



Feeling Big and Small

Yom Kippur Afternoon 5783



This summer, I was transfixed by a series of photographs. Many of you saw them as well. They have a black background, with bright lights that sparkle. Some of the lights are made of bright colors, in beautiful formations, with stunning haloes. Some pictures have sweeping curves in shapes reminiscent of mountain ranges. But what is even more amazing than the

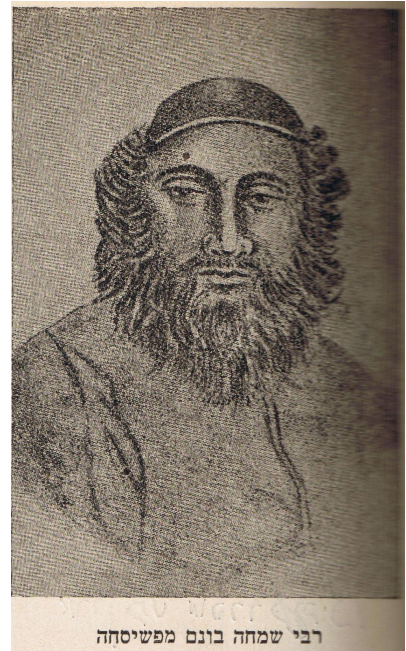
visual images is knowing what the images were of. These are the photographs taken by the Webb Telescope, and they depict the far reaches of the universe and light that was generated over 13 billion years ago.

What is it about outer space that so many of us find mesmerizing? Well, for one thing, I think there is something awe-inspiring at getting a glimpse of just how large the universe is— and how small we are inside it. Imagine a grain of sand held at arm's length. The first "Deep Field" image from the telescope covers that amount of sky, and it contains within it countless galaxies. It is unbelievable how many wonders are out there beyond our planet. Compared to everything that we can see and learn about from these images, our entire solar system seems tiny, and any one of us humans unfathomably small. It is enough to inspire tremendous amazement at what Jewish tradition calls *ma'aseh b'reishit*, the wonders of creation. It can make us feel insignificant. If thousands and thousands of galaxies look as small as a grain of sand held at arm's length: how much smaller, in comparison, are we!

On the other hand, I find it astounding that we, tiny creatures on a single planet among trillions, who have existed for a tiny fraction of the history of the universe, are able to create telescopes and rocket ships and sophisticated equipment that enable us to learn, and to see, and to reach out into the depths of space. We are able to build equipment that can leave our planet and our solar system, and that can reach billions of years into the past.

It recalls for me the often-quoted saying by Rabbi Simcha Bunam of Przysucha (1765–1827). “Everyone must have two pockets, with a note in each pocket, so that they can reach into the one or the other, depending on the need. When feeling lowly and depressed, small and insignificant, 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 and too full of oneself, one should reach into the left pocket, and find the words: “I am but dust and ashes.”

Why might we need each of Simcha Bunem’s reminders? Why might we sometimes need to feel large and consequential, and sometimes small and insignificant?



Let’s start with feeling large and consequential. If we believe that we are consequential in the world, that also means that we can have an impact. Our actions matter, and therefore, we have great potential to do good in the world. That good may be small in the scope of the universe, but it can be quite large for the people we impact. Such a worldview might lead us to engage in more actions that could impact those around us, and to continue trying to have a positive impact on the world.

Unfortunately, feeling if the world is created for our own sakes may also lead someone to turn inward. If the world is created for our own sakes, then we can do whatever we want! The world is created for my enjoyment, so I should just pursue that, regardless of any consequences!

Conversely, feeling small or insignificant or in the words of Simcha Bunem, like dust and ashes, also can lead in a number of directions. A person may think, “If I’m insignificant, then why do my actions matter? I can’t actually change anything, so I don’t need to try.” This kind of feeling small can be a type of escape from responsibility. Even if our species destroys our planet, who cares? There are trillions of other planets out there, our demise as a species or a planet won’t impact the galaxy in any meaningful way. So we might relax in our feeling of smallness and take comfort in our lack of ability to impact the world. If we can’t have an impact, then why bother trying?

Simcha Bunem’s intent in reminding us that we are dust and ashes, of course, is designed to elicit humility. We shouldn’t ever think that we, as individuals, are the most



important person in the room, nor, I might add, that our desires as humans should necessarily override the health of our planet. When we are humble, we can be more aware of the needs of those around us, rather than being only focused on ourselves.

A biblical example of someone who made himself small in this way is Jacob. Now we might not be used to thinking of Jacob as humble— Jacob is a trickster, finding ways to get what he wants. His presence looms large

in the Torah, as he builds his large family, becoming the well-to-do father of thirteen children, dozens of grandchildren, and the patriarch of a nation. But Jacob experiences a turning point as he anticipates encountering his estranged brother, Esau. Jacob has a moment of recognition that he cannot take credit for all of the blessings in his life, as much as he did work for them. Jacob turns to God in gratitude, gratitude for saving him from Esau so many years before, gratitude for keeping him safe from his father-in-law Lavan, gratitude for his family, gratitude for his many possessions. Jacob says, *katonti mikol hahasadim umikhol ha'emet*. I am unworthy. Literally: I am too small, for all of the kindnesses and loyalty that you have shown me. That night, he struggles with an angel, and gains the name Israel, the very name of the nation that comes from him. When Jacob is able to recognize that he is not the source of his own blessings, that is when he is able to grow, and to become worthy of being the father of the Jewish people.

