



Two Pockets

Note: This written version served as the basis for the sermon that was delivered on Yom Kippur. The sermon was delivered without the text or notes, so this written version is slightly different from what people heard in-person.

There's a slip of paper I have had taped to my computer screen at work since I became a rabbi – a small slip of paper with two phrases on it. It comes from the teaching of Rabbi Simcha Bunim, a great Polish Hasidic master at the turn of the 19th century. He is credited with saying the following - “Everyone must have two pockets, with a note in each pocket, so that he or she can reach into one or the other, depending on the need. When feeling lowly and depressed, discouraged or disconsolate, one should reach into the right pocket, and, there, find the words: *Bishvili nivra ha-olam* "The world was created for me." (BT Sanhedrin 37B) But when feeling high and mighty one should reach into the left pocket, and find the words: *V'anochi afar v'efer* "I am but dust and ashes." (Gen. 18:27)¹

The phrase, “The world was created for me,” comes from a passage in the Talmud about our uniqueness. The passage states that Adam was created alone to teach us that destroying a single human life is like destroying the entire world. And at the same time, saving a human life is like saving the entire universe. Similarly, the text goes on to say, God was worried about jealousy and competition among people. While coins are all minted from the same stamp, God created each person uniquely and therefore, we each must remind ourselves that, “the world was created for me.”²

The phrase, “I am but dust and ashes” comes from a passage in the book of Genesis. God witnesses the evil doings of the people of Sodom and Gemorrah and decides to destroy them all, but upon sharing His plan with Abraham, Abraham feels that something isn't quite right about the plan. His conscience makes him question God and so he confronts Him about the plan. In the midst of his conversation with

¹ Buber, Martin (1948). *Tales of the Hasidim: Later Masters*. Schocken Books. pp. 249–250.

² BT Sanhedrin 37B

God, in which he tries to negotiate the saving of the people, Abraham states, “I am but dust and ashes, but if there are fifty righteous people in the towns, will you spare them?”³ Abraham’s humility is highlighted and it is Bunim’s teaching to us that in moments of opportunity or significant challenge, sometimes it is our humility and our self-control that can bring about meaningful shifts in our lives and the lives of others. It can even change God’s mind!

We are supposed to have both slips of paper in our pockets because there are times when we must remember and celebrate our uniqueness, but there are also times when we must recognize our small place in a much bigger world. It’s about recognizing that we should neither be too high on ourselves nor too low – that we must constantly re-evaluate ourselves and adjust accordingly.

Unfortunately, we’ve moved way out of calibration. While we see the world around us turning to dust and ashes, both literally and figuratively, we tend to see ourselves as the center of the world, as if the world was created purely for our own sake. The optimism we have placed on our own capacity, combined with the pessimism we have placed on the world around us, is not only unhealthy, it is destructive, both personally and collectively. We cannot build a better world when we have already declared its ultimate destruction. And we cannot better ourselves if we only focus on pursuing our own success and happiness. It seems that our pants only have one pocket, and inside that pocket is the phrase, “The world was created for me.”

David Brooks, an op-ed columnist for the New York Times who wrote a wonderful book recently (*The Road to Character*), calls this our focus on, ‘The Big Me’, in which our culture celebrates putting ourselves at the center of the universe in the pursuit of happiness and success. Unfortunately, it’s led to some of the problems that we work so hard to combat.

1. For example, between 1948 and 1954, psychologists asked more than 10,000 adolescents whether they considered themselves to be a very important person. At that point, 12% said yes. The same question was revisited in 1989, and this time it wasn’t 12% who considered themselves very important, it was 80% of boys and 77% of girls.
2. Psychologists have a thing called the narcissism test. They read people statements and ask if the statements apply to them. Statements such as “I like to be the center of attention... I show off if I get the chance because I am extraordinary... Somebody should write a biography about me.” The median narcissism score has risen 30% in the last two decades. 93% of young people score higher than the middle score just twenty years ago. The largest gains have been in the number of people who agree with the statements “I am an extraordinary person” and “I like to look at my body.”
3. Along with this apparent rise in self-esteem, there has been a tremendous increase in the desire for fame. Fame used to rank low as a life’s ambition for most people. In a 1976 survey that asked people to list their life goals, ‘fame’ ranked fifteenth out of sixteen. By 2007, 51% of young people reported that being famous was one of their top personal goals. In one study, middle school girls were asked who they would most like to have dinner with. Jennifer Lopez came in first, Jesus Christ came in second, and Paris Hilton third. The girls were then asked which of the following jobs they would like to have. Nearly twice as many

