

The
CHASSIDUS
PERSPECTIVE
 with Reb Yoel Kahn



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A REWARD OF DUST AND ASHES

When Avraham pleaded with Hashem not to destroy Sedom, he said, "I am but dust and ashes." The Gemara explains that as a reward for this statement, Avraham's descendants merited to receive two *mitzvos*: the ashes of the *parah adumah*, and the dust given to the *sotah* to drink.

What is the connection between these two *mitzvos* and Avraham's statement? At first glance, it seems that the common denominator is that both are associated with "dust" and "ashes." In his great humility, Avraham compared himself to dust and ashes, the same items used for these two *mitzvos*.

However, it is obvious that the Torah would not link together unrelated concepts just because they share a common word. It must be that Avraham's statement and the *parah adumah* and *sotah* are related in content as well.

The Baal Haturim writes that the gematriya of *afar*, dust, is the same as *lesotah* (when spelled with a *sin*)—350. Similarly, the gematriya of *va'eifer*, "and ashes," is the same as *beparah*—287. But here, too, there is surely something in common beyond the identical gematriya. The equal numeric value is merely a derivative of the common theme shared by the two.

What is this common theme?

TWO TYPES OF GIVERS

We all know that Avraham was the epitome of kindness. His goodness knew no bounds, and he went out of his way to invite guests and provide them with whatever they needed.

What motivates a person to be kind to others? There are two possibilities.

Imagine your typical wealthy philanthropist. In addition to financial prosperity, he is blessed with a compassionate heart and is always looking for worthy causes to support. He is well aware of his virtuousness and that through supporting charitable organizations, his fame as a man of noble character will spread.

But then you have a motivation of a completely different sort: "I am but dust and ashes." This is an individual who has no ego whatsoever, and *that* is why he is selflessly devoted to others. In his mind, everyone else comes first, and this prompts him to gladly give others anything and everything he can.

Since everyone else comes first, he will make sure all their needs are met, and only then will he leave a bit for himself.

What is the difference between these two individuals? Obviously, there is a big difference in how they look at themselves and what motivates them to give. However, there is also a practical difference.

The wealthy philanthropist puts himself first. Therefore, when apportioning his wealth, he will leave the lion's share for himself, leaving whatever is left for people

and institutions in need. But the selfless giver adopts an opposite approach. Since everyone else comes before him, he will first make sure all their needs are met, and only then will he leave a bit for himself.

DANGEROUS PRAYER

Similarly, when a *tzaddik* davens on behalf of another, it can be done in two ways. One way is where the *tzaddik* realizes that he is much better off spiritually than the other, but nonetheless, seeing that the other is in danger, he prays to Hashem to protect him. After all, even a *tzaddik* must reach out and assist others.

Then there is Avraham's approach. When he davened on behalf of the people of Sedom, he said, "I am but dust and ashes." As soon as Hashem told him about the city's imminent destruction, there was no question in his mind that he would do whatever he could to save them.

This attitude of putting others first was apparent in many ways. For one, Avraham was putting himself in a tough spot. Challenging Hashem's decision had the potential to provoke His wrath, and it could not be taken lightly. Nevertheless, Avraham was willing to place himself in jeopardy to intervene on behalf of the inhabitants of Sedom.

PRE-GEMARA HACHNOSAS ORCHIM

Not only was Avraham prepared to sacrifice his physical wellbeing, he was even willing to make spiritual sacrifices for the sake of others.

In the beginning of the *parshah*, the Torah relates that Hashem appeared to Avraham. In the midst of basking in Hashem's presence, Avraham noticed three angels (who appeared as men) standing nearby. Leaving the *shechinah* behind, he ran toward them and invited them for a meal.

How could Avraham abandon Hashem's presence for the sake of some guests?

The Gemara derives from this story that inviting guests is greater than welcoming Hashem's presence. But when Avraham did this, this lesson had not yet been derived. His conduct ended up being the source of this lesson, but in Avraham's time, this was not yet known. Why did Avraham leave the *shechinah* behind?

The answer is that Avraham viewed himself as "dust and ashes." If there were people who could use a good meal, there was no question that they came first, even if it meant leaving Hashem's presence. Moreover, Avraham did not know they were angels. He thought they were regular men, people who prostrated to the dust on their feet. Avraham was prepared to forgo even spiritual advancement to help people he thought were idol worshippers!

KINDNESS, AVRAHAM-STYLE

In reward for saying "I am but dust and ashes," Avraham's descendants were given two *mitzvos*: the ashes of the *parah adumah* and the dust of the *sotah*. These two *mitzvos* likewise

demonstrate sacrificing personal gain to help another.

The *halachah* is that all those involved in the preparation of the *parah adumah* became impure (from its slaughtering until its ashes were gathered). The *parah adumah* was prepared by the Kohanim, who served in the Beis Hamikdash and represent sanctity and purity. Yet, they were instructed to *become impure* so that a person who touched a dead corpse could become pure!

Similarly, a *sotah* would only drink the bitter waters if her husband had warned her not to spend time in private with another man and she disregarded his warning. In other words, even in a best-case scenario she is no *tzadeikes*; even if she did not sin, she certainly did not behave modestly. Yet, Hashem commands us to erase His holy name, just to bring harmony between this woman and her husband!

Both *mitzvos* of *parah adumah* and *sotah* reflect Avraham's perspective to put himself aside for the sake of

others. Hashem wants us, as well, to embrace this approach. He therefore gave us these two *mitzvos*, which teach us a general lesson (beyond the parameters of *parah adumah* and *sotah*): We must be kind, Avraham-style. Even if our personal wellbeing is at stake, nothing should stop us from bringing purity and harmony to other Jews.

For further study, see *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 25, pp. 79-83.

We learn from Avraham that inviting guests is greater than welcoming Hashem's presence. But how did Avraham know this?

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