

“The World Was Created for My Sake”
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I recently had the good fortune of meeting a colleague, a fellow teacher and rabbi of the Jewish People, whom I had been hearing about for years. He is what some might call one of the *g'dolei ha'dor*— the sages of this generation. He is learned. He is kind. He is inspirational. A good teacher. In his 30 years in the rabbinate, he has touched thousands of lives.

Imagine my surprise, then, when he told me that the weeks preceding the High Holy Days are the time when he is the most crotchety, the most ornery, the most anxious of the entire year. Even after three decades of writing, speaking, teaching, he worries if what he prepares will measure up to others' expectations. He worries if his comments will inspire his congregants. If his talks will stir them. If his preaching will touch them.

He is never sure. So in the weeks preceding those comments, those talks, that preaching — he worries.

Recalling our conversation, I found myself wondering how such a person — a veteran, an old hand, in fact — could be given to such doubts. How could such a person so question his judgment, his instincts, and his learning after so many successful years in the rabbinate?

It was then that I was reminded of Rabbi Simcha Bunem of Psischke. Simcha Bunem is one of my favorite figures from Hasidic lore. He was the reluctant rebbe, elected without having sought the position. He was also renowned for moderation in a time of extremism. But what most distinguished Simcha Bunem were two notes he carried in his pockets. Occasionally, after giving a particularly stirring lesson or sermon, Simcha Bunem would feel his pride starting to swell and his sense of self-importance growing. When this happened, he would reach into one pocket and carefully remove the note inside. Reverently he would unfold it and study what he had written. “I am but dust and ashes,” the note said.

In those moments of pride and hubris, these words helped Rabbi Simcha maintain his humility and his reverence for God and his awe of God's creation. The words “I am dust and ashes” reminded Simcha Bunem of his own smallness, especially when he was feeling like the influential rebbe he had already become.

But there were also occasions when Rabbi Bunem was given to anxiety and even self-doubt — when a sense of smallness and fallibility would overwhelm him. On those days, he would reach into his other pocket and remove the other note. Reverently he would unfold it and study what he had written. It said: “The world was created for my sake.”

These words of which Rabbi Simcha would remind himself over and over, would elevate his spirits and his confidence so he could resume his enterprise of learning and teaching and creating and living.

This being the season to confess our shortcomings, I confess there are times when I too find myself straying in the direction of excessive pride or doubt. Inspired by Simcha Bunem, if I fear I behaved in a boastful or prideful way, I imagine reaching into a pocket and unfolding a note reminding me that I'm what is known as "*ish basar v'dam*" — a person of flesh and blood.

There are other times, though, when I, like Simcha Bunem and my older rabbinic colleague, find myself given to self-doubt, self-questioning, and worry. Since we're in the middle of one, let's take for example: sermons. Sometimes I wonder: Is the topic important enough? Is the content interesting enough? Provocative enough? Touching enough? Meaningful enough? Short enough?

In those moments of doubt, I know I am not alone. I wish so many others did too. I see such painful doubt in kids who don't raise their hands during class because they are afraid of being judged. I see it in widows and widowers who feel they can't go on alone. I see it in people who are afraid to risk changing jobs because "What if it doesn't work out?" I see it in people who don't vote because "What difference will it make?" I see it in teenagers who don't discourage bullying because that would be uncool.

It is in these moments that we need to remember Simcha Bunem the most...and reach into our pockets, telling ourselves:

"Bishvili nivra ha'olam."

"The world was created for me."

Doubt is not only an individual affliction. It can plague an entire society. *Parashat Shelach L'cha* in the Book of Numbers recounts such an instance of doubt on a massive scale. God had ordered Moses to commission 12 men, one from each tribe, to scout out the Land. What kind of country was it? Was the soil rich or poor? Was it wooded or deforested? What kind of people lived there?

At the end of 40 days the scouts returned. Laden with grapes, pomegranates and figs, the scouts reported to Moses and the entire people that the land does indeed flow with milk and honey. "However," they added, we cannot go in. "You see," they said, "the people there are powerful giants. Next to them we look like grasshoppers!"¹ At that pandemonium broke out! The whole community broke into loud cries and railed against Moses and Aaron. "If only we had died in the land of Egypt!" they shouted. "If only we might die in this wilderness!"

And so they did die in the wilderness. Their doubt was so profound that they believed themselves to be grasshoppers. And so they failed to reach the Promised Land. Instead they wandered for 40 years— one for each day of the scouts' wandering— and wondering perhaps about what might have been....

¹ Paraphrasing Num. 13:33.

For that matter, we can wonder too. What might the world be like if had there been no Herzl, no Weizmann, no Berl Katznelson, no Ben Gurion who said “Enough” to being grasshoppers on the field of geopolitics? What would it be like without the 6000 Jews who died so that the State of Israel could be born? What might this country be like without the suffragettes who said no to being grasshoppers on the field of disenfranchised voters? What might it be like without the students in the 60s and 70s who said no to being grasshoppers and forced an end to the Vietnam War? What might it be like without activists for civil rights, women’s rights and gay rights who said no to being grasshoppers? And what would this synagogue be like if the generations before us acted like grasshoppers and stopped constructing this magnificent Sanctuary because of the Great Depression?

Thank God, they weren’t grasshoppers! They refused to be paralyzed by doubt and fear. One way or another, they all overcame their doubts. And so they all...became...GIANTS. They had faith in themselves, in their missions, and in their God.

We are not — we must not be — grasshoppers either! We, too must find that faith. How? On this, the anniversary of Creation, the Torah recounts to us: “*Vayivra Elohim et ha’adam b’tzalmo, b’tzelem Elohim bara oto.*” “And God created human beings in God’s image, in the image of God were we created...“*Va’year Elohim et kol asher asa, v’hinei tov meod.*” “And God saw all that God had made, and found it very good.”²

No, we’re not grasshoppers at all. Created in God’s image, each of us is a holy vessel, a partner in Creation. Heirs to the covenant, we share a sacred partnership with God—to repair this world that was created for our sakes, and to imbue it with goodness. Then can we each become a giant. Each one of us capable of greatness. And that is very good because God needs us.

In the New Year, let us remember this day of Creation everyday, every morning when we wake up. *Bishvili nivra ha’olam.* The world was Created for me. And so let us ask: “What shall I do? What shall you do? What shall we do together to repair it and, in our own way, infuse it with goodness?”

² Gen. 1:27, 31.