³ Summary of Gen. 18:27-28

said they'd rather be a celebrity's personal assistant— for example, Justin Bieber's— than president of Harvard.⁴

4. And this statistic is confounding - in one study, when college students were asked if they'd rather lead a life where they have a lot of fame or have a lot of sex, 2-to-1, they would choose to have a life with a lot of fame.⁵

What is this world coming to?!

There's a great shirt that a friend of mine showed me recently. It says, "I live in my own little world. But it's ok. They know me here." And there's another popular one that has a picture of a pickle with the statement, "I'm kind of a big dill." We are so much about me, me, me. We've become extremely optimistic about our own capabilities. And for good reason – in today's world, we can accomplish so much, become so successful, and receive *immediate* gratification for that success. All we have to do is post about it online and we'll receive a bunch of likes, smiley faces, hearts, and comments within hours, if not minutes. And it feels so good and makes us so happy to be recognized for our accomplishments. We've come to *expect* recognition for those accomplishments. As Brooks points out, we've become "approval-seeking machines, to measure [our] lives by external praise— if people like you and accord you status, then you must be doing something right."⁶ We tell ourselves, our children, our friends, that they can accomplish anything; that with some blood, sweat, and tears, you can be what you want to be in this world – that we have an unbound freedom that is unparalleled in human history – that we have access to resources and opportunities that our ancestors never did – that we can have a global impact, not just a local or communal impact – that anything is possible.

But in actuality, this optimism is pretty exclusionary. Because self-centered optimism tends to come at the expense of the people around us. Our desire for success, happiness, and recognition leads to a focus on what **I** need to do to get ahead or have an impact; what **I** need to say to make sure my voice is heard; what **I** need to create in order to gain respect, credibility, or appropriate compensation. When we form our identity and our purpose from this mindset, we are creating our identity from an exclusionary place. It makes it a lot easier for us to measure success, because it's on our own terms.

The selfie is the perfect example of our societal shift to the 'Big Me'. We don't even need another person to take our picture anymore. When someone else takes your picture, s/he has control over how the picture will turn out – their perspective is included in the end result. But with selfies, there is no need for a cameraman or another perspective. It is purely one's own. It is close and it is self-imposed. It allows us to make up our own identity instead of searching for the real one. As Brooks points out, "From an older tradition of self-combat we move to self-liberation and self-expression. Moral authority is no longer found in some external objective good; it is found in each person's unique original self."⁷

As a result, we are less likely to turn inward to find purpose and meaning. Communication has become so fast and instantaneous that we have very little time to even listen to our internal voice. The comedian Louis CK makes a poignant joke about this when asked about why he doesn't want to buy a cell phone for his kids.

⁴ (for statistics #1-3) - Brooks, David. *The Road to Character* (Kindle Locations 245-261). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=64VQlatUgIg>

⁶ Brooks, David. *The Road to Character* (Kindle Locations 4870-4871). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

⁷ Brooks, David. *The Road to Character* (Kindle Locations 4796-4797). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

“You need to build your ability to be yourself and not be doing something. That’s what phones are taking away – the ability to just sit there...because underneath everything, there’s that thing – that forever empty. That knowledge that it’s all for nothing and that you’re alone – it’s down there. And sometimes, when things clear away, you’re in your car and you start sayin’ ‘oh no, here it comes, I’m alone.’ It starts to visit on you – the sadness – life is tremendously sad just being in it. And so you’re driving and that’s why we text and drive. If you look around, pretty much 100% of people driving are texting and they’re murdering each other with their cars. But people are willing to take someone’s life and ruin their own because they don’t want to be alone for a second because it’s so hard...”⁸

Reaching for the smartphone is not just a desire to stay connected – it’s a response to the fear of what we’ll discover if we actually spend the time reflecting and listening to the inner voice which we have done such a good job of muting.

