

The Dust of the Earth and the Stars of the Sky ***Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer***

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Parshat Lech L'cha

G*d says to Avram (Genesis 13:16), after Lot's departure, **"I shall make thy descendants like the dust of the earth. If anyone can number the dust of the earth, so shall thy descendants be countable."**

Later G*d continues (Genesis 15:5), **"Look into the sky and count the stars, if thou canst. So numerous will be thy descendants."**

The *p'shat* (plain-text) meaning is clear. G*d is assuring Avram (his name has not yet been changed to Abraham) that his descendants will be too numerous to count. But there is a particular meaning to the metaphor of the dust of the earth and the stars of the sky.

The Baal Shem Tov likens us to the soil in that, just as the earth contains hidden treasures which can be extracted and brought to their full value only by dint of hard work, so each of us – the Baal Shem Tov spoke of Jews, but we can understand the principle to apply to every human being, without exception – contains a spiritual treasure of incalculable value, a treasure which can be extracted, brought to its full value, and appreciated only through intense and lengthy hard work.

The similar "stars in the sky" assurance bears a similar meaning. As we gaze at the stars, they appear to be mere pinpoints of light. But their actual size is incredibly huge. Our own sun, one million miles in diameter, is but an average-sized star; some are many times as large. It takes great effort to understand the great size, the great light, and the great energy that the stars contain, for the pinpoints of light that we can see here on earth – even through powerful telescopes – merely hint at their true nature, and great work and learning are needed to appreciate them in their fulness.

Furthermore, just as the value and greatness of the treasures of the soil can be extracted only through great work, so the light of the stars reaches us only after a journey of, in some instances, billions of years. Just as the light of the stars did not cease its journey to the earth despite the almost incomprehensible amounts of time and distance it had to traverse, so we are adjured, no matter how much effort is needed, not to give up on the great spiritual treasure hidden within every human being.

As the dust of the earth; as the stars of the sky.

Shabbat Shalom.

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