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WHICH ARE WE, DUST OR ANGELS?

Magidah Khulda bat Sarah & Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.

There once was a rabbi who always kept in each of his two pockets a slip of paper. In the pocket on the left a paper on which appeared the words: I am but dust and ashes. And in the pocket on the right a paper on which appeared the words: a little lower than the angels.

That is how humankind is described in the weekly Torah reading *parashat Bereshit*. The scripture says: And God formed us of *afar min ha-adamah* (אפר מן-האדמה)—dust from the ground). But it then goes on to say *vayipach b'apav nishmat chayim* (ויפח באפיו נשמת חיים)—and God blew into his nostrils the soul of life). (Genesis 2:7)

The Zohar, the central work in the literature of Kabbalah, says: “. . . for the Holy One, blessed be He, shapes a form within a form, and finishes it and breathes into it the breath of life and brings it out into the open.” (Soncino Zohar, Vayikra, 3:44a) And that is what God did for us. God blew into us a little of God's own self, so that our soul is part of God's spirit. In us, God joined the earthly to the Divine.

Our physical needs and urges, our needs to breathe and eat and sleep and make love, and rid our bodies of waste, all let us know that we are of this earth. And yet, there stirs within us the living breath of God.

So which are we? Are we dust or angels?

Our answer comes to us in the Hebrew word “*adam*” (אדם) Many commentators have interpreted the word *adam*, the word for “humankind,” as having come from the word *adamah* (אדמה), the word for “ground,” from which Adam was taken. But the problem with this understanding is that coming from the ground cannot be said to be a distinguishing feature of humankind, since, according to the scripture, the animals also came from the earth.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) has interpreted it the other way around. Rabbi Hirsch says that the word for “ground” was actually derived from the word for man, meaning the ground that is worked by humankind.

But where does the word for human, the word “*adam*,” come from? It comes, Rabbi Hirsch says, from the meaning *adom* (אדום), red, as the least broken ray of the spectrum, the pure ray of light that is the nearest revelation of the divine on earth, and phonetically related to the root ד-מ-ה, meaning “to be like.” For we are created, as the scripture says, *b'tzelem elokim* (בצלם אלקים), in the image of God—our distinguishing feature, which means we have the ability to understand and to choose. We are angels when we choose to live in the image of God, when we choose to make our lives a blessing.

But what is required of us to live in the image of God? How do we become a blessing? Our rabbis have said that to live in the image of God means to act as God would act. And how does God act?

In *parashat Bereshit*, after Adam and Eve are removed from Gan Eden, comes this little verse: ויעש ה' אלקים לאדם ולאשתו כתנות עור וילבשם (and God made for Adam and his wife garments of skin, and clothed them.) Our rabbis have interpreted this as the first trace of God's kindness for human beings, “*gemilut chasadim*.” For it is said that the Torah begins and ends with God's kindness for us, beginning with God clothing Adam and Eve and ending with God burying Moses. These two examples might be seen to span the whole of life from birth, when we come into this world naked, to the time when we leave it. And so, our rabbis say, should life begin and end for us, with kindness.

Rabbi Akiva said: “Loving-kindness is a fundamental principle of the Torah.” (Rashi; *Sifra*) And Rabbi Hillel then came and said: “What is hateful to you, do not do to others.” (Shabbat 31a)

But why is kindness considered to be so important?

In the earliest individual statement of the Talmud, Simeon the Just said: “On three things does the world stand—on Torah, on the Temple service, and on acts of loving kindness.” (Pirke Avot 1:2)

Now it may be difficult for any of us to think of the continued existence of the world depending on what *we* do. Maybe we don’t like to think of ourselves as pillars holding up the world. But perhaps a better place to begin is by asking ourselves: Have there been times in my life when my existence has depended on the kindness of other people? Of course the answer will be yes.

Every person, without exception, needs the help of others. Even very wealthy people sometimes need to borrow money. When we celebrate a joyous occasion, we need people to rejoice with us. When we are sad we need people to comfort us. When we have a heavy load, we need people to help us. When we are ill, we need people to visit us. And when we die we depend on the kindness of others to bury us.

Where does one begin?

One begins by trying to sense the problems of others and to feel their suffering. Our rabbis have argued that even the smallest act of kindness is a mitzvah, and that such a mitzvah may tip the balance of the world in favor of goodness.

Do we believe it?

In answer to that question, Magidah Khulda offers a poem she wrote for an older friend who she thinks of as a master, or rather a mistress, of small acts of kindness. It’s called:

ALL THINGS ARE MADE OF SMALLER THINGS

What does it take
To bring about
The kingdom of God on earth?
We search
And never know
The kingdom’s end.
We strain
To find an order in the skies,
To find our place
And count our part.
The moon, the stars—
Which are we?
Dust.
Small stones
Skipped into a summer sea.
And yet,
The largest things
Are made of smaller things.
Drops divide the waters of the sea,
And drops divide those drops.
And sands of moons
And distant stars
Are also small.
And none is lost.
And so
Are all small acts of kindness
Like drops of water
That can wear away a stone
To its very heart,
Or make a well
Spring up,
Or wash away
A shadow on a soul
And help to bring it
In the light.
Which are we?
And where?
A little lower
Than the angels.

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