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Stars and sand

God blesses Abraham's descendants, not that they will be as numerous as the dust of the earth, but rather that they will be important to the world.

By WARREN GOLDSTEIN NOVEMBER 14, 2019 21:03



"The call to jump together is a call to define our Jewish identity by inspiration rather than force of circumstance, uniting in joy and celebration around our divine values"

(photo credit: REUTERS)





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"I will surely bless you, and I will make your descendants numerous like the stars of the heavens and like the sand on the seashore."

In this week's parsha, Vayeira, we read this famous blessing that God gives to Abraham.

There's an obvious question here. According to current estimates, there are around 7.7 billion people in the world, of whom approximately only 14.6 million are Jews – children of Abraham. We make up roughly only 0.2% of the world's population. How, then, do we understand this blessing of being great in number – numerous like the stars of the heavens and like the sand on the seashore – when clearly, we are not, and never have been? And even God Himself, later in the Torah, tells us that He did not choose the Jewish people, "because you are the most numerous of the nations... since you are [indeed] the fewest."

Rav Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg, a 19th-century German commentator, finds a clue in an unusual rendering of a very similar blessing found in last week's Torah portion, *Lech Lecha*. The verse says: "I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, then your offspring too can be counted."

He explains that the word used here for "to count" – *limnot*, actually means "to ascribe importance to." God blesses Abraham's descendants, not that they will be as numerous as the dust of the earth, but rather that they will be important to the world in the same way that the earth is important. He blesses them that their contribution to the world should be significant and tangible.

Rav Naftali Zvi Berlin, dean of the great Yeshiva of Volozhin, takes a similar approach. He explains that, like the stars, Abraham's descendants will have





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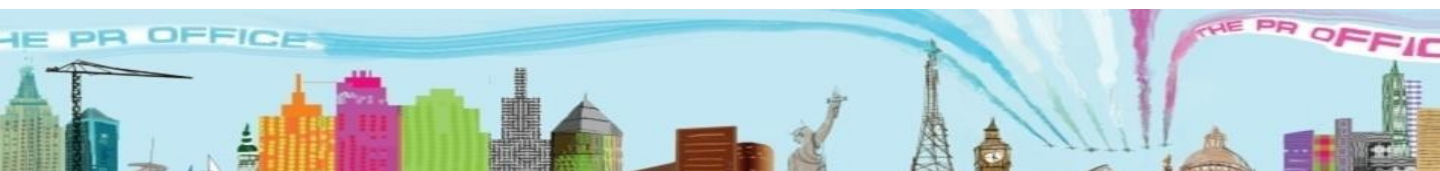
a special power to illuminate the world, their contribution radiating across history and pointing the way forward for human progress.

The Kli Yakar takes a different approach. He says the blessing that we will be like “the sand of the seashore” is a reference not to the future impact of the Jewish people, but to our endurance as a nation.

The sand on the seashore is constantly subjected to the waves that come crashing down on it, threatening to wash it away – and yet, while its grains shift, the seashore remains, unmoved, unmovable. The analogy is clear. Throughout history, the Jewish people have faced enemy after enemy – Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, Crusaders, Cossacks, Communists, Nazis – yet we remain steadfastly in place, holding the line, not washed away.

RABBI SAMSON Raphael Hirsch (Germany, 1808-1888) discusses how Jewish history has always defied the laws of nature, how our very origins are enveloped in miracles. Take the birth of Isaac, mentioned in this week’s parsha. Abraham was 100 years old, Sarah was 90, and they had an only son. What were the chances of this little family becoming a great nation? Yet, from these rickety beginnings, the Jewish people emerged, thereby expressing so clearly the divine blessing and plan for our nation. Isaac’s name comes from the Hebrew word for “laughter,” which reflects how, through God’s eternal blessings given to Abraham and his descendants, Jewish destiny has laughed at the laws of history and transcended the usual trajectory of nations and defied the odds, time and again.

In 2011, I attended the Conference of European Rabbis in Warsaw, the largest gathering of rabbis in Poland since the Second World War. It stirred





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something deep within me. To witness such a huge gathering of Jewish leaders from all over Europe in a city that had literally caged its Jewish population and then shipped them off to death was to understand the miracle of Jewish endurance. It was a loud declaration that we Jews, thanks to divine providence, are still here.

The miraculous endurance and enduring vibrancy of the Jewish people is a key theme of this year's Shabbat Project, which will see Jews of all backgrounds uniting in more than 1,600 cities and 105 countries around the world to keep and celebrate Shabbat.

The call to jump together is a call to define our Jewish identity by inspiration rather than force of circumstance, uniting in joy and celebration around our divine values, rather than pain and persecution. It is a call to embrace Shabbat, which is the vibrant source of our connection to God, family, community and even to ourselves. It is a call to unify as Jews, as brothers and sisters who love each other, and who are bonded together by our shared divine destiny.

Let's jump together, shake the dust of the earth and live the miracle of our ongoing vitality. Let's shine our light to the world.
Let's not just endure, let's flourish.

The writer is Chief Rabbi of South Africa.

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