

THE SIMILE OF THE DUST OF THE EARTH

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 482, Davening to a Malach. Good Shabbos!

The Simile of the Dust of the Earth

At the beginning of the Parsha, Hashem blesses Yaakov with the words "I am Hashem, G-d of Avraham your father and G-d of Yitzchak; the ground upon which you are lying, to you will I give it and to your descendants. Your offspring shall be as the dust of the earth, and you shall spread out powerfully westward, eastward, northward, and southward..." [Bereshis 28:13-14].

The simple understanding of the blessing "Your offspring shall be as the dust of the earth" is that Yaakov's descendants should be so plentiful that their numbers will be comparable to the dust of the earth. The Medrash, however, sees in these words more than just a blessing of being plentiful and bountiful. Out of all the similes that one might pick, the terminology "like the dust of the earth" is somewhat peculiar.

This is different than the blessing elsewhere that we should be "like the sand of the sea" (k'chol haYam) [Breishis 32:13]. The phrase "k'afar ha'Aretz" literally means like the dust of the ground. The dust of the ground is that which we walk on. Is it not peculiar that Jews are blessed by being told that they will be like the dust that people trample?

There are so many more picturesque similes to use (as we find elsewhere). "Like the stars in Heaven" [Bereshis 22:17] is a majestic comparison. Stars are unreachable. They are beautiful. They sparkle. "As many as the stars in Heaven" is a very inspiring and poetic blessing. But "k'afar ha'Aretz" is almost like saying "you should be like dirt." Is this a blessing?

Even the expression "k'chol haYam" -- like sand of the sea -- seems more appropriate. In our minds, we do not think of the sand on the seashore as something we trample upon. We associate sand of the sea with beautiful white sandy beaches. Even sand has quite a different connotation than "you should be like dust."

The Medrash explains the very powerful significance of this choice of words. This is more than just a

blessing of multitudes. The blessing of "k'afar ha'Aretz" represents the history of the Jews. Everybody tramples over the dust of the earth, but in the end the dust of the earth always remains on top. That same dust ultimately covers those who trample it.

"From dust you are taken and to dust you will return" [Bereshis 3:19]. In the final analysis, the dust of the earth is always on top. This is the analogy and the blessing of "Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth." Yaakov is told that his children will be trampled upon and spat upon, like the dust. But in the end, like the dust, they will remain on top.

Tosfos [Brochos 17a] comments on the prayer recited at the end of the Shmoneh Esrei: "My G-d, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking deceitfully. To those who curse me, let my soul be silent; and let my soul be like dust to everyone." What is the meaning of the term "let my soul be like dust to everyone?" Tosfos suggests the very idea introduced by the Medrash above: Just like dust (afar) is never destroyed and always remains, we pray that our descendants should always remain and not be destroyed.

This prayer is speaking about people who are not our friends, people who curse us and abuse us. We pray that to those who curse us, we remain silent and we pray that our soul will remain like dust vis-à-vis our enemies. What is the intention when we pray that we should be like dust? It expresses a desire to be among those "who are insulted by others but do not respond in kind, who hear themselves being shamed, but do not respond" [Shabbos 88b]. Such people are the ones who eventually come out on top. We express this aspiration with the words "may my soul be like dust to everyone." That which Hashem promised Yaakov collectively for his descendants, we request on an individual basis as well. Concerning such people it is written: "And let those who love Him be like the powerfully rising sun" [Shoftim 5:31].

Why Didn't Yaakov Stand Up For His Rights?

Yaakov's labored for Rochel for seven years, only to have his father-in-law switch daughters and give him Leah. When Yaakov complained about this outrageous deceit, Lavan proposed that Yaakov agree to work for him for an additional seven years and then he would give him Rochel.

Yaakov should have told Lavan, "I already worked for Rochel for seven years. I will agree to stay married to Leah whom I never asked for, but it is only decent that you fulfill your end of the previously agreed upon bargain and give me Rochel, with no further stipulations." Why did he so meekly agree to work seven more years for Rochel?

I saw an insight on this point by Rav Dovid Feinstein. The reason Yaakov agreed to this "new deal" was to preserve Leah's sense of self-respect. How would Leah have felt if Yaakov expressed willingness to work for seven years for Rochel, but would only take Leah "gratis" -- as if she were "good for nothing"?

Yaakov's willingness to accept Lavan's terms was not because he did not know how to cut a good

business deal. He knew how to negotiate and he knew that if he pressed his case, he could have gotten his way. The reason why he worked seven more years was in order to not devastate Leah. Had he stood up for his rights, he would have received "two wives for the price of one" and one of the wives would have felt that "he got her for nothing."

Concerning potato chip bags, there is no concern over hurt feelings when they are "buy one get one free." Neither potato chip bag thinks: "Am I the one he paid for, or am I the one he got for free?" However, it would have been cruel to put Leah in the position of being the "get one free" wife. Yaakov refused to do that.

Rav Dovid Feinstein emphasized that we see from here that it is worth giving up seven years of one's life so that another person not feel humiliated. It is for this reason Yaakov willingly agreed to work for seven more years.

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Vayeitzei are provided below:

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