

Every season, save winter, my Grandfather would walk to the edge of the field bordering the lawn on the south end our farm, bend his 6 foot 3 inch frame, and scoop up of a handful of earth. He would rub it between his calloused hands, smell, and study it in the same drawn out silence. Depending on the season or the weather, the consistency and color would vary – deep black and viscous in the spring, light and airy brown in the summer, and packed tight with weeds and corn husks in the fall. I remember one especially dry summer, trailing him as I always did, and though the soil seemed only dust in his hands, he still went through the same ritual.

I don't think it's any coincidence that the passage I kept coming back to while reading and re-reading Bereshit was when G-d spoke to Adam and Chava after they ate from the tree of knowledge. Well that and the reference to the pains of child-birth, but you don't want to get me started on that. Passage 3:17 "...cursed be the ground because of you; by toil shall you eat of it all the days of your life: thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you. But your food shall be the grasses of the field; by the sweat of your brow shall you get bread to eat, until you return to the ground – for from it you were taken. For dust you are, and to dust you shall return."

Two things spoke to me 1) basically G-d letting Adam know there would be no more free meals, and farm the earth he would have to do, AND it would not be easy and 2) dust you are, and to dust you shall return -- it doesn't get much more poetic. They both spoke to me because I was raised on a farm. My childhood was a witness to food coming forth "by the sweat of my grandfather and father's brows." And well dust, dust was ingrained in my psyche, from my grandfather's tales of the great depression. He didn't have to read "Grapes of Wrath," he lived it. I also have vivid memories of scorching late July and August afternoons when the rains weren't coming for weeks on-end, and dust, maybe not 1930's dust, but dust nonetheless, blew so much that my shirts felt gritty after hanging on the line to dry. The noon farm report was like Torah from Zion, followed by a d'var by Paul Harvey.

Now as we know "Ki afar atah ve'el afar tashuv" is not the first time dust is mentioned in the Torah. "G-d formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being" is the first time dust is mentioned.

Webster's dictionary defines dust as "fine dry particles of earth or other matter, so attenuated that they may be raised and wafted by the wind." Now we can't confuse afar with adamah, dust is not dirt. Dirt also still has a certain percentage of water in it already, dust next to nothing, making it so finite that it may be raised and wafted by the wind, not a hurricane, rather wind or a breeze. G-d didn't start out with a dirt or adamah, adding a bit MORE water, rather he began with the most finite of matter; adding the water bubbling up from the ground, and then breathing in life.

So ironic to me that the matter which has come to be the term we use for any unwanted particles settling on our furniture, in our eyes, under the table, in books, is what the Torah says is the very matter from which we came. Yet again there is always a purpose, you may not agree with it all, but can't deny there is so often a significance to even something as seemingly banal as dust, and you can bet that someone or many someones have written entire tractates on yes, dust.

We don't even have to journey from Kol Sasson to get a recent dust reference, Rabbi Ari Hart mentioned dust in his Rosh Hashanah d'var when he told the Chasidic tale by Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peschischa

"Everyone must have 2 pockets, with a note in each pocket, so that he or she can reach into the 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: "For my sake was the world created." But when feeling high and mighty one should reach into the left pocket, and find the words: "I am but dust and ashes.

In Aviva Zorenberg's The Beginnings of Desire: Reflections of Genesis, I was near giddy with excitement when I got to her paragraphs, yes you heard correctly, paragraphs on dust. Zorenberg explains, and I am seriously simplifying, probably badly, that the duality of dust doesn't just apply to coming from dust and returning to dust – we are all, and we are nothing in the end. It goes back to the creation of man from dust.

Dust, earthly dust, was collected from all four corners of the earth, according to Rashi, so that man would be accepted for burial in whatever part of the globe he dies; and of the dust of the sacred center, Jerusalem. Man is the meeting place of both forms of dust – earthly and holy. And it represents the age old dilemma of being of and living in the world and yet trying to rise above it, to be heavenly, and not of this earth. Again, I LOVE that such an "earthly material" is used to make this analogy, to remind us that all elements go into creation, into the makeup of the world, and the divine can also be found in dust or ashes.

Ooh, I used another word, yes ashes, ashes and dust are synonymously used for the Hebrew root ayn-feh-resh. "I am dust and ashes" is actually not from the creation story in Genesis, rather it is when Abraham said, "I am dust and ashes." When speaking to G-d in a later chapter of Bereshit. But does Abraham really mean I am nothing? I don't really think so. He was pleading with Hashem to save Sodom and Gemorrah, and when one talks directly to G-d, I would think, you leave hubris at the door. But I will leave Sodom and Gemorrah for another D'var by someone else. I DO want to talk a bit about ash. Ash is the powdery residue of matter that remains after burning.

Ash is not just what remains after fire and destruction, it can also be used as fertilizer for growth to spring anew. And though we do not do slash and burn farming anymore in the Midwest, it is still used in other areas of the world. Also in many cultures, including our own, ash can be holy. Ashes from the sacrifices on the Temple Mount were considered holy. Dust and ash are different, in that ash is the result of fire, but they are both finite particles, matter down to its most basic tangible form.

In Hinduism dust from certain rivers, like the Ghangis, Vridavan or Yamuna, is holy and when a person is dying their forehead is marked with dust or red turmeric paste. Moreover, the Tilak, not to be confused with the Bindi or red dot worn on married women's foreheads, is worn by Vaishnavas to remind them that "we came from clay and we will return to clay."

Now in this day and age we try and make our surroundings sterile as if dust is the source of all evil, and consequentially allergies are on the rise. I don't think it's a coincidence that I grew up on a farm and don't seem to have to have the allergy issues city and suburban friends do. When you live in an environment where your very livelihood is dependent on the land, you learn to live with a little dirt, and depending on the rains a lot of dust. When I was trailing my grandfather that summer day, squinting in the sun, most of the dirt he was able to break off in his hands crumbled before he closed his fist – dust. However he still rubbed it, smelled it, and studied it. And oddly to me at the time, he smiled and took my hand.

Now I am not advocating for rolling around in the dust bunnies under your couch or placing ashes from your fire pit on your head to get "back to our essence," and I didn't bring up India to get you to rub clay on your forehead. Though we may want to remember when lying in the morning sun, it's the very dust filtering through that allows us to see the sunlight, the lightness of day – the lightness of being. Before the sin of Adam and Chava in Gan Eden, "G-d formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being." After we were reminded that "for dust you are and to dust you shall return." It was never "for dust you WERE, we ARE." These are not words only to be trembled on Yom Kippur, or remembered when someone is sick or dying, these are not words to weight us down. They are to be picked up every day or at least every season, rubbed, smelled, studied, and wafted by a morning breeze.