Dust to Dust: Thoughts for Parashat Bereishith

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Bereishith

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“Then the Lord God formed the human from the dust of the ground and breathed into its nostrils the breath of life and it became a living soul” (Bereishith 2:7).

God could have created Adam from precious metals, from stardust, or from pure spirit but chose rather to use dust of the ground. Not only do we originate in dust, but we will also end as dust. God informs Adam (Bereishith 3:19): "for dust you are, and to dust you shall return". And Kohelet (3:20) reminds us: "All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all return to dust.”

Being composed of dust is a humbling thought. No matter how wise or rich or powerful we may think we are, we ultimately are just dust. In the span of eternity, our lives are a tiny instant. In the vastness of the universe, we are infinitesimally small. By creating us from dust, God was reminding us to remain humble, to view life as a precious but ephemeral gift. Those who display arrogance and egotism thereby demonstrate their vanity and foolishness.

But dust is also the foundation of all life! Mother earth produces the plants and vegetation that sustain us. While dust is a symbol of humility, it is also a symbol of productivity. Being created from dust is a reminder that we have tremendous potentialities within us.

The Hassidic sage, Rabbi Simcha Bunim, famously suggested that we keep a note in one pocket with the words: “I am dust and ashes.” In the other pocket we should keep a note with the words: “The world was created for me.” Both notes express truths, but they must be taken together. We are to be aware of our dust-like insignificance…but also our dust-like powers of creativity.

The message is captured in Psalm 8: “When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers,
the moon and stars that You set in place, what is man that You have been mindful of him,
mortal man that You have taken note of him? Yet You have made him little less than the angels,
and adorned him with glory and majesty; You have made him master over Your handiwork,
laying the world at his feet.”

We have recently been reciting the Avinu Malkeinu verses as part of the penitential prayers of Rosh Hashana through Yom Kippur. We ask God for many blessings. In the midst of the requests we say: *Avinu Malkeinu Zekhor ki Afar Anahnu*, Our Father and King, remember that we are dust. This seems to be a plea based on humility. Please God, have mercy on us because we are so insignificant and powerless. But it may also contain another message: Please God, have mercy on us because we have

the potential to generate and sustain life, to be creative forces that can make the world a better place.

Just as we remind God that we are dust, so we need to remind ourselves that we are dust. This teaches us humility…and self-respect. So much wisdom can be found in dust!