Dust to Dust: Thoughts for Parashat Bereishith

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Bereishith

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“And the Lord God fashioned Adam from the dust of the earth” (Bereishith 2:7).

Rashi quotes two opinions, drawn from Midrashic teachings, as to the nature of this dust that was used to create Adam i.e. humanity. One opinion suggests that God gathered dust from the four corners of the earth in order to fashion Adam. The other opinion has it that God took the dust from one spot, the site of the future holy Temple in Jerusalem.

What is this rabbinic debate all about? Surely, the rabbis had no evidence as to what dust God actually used to create Adam. Neither side argued that it had an ancient tradition to bolster its viewpoint. These rabbinic opinions are not dealing with establishing a historic fact but are concerned with something fundamental about the essence and nature of humanity.

God created Adam from dust drawn from the four corners of the earth. Rashi notes that this was done so that no matter where a human being would die, the earth would receive his/her remains. In other words, a human being is “at home” everywhere on earth.

The broader lesson is that a person belongs to the entire world. Nothing human is alien to him/her. A human being—because he/she is composed from dust taken from throughout the earth—is part and parcel of all humanity, of all that transpires on earth. Thus, a person needs to have a grand vision of his/her place in this world. A human being should feel a sense of relationship with all other human beings—where ever they live. A human’s mind should transcend the concerns of his/her own immediate place and should aspire to grasp universal human wisdom and experience.

God created Adam from the dust from one spot, the site of the future holy Temple in Jerusalem. A human being is rooted in one place, in the holiest place in the world. A person must be rooted in his/her tradition, must be focused on his/her particularity. Knowing that his/her life originates in the sacred dust of Jerusalem, a person can deepen his/her connection with God and with his/her direct and personal relationship with God.

So which opinion is true?

The answer is: both are true. This is not a rabbinic debate of opposing views, but an expression of complementary ideas about the nature of humanity.

A person must be both universal and unique. He/she must recognize an innate kinship with all humanity in the four corners of the earth, and also recognize his/her particular rootedness in a family/tradition/society. A person who is only "universal" will ultimately be deracinated from his/her own uniqueness. A person who is only "particular" will ultimately be disconnected from humanity as a whole, and will become increasingly narrow in outlook. In either case, one's full humanity will be compromised and diminished.

Humans were created from dust and will return to dust. This is a humbling fact. But during the interim when we live on earth, we should strive to lead lives of wisdom, sensitivity and fulfillment. We should fully develop our uniqueness while at the same time fostering our universality.

We were, after all, created from dust from the four corners of the earth and from the dust of the holy Temple in Jerusalem. This is our blessing…and our challenge.

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