my sake the world was created!”

And if you are not sure what your particular gift to this world is, then perhaps over this coming day you can look for it within yourself. What is the task to complete that is especially and uniquely yours? What are the qualities within yourself that you will need to cultivate to complete that task?

Most of us, I would imagine, fall somewhere between these two pockets, sometimes knowing that the world was created for my sake, sometimes feeling like dust and ashes. It is good to move back and forth between the two pockets, as Reb Simcha Bunem used to do. And perhaps best of all is to experience both at the same time: the radical humility of “dust and ashes,” and the acceptance and love of self of “the world was created for my sake.” We can spend this Yom Kippur seeking that integration, trying to cultivate both of these qualities within ourselves. May

each of us find the balance that will allow us to walk through this world gently but powerfully, offering each of our gifts to the task of creating a world of wholeness, and peace.