

For nearly forty years I've honored the traditions of the High Holy days yet I've never attempted to reflect on their significance in writing. After reviewing memories, reading new insights, and writing several drafts of this short essay, I was —at risk of sounding rabbinical-- at an impasse. I felt my only hope at adding any meaningful interpretation to the holidays would be anecdotal because what could I otherwise bring to the table that rabbis and other scholarly men and women hadn't already brought? And yet any personal anecdotes I had felt so silly in the shadow of this massive holiday. And why was it even important to me to bring something new to the table? The answer of course is ego. For me to tell you the story of breaking fast as a child with a king-sized Snickers bar only to get violently ill from the sugar rush would be about trying to get a laugh, which would be about ego. And what we're taught about Yom Kippur through the service, discussion, and acts of contrition, through the small pangs of hunger that needle us throughout the day, what were taught during these ten days of awe, is that there should be little room for the self, the ego, let alone laughs. Despite this, these acts of repentance and atonement are ultimately about our attempt to be sealed into the book of life for another year. We do them because they're the right thing to do but it's also a plea bargain of sorts. Ultimately, we are served through these selfless acts. The rest of what I'd like to share is a teaching I found that resonated with me during this impasse I had in my reflection. It speaks to this idea of ego in particular, this tension or dichotomy of self. It is a teaching of Rabbi Toba Spitzer that she delivered at her Reconstructionist congregation outside of Boston and I'll share it now with some slight editing.

"It was said of Reb Simcha Bunem that he carried two slips of paper, one in each pocket. On one he wrote: Bishvili nivra ha-olam—"for my sake the world was created." On the other he wrote: V'anokhi afar v'efer"—"I am but dust and ashes." He would take out each slip of paper as necessary, as a reminder to himself.

The two pockets suggest a kind of balance that we need to achieve, as we walk through this world. Some of us are quite comfortable with the idea that the world was created for our sake. Maybe it's hard to admit, but if you carry yourself with a certain sense of entitlement, an expectation that the world's doors should open easily before you, if you tend to think that most of the time you're right and the world around you is getting it wrong, then perhaps it's time to spend a little time in the "dust and ashes" pocket.

"Dust and ashes" helps cut through our arrogance; our conviction that we're always right or that we need to be right. It helps put our life and our ego in perspective. It's a really important reminder to think about how much of life's bounty we really are entitled to, and do we perhaps enjoy a far greater share than any one person might reasonably expect. Once we have that realization, it's amazing how generosity and abundance can open up in our hearts and in our lives.

V'anokhi afar v'efer"—"I am but dust and ashes"—is also a call to an awareness of our finite-ness, our mortality, our smallness in the cosmic scheme of things. If this thought frightens you, then that might be another reason to spend some time in this pocket. We all struggle so mightily against this reality, and that struggle causes us a lot suffering. To know that really truly we are of this earth, that we will one day return to this earth, and that ultimately that's okay, is a real spiritual achievement. It's a reminder that it is a great gift to just be alive each day. It's something to cultivate.

But there are those of us for whom the "dust and ashes" pocket is a bit too familiar, who

live with this awareness to an excessive degree. Those of us who never attend to our own needs, who are constantly putting ourselves down, feeling worthless, small, as if we and our lives amount to very little indeed.

If that is your tendency, then your challenge is to dive into the pocket of “for my sake was the world created.” and remember this world is here for us, too. For those of us who spend too much time in the “dust and ashes” pocket, we may forget that we are unique and necessary creations. For our sake the world was created. And not only that—we each have our own particular work to do. Our task is not to become someone else, not to achieve what the people we are forever comparing ourselves to are achieving. No, each of our tasks is to simply become our full selves—what is called here “perfecting our particular being.” Not being perfect—there is no such thing. But doing what it is that we are put here to do, that which is unique to each of us. Each of us has some work to do in this world, something to repair, that only we can do. To ignore or shirk that task by pleading our own incompetence or unworthiness is a kind of affront to God, to the Source of Creation. When it rises in your mind, in your heart, pull out this piece of paper, and say to it, Bishvili nivra ha-olam—“for my sake the world was created!”

Most of us, I would imagine, fall somewhere between these two pockets, sometimes knowing that the world was created for my sake, sometimes feeling like dust and ashes. It is good to move back and forth between the two pockets, as Reb Simcha Bunem used to do. And perhaps best of all is to experience both at the same time: the radical humility of “dust and ashes,” and the acceptance and love of self of “the world was created for my sake.” We can spend this Yom Kippur seeking that integration, trying to cultivate both of these qualities within ourselves. May each of us find the balance that will allow us to walk through this world gently but powerfully, offering each of our gifts to the task of creating a world of wholeness, and peace.”