It’s time for us to realize that we need that other pocket and that if we reinstate the phrase “I am but dust and ashes” back into our lives, that we will not only find more personal fulfillment, but we will also start to see changes in the world around us. Brooks points out that there are two types of virtues – résumé virtues and eulogy virtues. “The résumé virtues are the ones you list on your résumé, the skills that you bring to the job market and that contribute to external success. The eulogy virtues are deeper. They’re the virtues that get talked about at your funeral, the ones that exist at the core of your being— whether you are kind, brave, honest or faithful; what kind of relationships you formed.”⁹ We spend a lot of time, and the world around us supports, focusing on the résumé virtues. But at the end of the day, those are not the things that people will talk about at our funeral. We have to reorient ourselves around the eulogy virtues that we know should guide our lives and we do so by understanding the role of humility and our own fallibility.

In our tradition, the search for those virtues tends to take place in the desert – a place devoid of distractions and disruptions. Jacob discovers himself in the desert. Moses discovers himself in the desert. And then there’s the story about the prophet, Elijah, found in the Book of Kings, and referenced in the Unetaneh Tokef prayer during the High Holydays. Frightened for his life because he is being pursued, Elijah flees into the desert, leaving his servant behind. Here’s what transpires:

He himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness. He came to a bush and sat down under it, and prayed that he might die. “Enough!” he cried. “Now, O LORD, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers.” He lay down and fell asleep under a bush. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, “Arise and eat.” He looked about; and there, beside his head, was a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water! He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the LORD came a second time and touched him and said, “Arise and eat, or the journey will be too much for you.” He arose and ate and drank; and with the strength from that meal he walked forty days and forty nights as far as the mountain of God at Horeb (*NOTE: this is the SAME mountain where Moses saw the burning bush and met God for the first time*). There he went into a cave, and there he spent the night.

Then the word of the LORD came to him. God said to him, “Why are you here, Elijah?” He replied, “I am moved by zeal for the LORD, the God of Hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and put Your prophets to the sword. I alone am left, and

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HbYScltflc>

⁹ Brooks, David. *The Road to Character* (Kindle Locations 66-68). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

they are out to take my life.” “Come out,” God called, “and stand on the mountain before the LORD.” And lo, God passed by.

There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of God; but Adonai was not in the wind.

After the wind — an earthquake; but God was not in the earthquake.

After the earthquake — fire; but God was not in the fire.

And after the fire — a still, small voice (in Hebrew, *kol d'mama dakah*).

When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his cloak around his face and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then a voice addressed him: “Why are you here, Elijah?”¹⁰

God was not in the grandiose moments, the pomp and circumstance, the crashes and booms, the obvious and overt moments. God was not in the shiny objects, the headlines, or the towering edifices. God was in the still, small voice. The almost inaudible sound that some rabbis, including Rashi and Abraham Joshua Heschel, translate as “the voice of silence.”¹¹ It was the inner voice that asked the question, “Why are you here?” And that is *exactly* the question we should always be asking ourselves. Why are we here? What is my purpose? What am I supposed to add to this world during my time on earth?

Deep down, we know these are the questions we should be asking, but we’ve reached the point where we’re okay with moral mediocrity – we say to ourselves, ‘well, I’m not hurting anyone and life is okay’ without really feeling like we’re constantly pursuing the best self we can be. We settle. We get lazy. We work too hard at our jobs, at parenting, at maintaining friendships, at making it to the next stage of whatever it may be, and we just don’t have any energy left to work on ourselves. We neglect ourselves. Soul Cycle can’t really fill up our soul – it’s one step in the right direction, but it’s what you do when you’re not on the bike that matters. As Brooks points out, “Maturity does not glitter. It is not built on the traits that make people celebrities. A mature person possesses a settled unity of purpose. The mature person has moved from fragmentation to centeredness, has achieved a state in which the restlessness is over, the confusion about the meaning and purpose of life is calmed. The mature person can make decisions without relying on the negative and positive reactions from admirers or detractors because the mature person has steady criteria to determine what is right.”¹² Even if the world around us may seem out of control, by doing the important work on ourselves – listening to that still, small voice, and reminding ourselves that we are ‘but dust and ashes’ - we can meet the challenges of this world with strength and resilience.