In a few moments, we will read about a character who could benefit from having both of Simcha Bunem's slips of paper at different times in his narrative. At the start of the book of Jonah, God speaks to Jonah. Now, you might think Jonah would be proud to be considered worthy of receiving a message directly from God, but Jonah isn't actually interested in doing the mission that God has for him. Jonah, therefore, decides to run from God. Think about that! Jonah thinks that he is so small, so unnoticeable, so insignificant, that he can hide from God and get away with it! Jonah doesn't want to change the world, he doesn't want to fulfill a divine mission, he doesn't want to be important. He just wants to live his own life without any interruptions. So he consciously tries to shrink himself, and to avoid taking on a position of influence. He gets on a boat heading in the opposite direction from where God wants him to be, he goes down into the hold, and he falls asleep.

Now, while Jonah is telling himself that he is so small, he actually has a negative impact on those around him. The sailors on his ship nearly die in the storm that God causes

because of Jonah's actions. Jonah further insists that the sailors throw him into the water in order to stop the storm, causing them immense distress. Jonah may not want to be important, and he may think his life has so little significance that it shouldn't matter to others to throw him overboard, but the sailors' words make it clear how traumatic they find it to be asked to treat him in this way. He may try to erase himself, but it doesn't work, and it harms the people around him.



And then, Jonah has an experience that changes his life, that leads him to act on his potential, and make a positive impact on other people. Ironically, that change occurs through feeling small, but in a very different way. After the sailors throw Jonah into the sea, he is swallowed by a large fish. If we didn't get the hint that Jonah was feeling small beforehand, now that message is hammered home, as he is so small that he

literally fits into the belly of a fish, which carries him through the ocean and eventually spits him out near the city of Nineveh, where God told him to go in the first place.

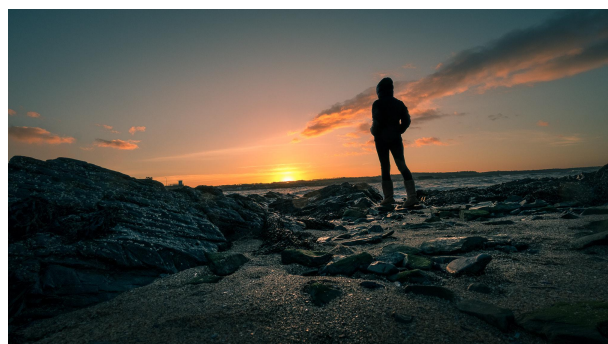
When Jonah is in that fish, he certainly felt small, but I can't imagine that he felt inconsequential. After all, here he was, a tiny body in the enormous ocean, and God guides one of the largest creatures out there to find him and shelter him. Jonah is small, but God sees him as important enough to protect. And we know that Jonah attributes his being rescued to God, because we see the prayer that he offers while he is in the fish. "The bars of the earth closed upon me... Yet You brought my life up from the pit, O LORD my God!"

Once Jonah has recognized not only his small size, but also his large significance, he agrees to go to the city of Nineveh. At that point he, one man in a city of many, many people seemingly set on behaving in terrible ways, brings a message to the city, a message that the people hear. They listen to his warning, delivered with five Hebrew words, and, influenced by the five words of one man, they change their ways.

Even after the people of Nineveh have repented, Jonah's story isn't over, and neither is his struggle to see himself in the world in a positive way. While the people of Nineveh go about the business of repenting, Jonah stands at a distance, and gets upset when a plant that was providing him with shade shrivels up. Ironically, Jonah who sees himself as so small that he thinks he can hide from God, also proves to be self-centered! Jonah finds it hard to look beyond himself and to care for the people of Nineveh, but he is beside himself when a plant shrivels up, leaving him in the hot sun. Jonah's largeness, like his smallness at the beginning, keeps him isolated, and without a sense of responsibility for others. He may help others under duress, when forced to by God, but he very easily slips into another state, where he focuses only on himself.

When I first looked up Simcha Bunem's saying in order to share it with you today, I remembered the words that he said to put on each of the notes in our pockets. But what hadn't stood out to me in my memory of the story are the **circumstances** in which one is supposed to **look** at the notes. I think it is those circumstances that are actually key to his message. He says that when you're feeling too small and insignificant, one should read the words: "For my sake was the world created." And when feeling high and mighty and too full of oneself, one should read the words: "I am but dust and ashes." He's not suggesting that we should decide when we want to feel big, and when we want to feel small. He knows that sometimes, like Jonah, we want to be small when we need to be big, and we want to be big when it's time to be small. Simcha Bunem says that we should go against what is most comfortable to us, and push back against it. When we are feeling inconsequential, we should remind ourselves of the many ways that we matter to the people in our lives. And when we are feeling self-important, we should remember that we are not the center of the universe. When we are feeling big or small in self-centered ways, Simcha Bunem wants us to push back, and to feel big or small in ways that will help us to be caring people with a sense of purpose and of responsibility.

I would like to think that the experience of gazing out into space is one way to help us channel the best aspects of feeling small, and of feeling large. We are each tiny beings, with very little power when measured against the scale of the universe. And yet, each of us is precious. We each matter to the people in our lives, and we each have tremendous ability to have a positive impact on those around us. Within our own spheres of influence, each of us has the ability to loom quite large. In the coming year, may each of us have the humility to



realize when our needs should not come first, and the audacity to recognize and the courage to act on our potential for positive impact on the world around us.

May we be sealed in the book of life. Gmar Hatimah Tovah.