

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

HEAVEN AND EARTH IN EACH OF US

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Our study passage comes from the early midrash collection on the book of Deuteronomy called Sifre.

R. Simai used to say: both the soul and the body of those creatures created from the earth are from earth, except for that one creature, man, whose soul is from heaven and whose body is from the earth. Therefore, if man lives by the Torah and performs the will of his Father in heaven, he is like the heavenly creatures, as it is said, " You are godlike beings and all of you children of the Most High (Psalm 82:6). But if he does not live by the Torah and does not perform the will of his Father in heaven, he is like the creatures of the earth, as it is said, "Nevertheless you shall die like Adam (i.e., go back to the earth = adamah) (Psalm 82:7). (Sifre Deuteronomy 306)

Rav Simai's interpretation of Psalm 82 is inspirational...and a bit frightening. This Psalm is somewhat harsh in itself as it mourns injustice and the end of humanity even as it exalts the human race:

God stands in the congregation of God; he judges among the judges.
How long will you judge unjustly and respect the persons of the wicked?
Judge the cause of the poor and fatherless: vindicate the afflicted and needy.
Deliver the poor and destitute: rescue them out of the hand of the wicked.
They know not, nor do they understand.
They walk on in darkness.
All the foundations of the earth are shaken.
I had said: You are angels, all of you children of the Most High.
Nevertheless, you shall die like Adam and fall as one, O princes.
Arise, O God, judge the earth: for You shall possess all the nations. (Psalm 82)

This psalm and this midrash seem to say that humanity is capable of heavenly acts, yet we are destined to return to dust. This dichotomy-that we have within us heaven come to earth (the midrash is on the words from Deuteronomy 32:2, "My doctrine shall drop like rain") yet we are also the earth's-is one of the profound problems of the human condition.

Discussion Questions:

1. You are probably familiar with the Hassidic idea that a person should have in one pocket a scrap of paper saying, "The universe was made for me" and in the other pocket, a scrap of paper saying, "I am but dust and ashes." Here you see the more ancient Biblical and rabbinic basis for this teaching. Is there any way we can liberate ourselves from our earthly fate? If so, how?
2. Does justice bring heaven to earth? Would justice bring the world closer to God's heavenly example? How? Give examples?
3. Are there things that justice can't fix? Give examples.