

Rav Kook Torah



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Great Like the Stars

Stars and Sand

When Avraham complained to God that he was childless, God promised that his children would be as numerous as the stars in the sky:

“God took him outside and said, 'Look at the sky, and count the stars if you can! So will be your descendants.'”
(B'reishit 15:5)

On another occasion, God promised Avraham that his children would be like “the sand on the seashore” (22:17). Why are the Jewish people compared to both stars and grains of sand?

Greatness at Mount Sinai

The Sages took note that God's promise uses the uncommon word KO (KAF-HEI) – “So [KO] will be your descendants.? They explained that this word alludes to the Jewish people's future greatness at Mount Sinai, where the word KO also appears: “So [KO] shall you say to the House of Yaakov” (Sh'mot 19:3). What does the state of the Jewish people at Mount Sinai have to do with being likened to stars?

In general, we need to understand the

metaphor of the star. The psalmist wrote that God gave each star a name (T'hilim 147:4). Why do stars need names?

Personal and Collective Missions

What is in a name? A name reflects an entity's inner essence. It defines the nature of its existence and indicates its fundamental purpose. Stars are wonderful, powerful creations. Each star has a unique function for which it was created, and each star has a unique name corresponding to its special purpose.

The comparison of Avraham's descendants to stars indicates the importance and greatness of every individual member of the Jewish people. Every soul is a universe unto itself, as the Sages wrote: “One who saves a single soul of Israel, it is as if he has saved an entire world” (Sanhedrin 37a).

But the Jewish people also have a collective mission, as indicated by their comparison to sand. A single grain of sand is of no particular consequence; but together, these grains of sand form a border against the ocean, establishing dry land and enabling life to exist. Israel's collective purpose is to bring about the world's spiritual advance, as it says, “This people I have created for Me [so that] they will proclaim My praise” (Yishayahu 43:21).

It is logical for God to first establish the collective mission of the Jewish people, and only afterwards adjoin their individual goals. Thus, upon leaving Egypt, Israel was formed into a people with a unique collective purpose. This collective mission is an integral part of their very essence, regardless of any individual merits. The collective aspect of the Jewish people was valid even though the Israelites lacked personal merits and good deeds when they left Egypt, as it says, “I have made you [Israel] numerous like the plants of the field, and you have increased and grown... yet you were naked and bare” (Yechezkeil 16:7).

Like the Stars

The prominence of the stars, on the other hand, is indicative of the special mission of each individual. This metaphor refers to the potential for greatness that each member of the Jewish people acquired at Mount Sinai.

These special goals are a function of each individual's efforts, deeds, and Torah study. This level is based on the revelation of Torah and mitzvot at Mount Sinai. The Midrash teaches that when Israel promised to obey the laws of the Torah, the angels tied two crowns to the head of every Jew. These spiritual crowns reflected the greatness of each individual; every Jew was a prince, bearing his own

unique crown of holiness.

*Sapphire from the Land of Israel.
Adapted from Midbar Shur, pp. 110-121*