Here are a few things we can do this year to try and refocus ourselves and address the question, “Why am I here?”

1. Lean on your **faith**

And by faith, I mean more than faith in yourself. Lean on your convictions, your moral compass, your recognition that there is *something* out there that is more powerful than you. I’ve started a relationship with a local pastor and through a series of conversations that we’ve started (and will continue to develop over the course of this year), I’ve learned how lucky we are, as Jews, to have a faith system that has combined belief with action. Some of the Christians who have attended our sessions have listened to descriptions of our Jewish rituals with envy and yearning, because we have done a brilliant job of making faith more than just a relationship with God – we’ve

¹⁰ 1 Kings 19:4-13

¹¹ <http://www.torahatrek.org/app-writings/writing-2>

¹² Brooks, David. The Road to Character (Kindle Locations 5104-5107). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

made it about a relationship with one another. And we access these relationships over the Shabbat dinner table, during the Passover seder, and by lighting Hanukah candles with our family and friends. I urge you to find one ritual this year that you can reclaim – a ritual that you can build upon from the way your parents or grandparents did it (or maybe even the way you’ve been doing it for years) and to re-discover the beauty and depth of that ritual. Shabbat is probably the easiest and most accessible one, but there are plenty to choose from. Ritualizing your life adds purpose and meaning to your actions and forces you to add intentionality into what otherwise can be mundane actions or experiences.

2. Embrace your **baggage**

On Rosh Hashanah, we blow the shofar and some Chasidic teachings state that we blow the shofar because there are some emotions and some experiences that are best understood through a cry. Words cannot always capture the depth and meaning of our sadness, our pain, our joy, or our passion. The Kotzker Rebbe taught, “There is nothing more whole than a broken heart.” We are most whole when we embrace the messiness of our lives. We are closest to discovering ourselves when we embrace our vulnerability and deficiencies. Our tradition does not want us to ignore our suffering and our faults – our tradition wants us to name them, honor them, and then find ways of dealing with them – not to ignore, deflect, or deny them. After this sermon, we’re going to name a litany of faults and deficiencies that we’ve collectively committed over the past year. Own them! Embrace them! And through the brokenness, we can find wholeness.

3. Sit in your **loneliness**

I have the habit of turning on the radio to listen to music as soon as I get into my car because the truth is, I don’t like sitting in silence. But I’m really working on changing that habit. Every time I’m in the car by myself, I’m going to try and take at least five minutes to sit in the silence. I started this new approach a couple of weeks ago and while it’s really hard for me to do, it’s also been transformative. We give ourselves so little time to sit in silence. That’s why so many of us find such joy and connectedness in nature, where the sounds of the forest or ocean seem to complement the internal voice, in contrast to opposing it like so many of the sounds that flood our lives these days. Make the time to sit in the silence and to sit in those rare moments of solitude. If we can learn to enjoy that solitude and the loneliness that accompanies it, we will be able to access the still, small voice in valuable and transformative ways.

4. Find your **joy** beyond survival

There’s a popular joke used to describe every Jewish holiday – “They tried to kill us, we survived, let’s eat!” We’re a people all about survival. We’ve earned our bragging rights in that department. But we have to enjoy life beyond the fact that we have survived. Too often, when asked how we’re doing, we reply, “I’m surviving,” as a way to indicate that we’re barely making it through all the things happening in our lives. Begrudgingly, we accept survival as good enough as opposed to celebrating the real joys in our life. Pessimism is all the rage these days. It’s almost as if it’s ‘cool’ to say that we’re working too hard, that we’ve got five million things to do this weekend, that we’ve got no time to breathe and not time to have any fun. How lame is that?! But what brings you real joy in your life? Think about it for a minute and then think about how often you access that joy. How are you celebrating that joy in your life? How are you putting that joy at the center of your daily experiences?

We need to return to a balance between the two pockets. We need to understand the value in both phrases, “The world was created for me,” and, “I am but dust and ashes.” We need to recalibrate our

focus away from résumé virtues and focus on eulogy virtues. And we need to listen to that still, small voice within us.

Please stand up and repeat after me:

- The world was created for me.
- I am but dust and ashes.
- The world was created for me.
- I am but dust and ashes.
- The world was created for me.
- I am but dust and ashes.

Now go start your year.