

ONLY DUST (AND ASHES) IN THE WIND

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

Then Avraham answered and said, "I have taken it upon myself to speak to my G-d, yet I am but dust and ashes." (Bereishis 18:27)

So began one of the most unusual bargaining sessions in the history of mankind, and the stakes were quite high. Unbeknownst to the people of S'dom miles away, their lives were on the chopping block, and Avraham was to make a last bid to save them. It was a bold move on Avraham's part, as he well knew and the posuk above reveals.

After all, we rarely argue with flesh-and-blood kings. What business do we have arguing with the King-of-Kings, the Creator of the Universe. And the truth is, Avraham probably wouldn't have considered doing it had G-d not first engaged him in the discussion, informing him of His plans to destroy S'dom and its sister cities in advance. This seemed to imply that G-d was open to discussion about the judgment, even at that late moment in time.

However, the Talmud makes a statement that seems to shed a different kind of light on the dialogue, and perhaps what it was really about. The Talmud says:

Rava elucidated: In reward for Avraham Avinu saying, "I am but dust and ashes," his children merited two mitzvos: the ashes of the [Red] Heifer and the dust of the Sotah. (Sotah 17a)

The ashes to which the Talmud is referring to are those of the Red Heifer after it has been slaughtered and burned to ashes, as part of the procedure for purifying a person from contact with a dead body (Bamidbar 19:1). The dust to which it refers is that which was added to the "bitter waters" that the suspected adulteress had to drink as part of her procedure to be absolved of any guilt (Bamidbar 5:11). But, aside from the words, what is the connection between this and Avraham's humility?

Often, the Talmud will make what is called a "gezerah shavah," one of the thirteen principles of elucidation used for understanding the Torah on a deeper level. It means that, according to tradition, when the same word is used in different contexts, perhaps even referring to two completely different laws, still, they can shed light on each other. It's as if the Torah used the same word in each verse to connect them to one another, a connection that would not otherwise be so obvious.

It is not a random thing. Rather, most gazerah shavahs are known from tradition, and just spoken

about in the Talmud. One would have to have the stature of Rebi Akiva to create new ones, and even then, they would only be expressing laws we already know from the Oral Law. In fact, like the other 12 principles of elucidation, the point of a gazerah shavah is to show how the laws from the Oral Law are implied in the words of the Written Law.

But this is different. What is there to learn from Avraham's reference to "dust" and "ashes" that we have halachos of burning the Parah Adumah (Red Heifer) to ashes, and to include dust in the waters of the Sotah? And besides, it is not halachos we are learning anyhow. Rather, we are learning about that which led to the merit of having received these halachos, and the question, why?

The starting point to answering this question is in understanding the sod - the esoterical basis - of each. Why must the ashes be added to the waters to be sprinkled on the spiritually-defiled individual, and why did dust from the floor of the Mishkan have to be added to the Mei-Sotah. Is there a connection between the two?

SHABBOS DAY:

You are dust, and to dust you will return. (Bereishis 3:19)

As Rashi explains, the Parah Adumah came to "clean up" the mess that the aigel hazahav - the golden calf - created. And, as the Arizal reveals, the aigel hazahav was just a later-day repeat of the sin of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and both of them led to the death of man.

Why death? A better question is, what death? Because, the physical death we suffer in this world is only the result of a spiritual death we caused back at the beginning, as the Arizal explained:

The three from the World of Atzilus are called "Zehira Ila'a of Adam," and are mentioned in the Sisrei Torah (Kedoshim 83a), and as explained in the Zohar. Before Kayin and Hevel were born, Adam HaRishon sinned, and the Zehira Ila'a was removed from him, that is, the three portions from Atzilus we mentioned before. In this manner, the decree of G-d was fulfilled: "On the day you eat from it you shall surely die," for the three portions of Atzilus were removed from him and there is no harsher death than this. (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Chapter 31)

We were like executives who abused our positions and, as a result, lost our privileges. As a result of the sin of the fruit, mankind lost access to his higher levels of soul, resulting in a tremendous reduction in our capacity to feel the presence of G-d in every day life. As the Arizal said, there can be no greater death than this.

Why did Adam HaRishon do it? The Leshem explains:

This was the first stumbling block for Adam HaRishon: he allowed himself to look at the strength of the Chitzonim (spiritual impurity) to understand the extent of their power [as embodied in the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil]; he investigated how they operate in general and in detail. He delved into this using his great wisdom until they pursued him and became attached to him, as the Zohar

explains. In the beginning, he had acted this way for the sake of Heaven, assuming that The Holy One, Blessed is He, only warned him against eating, but not touching. Thus, (he assumed) the only prohibition was against tasting and enjoying it, whereas approaching and touching it was not prohibited. Therefore, investigating was also permissible, for it was on the level of touching and not eating, the latter of which is more a matter of tasting and enjoying. He relied upon his great wisdom to protect him from being seduced after them into actually enjoying them. His wisdom was his stumbling block, though his intentions were for the sake of Heaven. (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 342)

Don't get the wrong idea. Adam HaRishon was not one to act out of pride. The yetzer hara had yet to enter him, and therefore everything he did prior to the sin was for the sake of Heaven. Rather, he made a miscalculation, not about his greatness, but about what he was capable of doing with it. He took on the fiery dragon with his brilliant sword before he knew how to wield it properly.

