

WHAT ARE WE, DIRT?

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 210, Is Marriage a Mitzvah? Good Shabbos!

Yielding the Right of Way to a Bus on Coney Island Ave

This week's parsha contains the famous verse "Let us create a Man in our image after our likeness..." [Bereishis 1:26] This teaches us that man was created in the image of G-d.

The Mishneh [Avos 3:11] teaches that one who publicly humiliates another person loses his portion in the World to Come. The Tosfos YomTov explains that the harshness of the punishment is due to the fact that such a person falls into the category of "Ki Devar Hashem Bazah" [For he has desecrated the Word of G-d - Bamidbar 15:31]. Why? "Because man was created in the image of G-d and is the result of the 'Word of G-d'".

When one embarrasses another person, it is not merely an offense against the person. It is an offense against G-d, through whose speech that person came into existence. By such action, one disregards the 'Word of G-d'. To be disrespectful to a human being is to be disrespectful to G-d.

This is something that requires our constant attention. A Human being is a "tzelem Elokim" [the Image of G-d]. We take human beings for granted, but we are dealing with entities that are literally the 'Word of G-d'. No one would think of taking a Sefer [sacred volume] and throwing it down. No one would think of going to a Torah scroll and shaming it or cursing it. What the Tosfos YomTov is teaching is that one who curses another human being IS cursing a Sefer Torah. "For he has desecrated the Word of G-d."

I recently heard a story involving Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky. Rav Yaakov was walking in Williamsburg on Shabbos and a funeral procession passed by. Rav Yaakov turned around from the direction he was going and started accompanying the funeral procession on foot, for several paces.

Rav Yaakov's son who was with him asked incredulously, "What are you doing?" Rav Yaakov responded that the law requires that one accompany the deceased - - even on Shabbos. His son

persisted, "But you do not even know who the person is!" Rav Yaakov responded that it makes no difference. "All people are created in G-d's Image." This is a mind-boggling story to us!

I heard another such story involving Rav Yaakov. Rav Yaakov was riding in a car with someone on Coney Island Avenue in Brooklyn, New York. The traffic there is always heavy and frustrating. The driver noticed a city bus that was about to pull away from the curb. Everyone knows that the last thing that a driver wants to do is to get stuck behind a bus on Coney Island Avenue.

Like every other driver in the world, this fellow stepped on the pedal and swiftly positioned himself in front of the bus. Rav Yaakov commented, "What are you doing? What happened to Kavod HaTzibbur (the honor due to the community)?"

Rav Yaakov felt that by the rules of giving proper honor to the Tzibbur (community), the bus should have been entitled to go first. Such an attitude -- giving a bus priority in heavy traffic -- is a spiritual level that emerges from one who has internalized the importance of a Tzelem Elokim (one created in G-d's Image).

This is something that we must constantly work on -- to always remember who we are dealing with.

"Adam" -- Not Such A Bad Choice of a Name, After All

We find later in the parsha that "Adam assigned names to all the creatures... [2:20]". The Medrash mentions that G-d challenged the Angels to name the creatures, but they were unable. G-d showed them that man was greater than them, for Adam was able to name all the creatures of the world.

Hebrew names, unlike names in other languages, are not merely arbitrary unique labels. Assigning Hebrew names to the animals was defining their very essence. The Hebrew word "Shor", for example, defines the physical and spiritual essence of what an ox is. This is true for all the other creatures of the world. This is something the angels were incapable of providing.

(Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch relates the word 'shem' to 'sham' [there]. The assignment of a name defines where a being exists.)

The Medrash then relates that G-d asked Adam to give himself a name and Adam responded that a fitting name for himself would be Adam, "for I was created from the earth (adama)".

Here, seemingly, Adam failed. When it came to the ox, Adam was able to define his physical and spiritual essence and give it the name 'shor'. He did not deal with the superficialities and the surface. But when it came to his own name, it seems he just made a simple pun. I should be called ADAM because I was created from the ADAMa.

The Alter from Slabodka says this was a great insight on Adam's part. The challenge of man is to always remember that he comes from the ground. Man can indeed achieve the highest level of spirituality. His wisdom may, in fact, be greater than that of the Angels but it can all fall apart in a split second. Man is very human and very frail, because ultimately he came from the dust of the earth.

No matter how high man soars, if he makes the wrong moves he can come back to what he really is ADAM(a) -- dust. Behind all his potential and greatness man is very earthy and earthly.

Many question the choice of the Torah reading for the afternoon of Yom Kippur. In the morning we read the Torah portion from Acharei Mos describing the High Priest's service in the Sanctuary and the Holy of Holies (Vayikra 16). We soar, spiritually, at the description of the Temple Service.

Yet at Mincha on Yom Kippur afternoon, we read the chapter of the forbidden sexual liaisons (Vayikra 18). We are warned not to commit incest and other forms of sexual immorality. We are even warned against committing acts of bestiality. These acts are the lowest of the low. Is this appropriate for Yom Kippur?! Could not the Rabbis find a more inspirational Torah Reading than this?

The answer is that this is just what we need to hear on Yom Kippur. We should never make the mistake that just because we are soaring in the clouds with the angels, that it cannot all come crashing down the day after Yom Kippur. In the final analysis, we must always remember that we are physical, we are not angels. There is a component of man that is very, very tied to this earth, with earthly pleasures and earthly desires.

The wisdom of Adam was to realize this and give himself a label by which he could never think "I am beyond that". It is always feasible and always possible to slip back. We have temptations of human beings and we must constantly be on guard against them.

Sources and Personalities

Tosfos Yom Tov (1579-1654); [Rav Yom Tov Lipman Heller]; Prague; Poland.

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lter from Slabodka (1849-1927); [Rav Nassan Tzvi Finkel]; Lithuania

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888); Frankfurt-am-Main; Germany.

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This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Bereishis are provided below:

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