I ❤ ISRAEL: Har HaMenuchot and a Sign That Makes You Think

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HaShem tells Moshe: "Lead the battle of the children of Israel against the Midianites; afterward, you will be gathered to [the souls of] your people." (Bamidbar 31:2)

MISSION AND SACRIFICE

In this week's parasha, Moshe Rabenu teaches us a great lesson: how to hold two opposite feelings at once and let them complete each other.

On one side, HaShem tells him, "Go, fight the Midianites, and afterward you will be gathered to your people." That is, you will die. This war is your last mission. Moshe understands. He knows his body will return to the dust, and his soul will join his ancestors. He does not resist. He does not bargain. He accepts his own mortality with humility.

On the other side, Moshe knows he is irreplaceable as a leader. He does not say to HaShem: give this mission to Yehoshua; I am tired; let someone else do it. Moshe knows his worth. He knows no one can take his place. But he feels no vanity. He takes the responsibility on himself, to the last day.

In Moshe, these two opposite ideas—humility and self-worth—complete each other.

BET VAAD LECHOL CHAI

Yesterday, Thursday, I visited Har Hamenuchot, the largest

Jewish cemetery in Yerushalayim. It sits in Givat Shaul. It covers about 58 hectares—roughly 80 soccer fields. More than 200,000 graves. Some of the greatest rabbis of recent generations rest there: Rabbi Chayim Yosef David Azulai; Rabbi Mordekhai Eliyahu; Rabbi Shalom Messas; Rabbi Yaakob Yosef, and many others.

I have to confess something. I generally do not visit cemeteries. I follow the opinion of Maimonides, who writes that one should not frequent graves (Hilkhot Ebel 4:4). And in that same place he teaches that what remembers the tzadikim is not the text carved in stone. It is their teachings. Their words and their deeds, when we recall them, are their true monument. For me, the best way to honor the memory of our Chakhamim is exactly what Maimonides says: to read, study, and teach their ideas.

I had the zekhut of writing the biographies and ideas of more than 120 "forgotten" Sephardic Chakhamim (here). I published two books about them, which I called Forgotten Giants. Every time I write about one of these rabbis, I remember what Chazal said about a verse in Shir haShirim: "*dobeb sifte yeshenim*"—when you repeat, when you teach, the words of a rabbi who has died, "his lips move in the grave" (Yebamot 97a). To bring back his memory is an act of *techiyat hametim*. From this angle, visiting the books of the Chakhamim does more to elevate their memory than visiting their graves.

THE SIGN THAT MAKES YOU THINK

I went to Har Hamenuchot thinking about our patriarchs. Abraham bought the Meara of Makhpela in Hebron in his own lifetime (Bereshit 23). He negotiated, he paid, and he secured his place and Sara's. He did not wait. He did not leave the task to his children. Thinking about the end is not morbid. It is part of living with clear eyes, and a sign of humility before your own mortality.

When I reached the cemetery, a small sign made me stop and think. It was very simple.

It quotes two famous texts.

The first, a line from the Mishna: "*Bishvili nibra haolam*" – "The world was created for me" (Sanhedrin 4:5).

The second, the words of Abraham Abinu: "*Veanokhi afar vaefer*" – "I am only dust and ashes" (Bereshit 18:27).

Two opposite ideas. But the wisdom lies in holding both.

Start with the second, which speaks of our smallness. We are atoms. Dust returning to the earth. The more we learn about the universe, the smaller we look. In space, our whole planet is only a pale blue dot, as Carl Sagan put it. In July 1994, the comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 struck Jupiter and destroyed a surface larger than the entire Earth. It was almost routine, a small event in our small solar system—and it leaves you thinking and trembling about our cosmic fragility. We are small in space and brief in time. An illusion of no more than 120 years. Moshe Rabenu knew his return to the dust was certain, and that kept him humble. But he also knew his mission, which mattered more than his survival.

The first idea is the opposite: "the world was created for me." At first it sounds narcissistic. But it is not. The Mishna teaches us to see ourselves as central to the Creator's plans. Like The Truman Show, where every camera is fixed on one person. It is the way the Chakhamim teach us to see ourselves – to grasp a unique and central role in the Creator's plans, and to realize our own significance and potential.

THE TWO NOTES INSIDE YOUR POCKETS

Rab Simcha Bunim taught that you must carry these two ideas like two notes, one in each pocket, all your life. In one

pocket: “The world was created for me.” In the other: “I am dust and ashes.” Both notes are true. Wisdom is knowing which to read and when.

When you feel low, crushed by life, or depressed. Reach into the first pocket and repeat to yourself, “I was created with unique talents, and I must not waste them. Not one day should pass without putting them to use: for Am Israel, to draw closer to the Creator, and to have a good effect on others.”

When you feel worthless or forgotten, remember this: the world was created for you. Only you can do things no other human being can do.

And when you start to feel superior to others, reach for the second note. Dust and ashes. As that old song I listened to as a young man put it, about how fleeting life is: “All we are is dust in the wind.” Dust, carried off by the wind. Smallness and impermanence. The 120 years fly by.

Neither truth is enough on its own. Humility without a sense of purpose sinks you. A sense of purpose—knowing your own worth—without humility makes you arrogant. The wisdom is knowing which note to pull from which pocket in each moment.

And maybe that is why the sign stands right there, at the entrance to the cemetery. Because it is the one place where both notes open at the same time. Every grave declares “afar vaefer”: dust that returned to dust. But every grave is also a witness to “bishvili nibra haolam”: here rests a human being who was unique, with divine gifts, who made a difference in the world.