That was a mistake that "sorry" was not going to correct so easily. His was a mistake that set into motion all kinds of negative forces within creation that caused G-d to make adjustments in creation, just to keep the evil forces in check enough to allow man to live and continue to strive for spiritual goals. The main adjustment was to Adam HaRishon himself - and therefore all of mankind - as the Talmud (and Arizal) states:

We have already explained that there are some souls that were not part of Adam HaRishon's soul when it was first created. These are truly "new souls", whereas the souls that were already included in Adam HaRishon are called "old souls" by comparison, of which there are two types. Thus, there are three types, the first being those which were not included in Adam HaRishon, and those which are considered to be completely new souls. The second type is the result of Adam's sin, after which his limbs "fell off" and he was reduced until he was no higher than one hundred amos, b'sod, "and laid Your hand upon me" (Tehillim 139:5). Just as it happened to his body, so too did it happen to his soul (Chagigah 12a). (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Chapter 7)

The extent of this transformation was visible even in Adam's physical appearance. Prior to the sin, Adam HaRishon's skin looked different. Rather than the physical skin we have today, which is solid and dull, Adam's skin gave off light, just like Moshe Rabbeinu's did when he descended Mt. Sinai after G-d passed by him. He had what the Kabbalists call, "Kesones Ohr" - Clothing of Light - spelled Aleph-Vav-Raish.

However, what Adam HaRishon walked away with after the sin was Kesones Ohr, except that Ohr is spelled: Ayin-Vav-Raish, which means "skin." In fact, another name that the Kabbalists use for our epidermis is "Mishchah d'Chiviya," aramaic for "Clothing of the Snake," since the Original Snake played a major role in our physical outcome.

Which brings us to the root of the problem, and why humans must die in the end:

Immediately Adam descended tremendously from his level, and so did the worlds to where they are now . . . They became material, and so did Adam and Chava. Their "clothing" transformed from

clothing of light to clothing of skin, the "skin of the snake." (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 344-345)

The goal of rectification, therefore, is to return back to clothing of light. That cannot be achieved during Yemos HaMoshiach, as it says:

In the future, the righteous will be dust, as it says, "The dust will return to the land as it was" (Koheles 12:7), and it says, "You are from dust and to dust you will return" (Bereishis 3:19); (Shabbos 152b). This will occur a moment before Techiyas HaMeisim, when those who are still living will die in order to dissolve the physicality of their bodies in order to transform them from clothing of skin to clothing of light. Death will not be the result of the Angel of Death then, G-d forbid, for that was destroyed completely (Succah 52a) . . . but by The Holy One, Blessed is He, Himself, in order to recreate them anew completely, like the body of Adam before the sin when he entered Gan Aiden. (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 489)

And look how the Torah describes death:

By the sweat of your brow will you eat bread, until you return to the earth from where you were taken. You are dust, and to dust you will return. (Bereishis 3:19)

Kesones Ohr with an Aleph doesn't need to die or dissolve in the ground, but Kesones Ohr with an Ayin does, in order to get back to being Kesones Ohr with the Aleph once again. And, the ashes of the Parah Adumah and the dust of the Sotah are not only reminders of this, but part of the rectification process itself. For, both come to rectify the disloyalty that Adam showed to G-d when he violated the commandment not to eat from the Tree, a disloyalty that was repeated through the sin of the golden calf, and for which the Sotah is the symbol (Nefesh HaChaim).

The only question remaining is, how did Avraham express all this by referring himself to dust and ashes when arguing with G-d over the fate of S'dom?

SEUDAH SHLISHIS:

Avraham stretched out his hand and took the butchering knife to slaughter his son. (Bereishis 22:10)

The tenth and final test for Avraham was the Akeidah. He passed, and with flying colors we might add. Indeed, so willing was he to slaughter his beloved Yitzchak that the angel had to command him not to, on G-d's behalf. Instead, Avraham slaughtered a ram that had been caught in a thicket, and that acted as the sacrifice that his son had almost been.

Nevertheless, since Avraham had been so willing to obey G-d and sacrifice Yitzchak, it is looked upon from Heaven as if Avraham actually carried through with the sacrifice of his son. Indeed, the Talmud says:

. . . How did they know the location of the altar [when designing the First Temple]? . . . Rav Yitzchak Napcha said, "They saw the ashes of Yitzchak piled in that spot." (Zevachim 62a)

That was the main result of the Akeidah: ashes. But they were not just any ashes; they were ashes that spoke a world, and they said, "We are but dust and ashes." For, Avraham was not only willing to sacrifice a son, but a dream as well. Yitzchak was beloved to him, but more importantly, he represented the physical means to continue Avraham's spiritual legacy. With the death of Yitzchak, came the death of Avraham, spiritually-speaking.

