Humility and Strength of Character: Thoughts on Parashat Vayera

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"...for I am dust and ashes." (Bereishith 18:27)

When God informed Abraham that He was intending to destroy the wicked city of Sodom, Abraham immediately challenged the Divine decision. Perhaps, argued Abraham, there were righteous people in the city: should they perish along with the wicked people? "Will the Judge of all the world not act justly?"

Abraham demonstrated amazing "chutzpah" in confronting the Almighty. After all, what right did he have to challenge God? Why didn't he simply accept the decree, recognizing God's infinite wisdom and power? Doesn't true piety demand passive acquiescence to the will of God?

Abraham set a different model of faith, one that recognized the right of humans to voice their feelings and demands to God. Abraham, in pleading with God, acknowledged that he was only "dust and ashes", that he was unworthy of arguing with the Almighty; and yet, he proceeded to challenge God. In spite of his lowliness as a mortal human, he felt entitled to question the decisions of eternal God.

Faith does not mandate passive subservience. Humility does not preclude standing up for one's views. Although we are only "dust and ashes", we are human beings created in God's image. Although we must always be aware of our ultimate smallness and insignificance, we must also always be aware of the Divine spark within us. Vanity and arrogance are signs of foolishness. Silence in the face of injustice is a sign of defective moral development. Abraham showed that humility and strength of character go together.

Abraham presented himself before God as being "dust and ashes". Dust (i.e. the earth) is actually the source of life. Our food grows from the earth. Dust symbolizes the power of fruitfulness. It points to the future, to crops that will grow and sustain us in coming seasons and in coming years. On the other hand, ashes are the residue of things that have burnt out. Ashes symbolize the past, that

which no longer exists. Abraham's words to God, then, might be paraphrased as follows: I know that my life only occupies an infinitesimal amount of time and space, and that You are the Eternal and the Infinite. But don't dismiss me due to the smallness of my existence. I am "dust", I am the forerunner of future generations, I symbolize the future of humanity. I am "ashes", I live with the memory of all the generations that came before me, I symbolize the past of humanity. I stand before you, God, as a human link between all that is past and all that is future. My life constitutes a cosmic instant--but I speak not due to my own worthiness, but as a representative of humanity past and future. If I am speaking to You with "chutzpah", it is because I speak on behalf of humanity's need to maintain an honest and forthright relationship with You.

In working on our own faith, we can learn much from Abraham's confrontation with God. We each come before God as "dust and ashes". This underscores our need for humility. But it also underscores how each one of us represents the past and the future of humanity, and how we must develop the moral courage to stand up for what is right and just. Humility and strength of character go together.

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