

4th-year Practicum Iyyun
Ne'ilah, pre-Atah Notein Yad and Atah Hivdalta

Years ago on a snowy December day at OSRUI,
Dan Nichols shared with me
something his mom had taught him as a young boy.
She told him he should always carry with him
a “proud pocket”
and a “not-so-proud pocket.”
The “proud pocket,” of course,
was meant to hold memories of his accomplishments,
of things he had done well,
of times he had felt good about helping someone else...
The “not-so-proud pocket,” she told him,
was as,
or even more essential,
carrying memories of the times that he had not done his best,
had not been his best self.
She explained that if he ever felt the need,

he should draw upon either of the pockets –
either for a reminder that he was good enough
on a day when things felt challenging,
or,
on a day when he could use a dose of humility,
to remember that he still had work to do
in order to be the best Dan he could be.



Later in life,
Dan learned that his childlike memory of his mom's story
was tied to a real teaching
by the Chassidic master, Rabbi Simcha Bunim,
who said that we should carry a note in each of our pockets:
"Bishvili nivra ha'olam" –
For my sake, the world was created –
and *"Anochi afar va'eifer" –*
I am dust and ashes.
As human beings,

we often live in the space between these two extremes,
occasionally requiring reminders along the way
when we drift further to one side or the other of the spectrum.
As is the case for most things in life,
the key is to strike some sort of balance between the two.
Hearing this story from Dan was such a powerful learning for me
that I have carried it with me ever since –
literally wearing it upon my wrist each and every day
on this bracelet I had engraved during my year in Israel.



In studying the liturgy of *Atah Notein Yad* and *Atah Hivdalta*,
I was reminded of the two-pocket texts.
In the setting of *Atah Notein Yad* you will soon hear,
the words “*ki hakol havel*” –
“for everything is nothing” –
are repeated over and over again.
This prayer reminds us that we are *posh'im*,
sinners,

that our end is as lowly as *rima v'tolei'a*,
worms and maggots.

We wonder if we are any better than beasts.

This text expresses our ultimate humility before God
and reminds us that to dust and ashes we shall return.



Atah Hivdalta, on the other hand,

reminds us that,

from the beginning,

God set human beings apart,

worthy to stand in God's presence.

The text repeats many times

that God does not want us to die,

but rather to return from our ways and live –

a recognition that as human beings,

we are prone to making mistakes,

but that we can engage in *t'shuvah*

and choose to do better next time.

This text reminds us that God believes in us,
that we do have inherent worth,
that perhaps the world was created for our sake.



In the end,
we know that God is eager to forgive us;
even after *Ne'ilah* is over,
we will continue to pray *S'lach Lanu* in the weekday *Amidah*
and sing *Hashiveinu* when we return the Torah to the ark.
Though the gates are closing on this day of *Yom Kippur*,
we are not out of time.
God will always be there,
waiting with hands outstretched
for us to return,
repent,
and recommit ourselves to finding a balance
somewhere between our two pockets.