

You're the Best! You're the WORST

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SUMMARY: Counselors must navigate switching between those moments when they are idolized by campers and those when they have to clean up puke. That's not an easy switch to make; this session is about walking in balance, figuring out how and when to take up space and when to cede it, and finding truth between the extremes.

GOALS: Participants will become familiar with the Jewish text about two pockets, which can help them think about finding balance between ego and humility.

AUDIENCE: Age range: 13+; Group size: 5+

TIMING: 75 minutes

MATERIALS:

One small slip of paper that says: "For my sake the world was created" per participant AND

One small slip of paper that says: "I am but dust and ashes" per participant.

In addition, the facilitator needs a folder of papers that can be dropped and scattered everywhere or some other item that can be dropped and scattered without breaking or making a mess (like a tray of empty paper cups, for example).

Additional colored paper, scissors, glue, markers, and art supplies such as stickers and notions that can be cut and glued (maybe some ribbons, small sequins, etc).

SET-UP: A circle of chairs or chairs around a big table

SESSION TIMELINE

- 00:00-00:10 – Entrance/Setting Activity & Opening Discussion
- 00:10-00:20 – Introduce the Story
- 00:20-00:35 – Pair Share
- 00:35-00:45 – Discuss Source
- 00:45-00:50 – Rebalance
- 00:50-00:65 – Decorate
- 00:65-00:75 – Debrief

SESSION OUTLINE

00:00-00:10 – Entrance/Setting Activity & Opening Discussion

As participants enter the room, hand each one a small slip of paper. Half the slips should say: "For my sake the world was created." And the other half: "I am but dust and ashes." Each participant should receive only one of the two messages at the start. The messages should be roughly evenly divided among the group.

Instruct each person to read the paper, place it in their pocket, and try to embody the message as fully as possible as they walk around the room for a few minutes. As everyone mills about in the space, walk across the room with a folder full of loose papers and in the middle, appear to trip slightly and drop all the papers, scattering them everywhere (this doesn't have to be papers, can be a tray of paper cups or whatever else will not break if dropped but can make a small clean mess). When some people come to help you gather up what you've dropped, ask those specific people to remain standing and everyone else to have a seat.

Invite two of the people now left standing to read what was on their paper out loud to the group. If they are both the same message, ask another and keep going until the second message is also revealed. If everyone standing (everyone who volunteered to help pick up the dropped items) has the same message, point that out and use it as the basis for the next discussion. If they are pretty evenly split, ask them just to keep it in mind for later.

First Discussion:

Invite participants to share how they felt walking around embodying their message and what they noticed about how it changed their walk, their pace, how they related to others in the room, etc. Include people who had each message. (If everyone who came to help you all had the same message, talk about how that might have affected them and what they think it means.)

00:10-00:20 – Introduce the Story

Ask if anyone knows where these two messages come from and invite them to share what they know about it with the group. If no one knows, explain the source:

Legend has it that the Hasidic Rabbi Simcha Bunim Bonhart of Peschischa (Poland), taught that 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,

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." (From Tales of the Hasidim, by Martin Buber.)

Discuss this teaching, inviting participants to explore why one would need to carry both of these messages all the time.

- In what ways are they in conflict with one another?
- How can they coexist?
- Is it either inherently positive or negative?
- What feelings do they provoke about one's obligations in the world?

Don't be surprised: most groups will find an array of different interpretations of each message (for example, one person may say the "universe created for me" message makes them feel like they have the power and responsibility to do great things in the world, while another may say the same message makes them feel entitled to do nothing and just absorb experiences instead of creating or contributing). Ask participants if they can think of any famous or fictional characters that appear to embody one of these messages in everything they do.

00:20-00:35 – Pair Share

Invite participants to get into groups of two and share one experience from their camp lives that they feel really resonates with one of the two messages – let them know that it does NOT have to be the message they were originally given. Each participant should share a story with their partner. After everyone has told his/her story, instruct the group to take a few minutes to imagine themselves in the moment of the story... and now imagine that in the middle of that experience, they had reached into their pocket and read the other of the two messages. Allow for at least a couple of minutes of silence for them to imagine and think about this. Depending on time either: a) ask them to talk in their partner groups about what would have changed, how they would have felt, how they might have acted differently if that had happened or b) as a group, ask for a few volunteers to tell everyone their original story and to share their answers to those new questions.

