

DUST AND ASHES

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

"Avraham responded and said, 'Behold, now, I have begun to speak to my G-d, although I am but dust and ash.'" (18:27)

This famous statement, "I am but dust and ash," has come to symbolize the epitome of modesty and humility. The Midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 9:15) relates that Hashem said to Avraham, "Because you said, 'I am but dust and ash,' I promise you that your children will be given two great mitzvos which are performed with dust and ashes. The ashes of the Parah Adumah (the red heifer, the ashes of which were sprinkled upon one who had become defiled through contact with a corpse), and the dust of the Sotah (the wayward wife, who is brought to the Temple and is given to drink a mixture consisting of water, earth (dust), and the letters of Hashem's name dissolved in the water)."

The Dubner Maggid, famous for his parables and allegories, explains the above Midrash by means of a mashal (parable). Once there was a king who made a very large and exclusive banquet. Only the most important and influential people were invited. One of the invitees was a very special man, a wise and scholarly individual, who was highly distinguished among his peers. As expected, the king had set aside a seat for this special guest at the head table.

This guest, however, was also a very modest and unassuming person. When he arrived, he absolutely refused to be seated anywhere near the head table. Instead, he chose for himself a simple place towards the back of the banquet hall. The king, seeing what had happened, repeatedly tried to get his distinguished guest to take his place at the head table. But to no avail. He absolutely refused to sit anywhere other than at his humble table in the back.

Then the king had an idea. He made his plan known to the others seated at the head table, and they immediately began implementing it. One by one they left their places at the head table, and found themselves a seat at the same table where the humble but distinguished guest was seated. His table had now become the "head table".

The same was true with Avraham. In his humility, he truly felt himself to be "dust and ash." "If you insist on being dust and ash," said Hashem, "then I will take dust and ash and create from them beautiful mitzvos, which will bring honour to you."

Why did Hashem choose these two mitzvos - the dust of the Sotah and the ashes of the Parah Adumah? Let us examine the properties of earth-dust and ash.

Earth as a substance has very little significance; it is simply dust of the ground. But if one takes a seed and plants it in the earth, the earth nurtures the seed and enables it to grow into a beautiful plant or a tree. Thus, we might say that earth has little significance in the past, but great potential in the future.

Ashes are the opposite. In the future, they are useless. But if we were to examine the ashes' role in the past, we would likely find that they had at one point served an important function, perhaps warming a house, or perhaps they came from a vessel that had been used for many years and had finally worn down.

Avraham felt that he encompassed the negative qualities of both dust and ashes - he was like dust in the past, and like ashes in the future. "Because you have compared yourself to earth and ashes, I will take this earth," says Hashem, "and use it for the mitzvah of Sotah, which comes to clarify something that has occurred in the past (i.e. has the wife strayed from her husband or not). And I will take these ashes and use them for the mitzvah of Parah Adumah, whose ashes are used in the future to purify one who has become defiled." [Beis HaLevi]

Erev Yom Kippur, as the Kol Nidrei service begins, is a very emotional time. Once, it is told, the rabbi of a certain congregation, in an impassionate gesture, got up before his entire congregation and threw himself down before the Holy Ark. "Hashem," he declared, "I am but dust and ash before You!"

The congregation was greatly moved by the Rabbi's gesture of selflessness and humility. After a few moments, the Chazan of the congregation arose, and he too threw himself down before the Holy Ark and cried out, "Hashem, I am but dust and ash before You!"

All this emotion proved too much for the simple shammash (beadle). Soon, he too arose and threw himself down before the holy ark. "Hashem," he said, "I am but dust and ash before You." Lying there on the ground before the Holy Ark, the rabbi gave the chazan a subtle nudge. "Look who thinks he's dust and ash..."

Certainly, we must emulate the humility of Avraham Avinu. But we must never fall into the trap of regaling in our own humility.

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