At least that is what the yetzer hara would have us believe, and every aspect of Avraham's being screamed at him as he prepared Yitzchak to die for G-d. For, as long as we believe that the physical world is the only way to fulfill our spiritual dreams, we are doomed to compromise the very values we seek to protect and continue. The end result of such a belief system, believe it or not, is the Sotah.

Look at what we say towards the end of the Viduy of Yom Kippur:

My G-d, before I was formed I was unworthy, and now that I have been formed, it is as if I had not been formed. I am dust in my life and will surely be so in death. Behold - before You I am like a vessel filled with shame and humiliation. May it be Your will, Hashem, my G-d and the G-d of my forefathers, that I not sin again . . .

In a sense, this is the essence of the Viduy, because all sin comes as a result of thinking just the opposite. And, as the Torah testifies, the more man believes that he is the opposite, the more his life becomes worth little than the dust from which he was made. Yet, as Avraham's life shows, the more one understands that their physical worth is little more than dust and ashes, the more they are valued in the eyes of G-d, even made His partner in determining the direction of creation.

For it is this perception of our physical being that allows the soul within us to overwhelm the body, and to shine through it. And, it is the shining through the body that purifies it, and elevates it, and transforms it back to Kesones Ohr with the Aleph, once again. This was what the Akeidah came to teach and instill within us for all the generations.

Thus, Avraham wasn't only saying that he was unworthy even to talk to G-d. He was saying that it was his very appreciation of this unworthiness that made him worthy and able to talk to G-d, and even bargain for the lives of people as evil as those of S'dom. And, it was his internalization of this concept that led to the merit of the ashes of the Parah Adumah and the dust of the Mei Sotah, both of which represent tikunim to return back to sin-free lives, loyalty to the values of G-d, and skin made of light.

MELAVE MALKAH:

G-d withdrew when He had finished speaking to Avraham, and Avraham returned to his place. (Bereishis 18:33)

As to why the Torah was compelled to inform us of this, Rashi explains: G-d only left the bargaining table after his fellow bargainer left. The question is why did it work that way? We know that Avraham

stopped because he had already received G-d's word that He wouldn't destroy the cities if 10 righteous people could be found. He didn't ask for less than 10, since he had seen that less than 10 did not save the world in Noach's time, so why assume otherwise with S'dom.

Yet, the posuk and Rashi's comment seem to imply that G-d would have at least entertained the possibility of an additional request, had Avraham made it. And even if Avraham had asked for nine and G-d had said no, what would have been lost? Given Avraham's love of mankind and his sense of responsibility for them, it is amazing that Avraham didn't go down to one righteous individual?

Perhaps we can answer this question from the following story in the Talmud:

When [Rebi Yochanan ben Zakkai] arrived [at the Roman camp], he said, "Peace unto you, king! Peace unto you, king!" [General Vespasian] answered him, "You are now deserving of death twice. Firstly, I am not the king and yet you have called me king. Secondly, if I am the king, why did you not come to me earlier?" He answered, "I called you king because one day you will be, for, if you weren't a king then Jerusalem would not have been given over to you, as it says, 'And the Levanon will fall by a mighty (adir)' (Yeshayahu 10:34). Now, 'mighty' (adir) refers to a king, as it says, 'And the leader (adir) shall be of themselves' (Yirmiyahu 30:21). 'Levanon' refers to the Temple, as it says, 'This goodly mountain and the Levanon' (Devarim 3:25). As to your question, that if you were a king why did I not come to you earlier, it was because the rebels among us prevented me from leaving." However, Vespasian responded, "If there is a barrel full of honey and a serpent is around it, is it not proper to break the barrel because of the serpent?" Rav Yosef and others say Rebi Akiva applied the following posuk to him, "Who makes wise men retreat and makes their knowledge foolish" (Yeshayahu 44:25). [For, Rebi Yochanan] should have answered, "It is better to take tongs and remove the serpent from the barrel and kill it, and leave the barrel intact." (Gittin 56a)

Rashi and Tosfos do not explain the meaning of the posuk quoted by Rebi Akiva. However, the Maharshah does, and as a result brings to light another very important concept. He wrote:

In other words, the sin of the people of the city was the cause for The Holy One, Blessed is He, to "make wise men retreat," denying them the knowledge to answer. (Maharshah, q.v. Who makes wise men retreat)

The Talmud is not saying that there was something wrong with Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, G-d forbid, but with the people he was leading. As the Maharshah teaches on this, Heavenly help and Divine Inspiration flow to the Torah leaders of the generation based upon the needs and merits of the generation. As we know from Brochos 32a, leaders are made leaders by Heaven for the sake of the nation they are meant to lead.

Thus, had S'dom merited to be saved, even for 8 or 9 righteous people among its entire population, Avraham would have asked for that too. However, that had not been the case, and thus Avraham "felt" as if he had gone far enough by asking only for 10, and no less.

Thus, before we look at the Gedolim of any generation and proffer our personal criticisms of the way they lead, let us not forget who they are leading. Ultimately, they are the ones to receive the tap on the shoulder and the gift of Heavenly help, but it is because of us that they do or don't. We may be simple folk, but we play a very complex role in the process of connecting Heaven and Earth.

Have a great Shabbos,

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