

Two Pockets

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The last few weeks have been a roller coaster for me—from the highs of being gathered as a community on December 4th and 5th, to the aftermath of my mother's emergency surgery and her struggles in the ICU. Though that is an experience personal to me, I think the sense of ups and downs is something we are all feeling. It might be in relation to the COVID pandemic, where vaccines are currently being given even as the death toll continues its dramatic rise. Or it's any of a number of news stories we read this week: There will be an aid package, no there won't, yeah this administration is providing another opportunity for peace for Israel, but look, dangerous talk of martial law.

Pearl Norton, in her Bat Mitzvah D'var Torah, noted that there is no one in the Torah who rode a roller coaster quite as dramatically as Joseph. One minute he is the pampered, favored son, and then he is a slave sold down south. He rebounds and is in charge of Potiphar's household, but then turns around and finds himself in prison, forgotten by Pharaoh's steward whom he'd helped. The ups and downs continue in this week's parshah, not only for Joseph, but for all of Egypt. Joseph is the savior of the Egyptian masses, rescuing them from certain death by famine, but he is also their downfall, allowing their poverty to force them into serfdom to the Pharaoh. The brothers too find themselves on this roller coaster. One minute they are afraid of prison, then told they will be spared and only Benjamin arrested. One minute they fear this Egyptian official who seems to be toying with

their lives, and the next he is their long-lost brother, bestowing gifts and assurances for the future.

Even if our lives are less dramatic than those of Joseph and his brothers, we are still prone to ups and downs. Even as we have grown out of adolescence, still we are hit by waves of optimism and pessimism, depression and elation. Much-anticipated and wonderful blessings have their darker side; the young child whom we love so much is also the cause of new fears and worries. The desire many working people expressed, “If only I didn’t have to commute, or if only I didn’t have to travel so much for work,” has turned into, “When will I get out of the house?” Our lives are indeed roller coasters as we deal with waves of reality and of emotion.

The Jewish answer to this polarity in our lives has traditionally been the advice of Rabbi Simcha Bunim, a Polish Chassidic rabbi, who lived at the end of the 18th and into the 19th century. He was from a school of Chassidic thought that valued both science and devotion. A pharmacist by profession, he was part of a movement that encouraged “a passionate heart and an analytic mind.”

Incidentally, this movement influenced Chabad, which was originally a more intellectual version of Chassidism. Remember, unlike his contemporary followers, the Chabad Rebbe had a degree in electrical engineering from a respected institute in Paris, studied mathematics and physics at the University of Berlin, and was a student at the Sorbonne at the outbreak of World War II.

Returning to Simcha Bunim, his most quoted teaching, which may be familiar to you, is as follows:

Everyone must have two pockets, with a note in each pocket, so that they can reach into the one or the other, depending on the need.

When feeling high and mighty one should reach into the left pocket and find the words "I am but dust and ashes."

But, when feeling lowly and depressed, discouraged or disconsolate, one should reach into the right pocket, and there find these words: "For my sake was the world created."

The origins of these two statements are interesting.

"For my sake was the world created" comes from a Talmudic discussion about the way Adam, the earthling, was created as a singular being. It is here we find the famous statement to remind us that "one who destroys one life, it is as if they have destroyed an entire world, and the one who saves a single life, it is as if they have saved an entire world." It is also where we find God worried that if humans had multiple ancestors, they would disparage one another saying, "My ancestor is greater than yours." Finally, we have the sentiment expressed also in the lovely reading that was part of our baby naming this morning, that unlike a king who stamps coins with his likeness and they are all the same, the Holy One creates each of us in the Divine Image and yet we are each different. When we are discouraged, we need to remember that as an individual, we have something

unique and important to contribute to the world. As the Psalmist states, “For you have made us little less than Divine and crowned us with glory and honor.”

What about the other statement, “I am but dust and ashes”? One might think that this comes from a discussion of death, perhaps from Ecclesiastes, where we are reminded that no matter how great, how rich or how wise, still the same fate awaits us—a sobering thought. But actually, these words were spoken by Abraham at the beginning of his argument for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and I think speak to a different kind of humility. Abraham opens his appeal acknowledging his human limitations. I am small, in a very large world, he is saying, and even as I argue, I need to acknowledge that there may be a larger picture that I don’t see. “I am but dust and ashes” contrasts with “I am the measure of all things” or I am a “Master of the Universe” a la *Bonfire of the Vanities*; it is a reminder that it’s not all about me.

Maintaining equanimity in a difficult world is not easy, and yet equanimity, *hishtavut*, is considered one of those 24 qualities necessary to being a student of Torah. It is what allows us to get past the curveballs, small and large, that life throws us, the times when things go wrong, or we are rejected or misunderstood by people we care about. Maintaining our equanimity over this next month, as we wait for the American political scene to calm down, and over the next 4 to 6 to 9 months as we await the all-clear on COVID, will be difficult, but our spiritual resources can help. Rabbi Rachel Barenblatt, whom many follow as the Velveteen Rabbi, writes about this need to find centered acceptance and calm, which helps her handle both the good and the bad with grace and presence. *Ken Yehi Ratzon*, so may it be for us.