



YK Study Session 5786 (2025) Humility in an Age of Hubris

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אבינו מלכנו זכור כי עפר אנחנו
Avinu Malkenu, remember that we are but dust

From whence the liturgy

Ps 103:14

כִּי־הוּא יָדַע וַיִּצְרֵנוּ זָכוֹר כִּי־עֹפָר אֲנִינִי:

For [God] knows how we are formed,
and is mindful that we are dust.

Steinsaltz commentary: God is aware of how powerless we are and how much we need His kindness and mercy, **for He knows** how intense **our** evil **impulses** are, so likely to cause us to veer from the proper path. **He is mindful that we are but dust**, physical beings, children of the earth, and that because of this, He cannot expect perfection from us.

On the origins of dust and humanity

Gn 2:7

וַיִּצְרֵן יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאָדָם עָפָר מִן־הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפֹּחַ בָּאָפִין נְשָׁמַת חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה:

God יהוה formed the Human from the soil's humus blowing into his nostrils the breath of life: the Human became a living being. [*The Contemporary Torah*, JPS, trans., 2006]

What does it mean to be dust?

Pirkei Avot 3:1

עַקְבִּיָּא בֶן מַהֲלָלֵאל אוֹמֵר, הִסְתַּכַּל בְּשִׁלְשָׁה דְּבָרִים וְאִי אַתָּה בָּא לַיְדִי עֲבִירָה. דַּע מֵאֵין בָּאתָ, וּלְאֵן אַתָּה הוֹלֵךְ, וּלְפָנֶי מִי אַתָּה עֲתִיד לִתֵּן דִּין וְחֶשְׁבוֹן. מֵאֵין בָּאתָ, מִטְּפָה סְרוּחָה, וּלְאֵן אַתָּה הוֹלֵךְ, לְמָקוֹם עָפָר רִמָּה וְתוֹלְעָה. וּלְפָנֶי מִי אַתָּה עֲתִיד לִתֵּן דִּין וְחֶשְׁבוֹן, לְפָנֶי מֶלֶךְ מַלְכֵי הַמְּלָכִים הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא:

Akabyah ben Mahalalel said: mark well three things and you will not come into the power of sin: know from where you come, and where you are going, and before whom you are destined to give an account and reckoning. From where do you come? From a putrid drop. Where are you going? To a place of dust, of worm and of maggot. Before whom you are destined to give an account and reckoning? Before the King of the kings of kings, the Holy, Blessed One.

Hasidic

According to Hasidic tradition, Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peshischa carried two slips of paper, one in each pocket. On one he wrote: *Bishvili nivra ha-olam*—“for my sake the world was created.” On the other he wrote: *V'anokhi afar v'efer*—“I am but dust and ashes.”

How could our stories be different if we remembered that we were but dust?

On hubris and humility

Context: The story of the judge, Jephthah, is related in Jdg 11 – 12. In this story, Jephthah, an able warrior who had been driven out of his family home for being the bastard born son of his father, a chieftain, and a prostitute. When the Ammonites go to war against the Gileadites, Jephthah's brothers ask him to come back and lead them. Just before Jephthah goes out to face the Ammonites in battle, he makes a vow to God: “If You deliver the Ammonites into my hands, then whatever comes out of the door of my house to meet me on my safe return from the Ammonites shall be GOD's and shall be offered by me as a burnt offering” [Jdg 11: 30-31]. Unfortunately, the first thing to greet him upon his successful return from battle is his daughter. The sad end to the story appears to be that, after a period where she is able to bewail her virginity in the hills with her female companions, Jephthah sacrifices his daughter.

Two Versions of a Midrash on the Story:

Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Bechukotai 7:1

...והלא פנחס היה שם, והוא אמר לא אוכל לשוב אלא פנחס אמר אני כהן גדול בן כהן גדול אשפיל עצמי ואלך אצל עם הארץ, ויפתח אמר אני ראש שבטי ישראל, ראש הקצינים, אשפיל עצמי ואלך אצל הדיוט, מבין שניהם אבדה ההוא עלובה, ושניהם נתחייבו בדמיה

...But was not Phinehas [the High Priest] there? Still he [Jephthah] said (Jdg 11: 35): “Alas, daughter! You have brought me low; you have become my troubler! For I have uttered a vow to GOD and I cannot retract.” However, Phinehas had said: I am a high priest and the son of a high priest. Shall I humble myself and go to an ignoramus (*'am ha'arets*)? But Jephthah said: I am head of the tribes of Israel and head of the magistrates. Shall I humble myself and go to a commoner? Between the two of them that poor woman perished; so the two of them were liable for her blood...

Bereshit Rabbah 60:3

ולא היה שם פינחס שיתיר לו את נדרו, אלא פינחס אמר הוא צריך לי ואני אלה אצלו, ויפתח אמר אני ראש קציני ישראל ואני הולך לי אצל פינחס, בין דין לדין אבדה הנערה ההיא, הדא דבריתא אמרה בין חיתא למחבלתא אזל ברא דעלובתא. ושניהם נענשו בדמיה של נערה

...Pinhas [the high priest] was not there to abrogate his [Yiftah's] vow for him. Instead, Pinhas said: ‘It is he who requires my services; shall I go to him?’ And Yiftah said: ‘I am the head of the chieftains of Israel, shall I go to Pinhas?’ Between the two of them, that young woman was lost. This accords with [the saying] that people say: Between the midwife and the mother in childbirth, the son of the wretched woman is gone. Both of them [Pinhas and Yiftah] were punished for the blood of the young woman...