Introduce the idea that, "It is said that the secret of living comes from knowing when to reach into each [pocket], but actually many people often make a mistake, and they use the piece of paper that is the opposite of the one they should use." Ask participants:

- Are you already humbling enough, but pick the paper that encourages you to continue the status quo and not reach outside yourself, maybe out of your comfort zone?
- Are you already confident and powerful and yet continue to tell yourself that the world was created only for you?
- What would it mean to choose the other pocket?

Allow participants time to reflect on this.

00:35-00:45 – Discuss Source of Dust and Ashes

Tell the story from Genesis 18: G-d tells Abraham that the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are full of sin and they will be destroyed. Abraham intercedes and asks if the righteous will be

destroyed alongside the wicked and if G-d will save the cities if 50 righteous people are found there. G-d agrees, and Abraham asks what about if 45 righteous people can be found, will G-d save the city? Yes. What about 40? He presses. G-d accedes. Abraham proceeds to bargain G-d down to just needing to find 10 righteous people to save the cities. Ask participants if this is a “I am but dust and ashes” situation or a “For me the universe was created” situation. At first glance, it may seem like the latter: Abraham could feel amazing in this moment, because G-d (!!!) is listening to his advice (!!!) and changing the plan based on his input. However, it is in fact this text from which the “dust and ashes” message comes. In the middle of the negotiation, Abraham stops and says:

וַיַּעַן אַבְרָהָם, וַיֹּאמֶר: הֲנֵה-נָא הוֹאֵלְתִי לְדַבֵּר אֶל-אֲדֹנָי, וְאֲנֹכִי עָפָר וָאֵפֶר. And Abraham answered and said: 'Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the LORD, I who am but dust and ashes.

(“I am but dust and ashes” in Hebrew is pronounced “V'anokhi afar va'efer”, Genesis 18:27)

Abraham is saying, “Look at me, I’m talking back to G-d when I’m really nothing.” Discuss with participants how this is an example of living in balance, recognizing one’s humbleness while in a position of great power. Ask if they can think of other examples of when it is difficult to be in balance between ego/self-confidence and humility.

Ask if they can now think of examples of famous or fictional people who seem to have mastered the art of including both of these ideas in their lives in equal or appropriate measure (as opposed to earlier when this was about one or the other). Ask if they can think of people they know personally who walk in balance in this way.

00:45-00:50 – Rebalance the Group

Invite everyone with the “dust and ashes” message to go to one side of the room and pick up another slip that contains the same message; do the same for the “universe for me” people at another spot. Then ask the two groups to mix up and ask each person to trade away one message for the other, so that they end up with one of each instead of two of one message. Have them place each message in one pocket (or hold it in each hand) and now walk around the space again, noticing if they feel different, notice different things, or interact differently with others now that they have both messages.

00:50-00:65 – Decorate

Give participants time and supplies to create and decorate two slips for themselves to take away, either enhancing the ones that were passed out or creating new ones; maybe play music during this time to allow for quiet reflection during the art rather than off-topic conversation.

00:65-00:75 – Debrief

Reconvene in the circle to discuss what felt different and how they might take this lesson into their camp lives, citing specific and concrete examples of what they are thinking. Ask how they might take this lesson into their home and school lives, citing specific and concrete examples of what they are thinking:

- Who are the voices in your lives that help you remember one message or the other?
- Who brings you back down to earth when you are feeling too proud of yourself?
- Who helps lift you up when you are feeling powerless or unimportant?

Encourage participants to let those people know that they are playing an important role in helping them walk in balance and to thank them for doing so. Ask them to consider what role they play for others.

BRINGING IT TO YOUR CAMP

This is largely a thinking and talking exercise as written, but could easily incorporate games or activities having to do with balance, self-centeredness, being supported by and supporting others, etc.

A creative aspect could be to ask participants to re-write the messages in their own words, making them very personal messages in their own voice and manner of speaking. The ideas here could be tailored to be less personal and more cultural in nature by asking participants which of the two messages they think are told to them by the media, by social media, by Hollywood, and other sources of art, for example.

This could also be a Leadership Development exercise, including examples of the different types of leadership and how each relates to one of the two messages or both.