Quantity and Quality: Thoughts on Parashat Vayishlah

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"...I will surely do thee good, and make thy seed as the sand of the sea which cannot be numbered for multitude." "and thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth...." "I will multiply thy seed as the stars in heaven."

God promises our forefathers that their descendants will be numerous. Quantity matters. For the message of ethical monotheism to spread throughout humanity, it is vital that there be enough righteous people in the world and in all generations. The more followers of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the more opportunity there is for the word of God to take hold among humankind.

But the images that God uses to describe quantity also may be conveying lessons relating to quality.

Stars in heaven: Although stars appear to be vast in number, each star actually stands alone, with light years separating it from its nearest neighbor. The lesson: even in multitude, one must not lose sight of the uniqueness of each individual. Each person needs space in which to grow and develop; each person has a distinctive contribution to make; each person shines his/her own light on the human enterprise.

Sand of the sea: Although each grain of sand is unique, it is almost impossible to separate one grain from the others. The lesson: even in uniqueness, one must not lose sight of his/her role as a member of the family and people of Israel. For our message to meet with success, we need to be united by a clear sense of solidarity and group responsibility. None of us is entirely separate from the community of which we are part. All Israel is responsible one for the other.

Dust of the earth: Although the dust of the earth seems like the lowliest of things, nothing could survive without it. God created Adam from the dust of the earth--teaching the humble origin of humanity, but also the unique creative power latent within the dust of the earth. Indeed, all the earth's vegetation grows from the dust, and life could not survive without the fructifying power of the earth. The

lesson: the people of Israel must be a life-giving force in the world, must bring sustenance and happiness to all humanity.

God's blessings to our forefathers, then, refer to the omnipresence of our people throughout history. We will be blessed with multitudes who can fulfill God's work on earth. But the blessings also refer to the quality of our lives and our mission: a respect for the uniqueness of each individual; a recognition of responsibility for the community; a commitment to be a positive, life-giving force for all humanity.

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