Sand and Stars: Thoughts for Parashat Vayera

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Vayera

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…I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is upon the sea-shore… (Bereishith 22:17)

In his memoir, The Torch in My Ear, the Sephardic Jewish writer Elias Canetti (who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1981) reflects on an insight that came to him as a young man: “I realized that there is such a thing as a crowd instinct, which is always in conflict with the personality instinct, and that the struggle between the two of them can explain the course of human history.” (The Memoirs of Elias Canetti, p. 387).This idea became central to Canetti’s life, ultimately resulting in his classic book Crowds and Power.

What is the “crowd instinct?” It is the desire to blend into a crowd, to dissolve one’s personality into a large mass of people. The crowd instinct can be witnessed in sports’ arenas, where fans become one with each other and with the players on the field. It can be experienced in mass rallies where fiery orators fire up the crowd, or at rock concerts where fans lose themselves in their wild admiration of the singers and their music. People have a deep desire to be part of such crowds.

Yet, crowds can become dangerous. When individuals succumb to crowds, demagogues can control them, can drive them to do terrible things, can turn them into lynch mobs or murderous gangs, can push them into terrorism and war.

And so there is also a “personality instinct,” a deep desire to retain our own ideas and values, to resist the mesmerizing power of crowds. Although we at times want to share in the enthusiasms and griefs of crowds, we simultaneously want to maintain our inner freedom from the crowds. We want to blend in…but not to blend in.

In the Almighty's blessing of Abraham, we can detect both the crowd instinct and the personality instinct. God apparently wanted Abraham to keep aware of these conflicting pulls, and to maintain spiritual balance.

God promised that He would multiply Abraham's seed "as the stars of the heaven." Stars, although there are so many of them, are essentially alone…light years separate one star from the next. Stars symbolize the personality instinct, the unique separateness of each one. Although part of a galaxy, each star is separate and distinct, never losing its particular identity.

But God also promised that Abraham's seed would be "as the sand which is upon the seas-shore." Sand represents an entirely different kind of multitude than stars. While each star is alone and separate, each grain of sand is surrounded by many other grains of sand. Whereas stars evoke separateness, sand evokes incredible closeness…masses of grains touching each other so that it is almost impossible to take only one grain of sand in your hand. Sand symbolizes the crowd instinct.

Abraham was to found a new nation, and nations need to have adequate numbers in order to thrive. Nation-building entails working with crowds, striving to create consensus among various factions. Nations demand patriotism, national symbols that inspire citizens to feel united with each other. But nations can become dangerous crowds. Demagogues can manipulate the crowd's emotions and can control information that they share with the masses. Crowds can become dangerous; crowds can be turned into murdering, war-mongering and hateful entities.

How can one resist the power of crowds? For this we need the personality instinct. Each person needs to understand the crowd, but keep enough independence not to totally succumb to the power of the crowd. Each person literally has to be a hero, has to be willing to stand up and stand out…and possibly take terrible risks in order to maintain personal integrity.

This was God's blessing to Abraham: Your seed will learn how to form positive, helpful, cooperative crowds that will enhance human civilization. Your seed will be composed of individuals who will have the wisdom and the courage to remain separate, to resist those who would try to manipulate the crowd into wickedness. Your seed—like the stars—will be composed of strong, luminous and separate beings. Your seed—like the sand—will come together to form healthy, strong and moral communities and societies.

Throughout human history, there has been an ongoing tension between the crowd instinct and the personality instinct. Too often, the crowd instinct has prevailed. Masses of people have been whipped up to commit the worst atrocities, to murder innocents, to vent hatred. Too seldom have the masses acted like stars who can and do resist the power of dangerous crowds.

In our time, like throughout history, there are those who seek to manipulate crowds in dangerous, murderous and hateful ways. There are those who play on the fears and gullibility of the masses, who dissolve individuality and turn people into frenzied sheep.

But there are also those who refuse to become part of such crowds, who resist the crowd instinct and maintain the personality instinct. These are the stars who will form a new kind of crowd, a crowd that will bring human beings together in harmony and mutual respect. God’s blessing to Abraham is a blessing that we all need to internalize…the sooner the better.

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Angel for Shabbat