

## The Shrinking of Man

By: Rabbi Yanki Tauber

Once upon a time, man was very big. The stars were tiny lights suspended in the "sky," which was a blue, rooflike covering a few hundred miles above his head. The earth on which he stood was about a quarter the size it is today. At the very most, he was aware of the existence of several hundred thousand other human beings (the word "million" wasn't even in his vocabulary). He was obviously the most important thing around--stones were just stones and animals were just animals. It was equally obvious that he stood at the pinnacle of creation and all these other things existed solely to serve his needs.

Over the centuries man shrank. His world grew larger; suddenly, there were all these other people, and all these other species, dwarfing his significance. At the same time, it became tinier and tinier, until it was an infinitesimal speck in a universe of mind-numbing vastness.

Did man become humbler? Did we become less infatuated with self? Interestingly enough, the shrinking of man had the very opposite effect. Ideals such as devotion and sacrifice became "human weaknesses." Pride, once a sin, became a mark of psychological health. People started asking whether greed was indeed inferior to virtue, until greed became a virtue, ending the argument. Why is it that the more we came to appreciate our insignificance, the more selfish we became?

Upon closer examination, this is no paradox. The person who sees himself as the kingpin of creation, as something of paramount importance to the grand divine plan, is driven to fill that role and serve that plan; the person who believes that everything exists to serve his existence is certain that his existence serves a purpose beyond mere existence.

On the other hand, if man is insignificant, then he serves no higher purpose. "I am nothing" can be just another way of saying, "There's nothing but me."

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This is not to say that the person who sees himself as the center of creation is not susceptible to egoism and self-aggrandizement. Nor is it to say that feelings of inconsequentiality will never be accompanied by altruistic behavior. The point is that feelings of insignificance do not make a person selfless--indeed, the most virulent forms of egomania derive from a lack of self worth. Conversely, a sense of self worth can be the source of either arrogance or humility--depending on how a person regards his worth.

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19 March | 4 Nissan

**Parashat Vayikra**

Shabbat Begins: 5:52 pm

Shabbat Ends: 6:02 pm

The difference, says Chassidic master Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, is the difference between two *alephs*. In the opening verse of the book of Chronicles, the name "Adam" is written in the Torah with an oversize *aleph*; in the opening verse of Leviticus, the word *vayikra*, which refers to G-d's calling to Moses, is spelled with a miniature *aleph*.

Adam and Moses were both great men, and both were cognizant of their greatness. Adam was the "handiwork of G-d" fashioned after "the divine image." His sense of himself as the crown of G-d's creation is led to his downfall, when he understood this to mean that nothing is beyond his ken.

Moses was well aware of the fact that, of all G-d's creations, he was the only one to whom G-d spoke "face to face"; he knew that it was to and through him that G-d communicated His wisdom and will to His world. But rather than the inflated *aleph* of Adam, this knowledge evoked in him the self-effacing *aleph* of *Vayikra*. Moses felt diminished by his gifts, humbled by the awesome responsibility of proving equal to them. As the Torah attests, "Moses was the most humble man on the face of the earth"--not despite but because of his greatness.

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Ancient man was both blessed and cursed by the prevailing evidence of his greatness. Modern man is both blessed and cursed by the increasing evidence of his smallness. Our challenge is to avail ourselves of both blessings: to couple our knowledge of how small we truly are with our sense of how great we can truly be. To become humbly great, which is the greatest kind of humility there is.

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