



Unmixing Metaphors

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We use metaphors and similes to speak about God because we believe God to be beyond a literal description. When we choose an image that evokes some aspect of our relationship to God—our Parent, our Rock, our Light—we are able to speak vividly about God while acknowledging that our words ultimately cannot claim to capture the divine subject.

But why would God use these figures of speech when communicating with human beings? A classic example of this phenomenon appears just a few verses into Parashat VaYeitzei. In Jacob's dream of a ladder to the heavens, God stands above him and says:

בראשית כח:יג-יד

אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אֲבִיר וְאֵלֶיךָ יִצְחָק הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה שֹׁכֵב עָלֶיהָ לְךָ אֶתְנַנָּה וְלִזְרַעְךָ: וְהָיָה זֶרְעֶךָ כַּעֲפֹר
הָאָרֶץ וְפָרְצֶת יָמָה וְקִדְמָה וְצָפֹנָה וְנִגְבָּהּ וְנִבְרָכוּ בְּךָ כָּל-מִשְׁפְּחוֹת הָאָדָמָה וּבִזְרַעְךָ:

Genesis 28:13-14

I am the Eternal, the God of your forefather Abraham and the god of Isaac. The land which you are lying on I now give to you and your descendants. **And your descendants will be like the dust of the earth**, and you shall spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south, and all the families of the earth will bless themselves by you and your descendants.



God is assuring Jacob that he will inherit the land promised to his ancestors, that is clear enough. But why the comparison to “the dust of the earth”? First of all: what does that mean, exactly? And whatever it means, why use this image instead of communicating the meaning directly?

To understand that, we have to go back to the first time this simile was used in the Torah, with Abraham in Parashat Lekh Lekha. Abraham began his journey with a call to go to the land that God would show him. He then begins wandering around that land, as if searching it out. But soon he is forced to descend to Egypt, to escape a famine. When he is able to return, he receives a message from God:

בראשית יג:טז

שָׂא נָא עֵינֶיךָ וּרְאֵה מִן הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה שָׂם צַפְנָה וְנִגְבָּה וְקִדְמָה וְיָמָה: כִּי אֶת כָּל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה רֹאֶה
 לְךָ אֶתְנַנֶּה וְלִזְרַעְךָ עַד עוֹלָם: וְשִׁמְתִּי אֶת זֶרְעֶךָ כְּעֹפֶר הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אִם יוּכַל אִישׁ לִמְנוֹת אֶת עֹפֶר הָאָרֶץ
 גַּם זֶרְעֶךָ יִמְנֶה:

Genesis 13:14-16

Raise your eyes and look out from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west. For I give all the land that you see to you and your descendants forever. **I will make your descendants like the dust of the earth, so that if one could count the dust of the earth, then your descendants, too, could be counted.**

Notice that Abraham’s blessing, like Jacob’s, includes the naming of the four directions. And there, at the end, we see Abraham’s offspring described with the same image that we saw in Jacob’s dream.¹

¹ In fact, there are many things about Jacob’s vision that hearken back to Abraham. Of course Jacob is explicitly addressed by the “God of Abraham,” and the land being promised to Jacob is the same land that was promised to Abraham and his descendants. Abraham was also told by God, that “וּנְבָרְכּוּ בְךָ כָּל מִשְׁפַּחַת הָאָדָמָה” - all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you” (Genesis 12:3).



Here we are also given the basic meaning of the image. Not only will Abraham's descendants be numerous, they will be so numerous that they are impossible to count—like trying to count grains of dust. That is certainly a powerfully evocative image.

But still, we might ask, why **this** image? Just as we read the Torah presuming every word to be carefully and intentionally chosen, surely when it comes to the use of a particular image, we can imagine there were many others God could have chosen instead.

In fact, we know that to be true, because God **does** use a different simile with Abraham, later in Parashat Lekh Lekha, to communicate what appears to be a very similar message. God appears to Abraham in a vision and tells him not to fear, for his “reward will be very great.” But Abraham seems unconvinced, pointing out that he is already an old man, and still childless (הולך ערירי) so there will be no one to inherit him.

God responds dramatically:

בראשית טו:ה

וַיֵּצֵא אֱתֹנוּ הַחוּצָה וַיֹּאמֶר הִבֵּט נָא הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וְסַפֵּר הַכּוֹכָבִים אִם תּוּכַל לְסַפֵּר אֹתָם וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ כֹּה יִהְיֶה זֶרְעֶךָ:

Genesis 15:5

God took him outside and said, “Look up, please, at the heavens, and count the stars, if you can count them.” And God said to him, “Thus will your children be.”

Again God assures Abraham that his descendents will be numerous; again God emphasizes specifically that they will be too numerous to count. But this time God uses a different

metaphor. They will be, not like the dust, but like the stars.²

So now we have two questions. First of all, why does God switch up the image with Abraham? And then, many years later, when God tells Jacob that his descendants will be like the dust of the ground, why does God choose one and not the other of the two images that previously described Abraham's descendants?

We can make that question even sharper by asking a third. Because if we look back to last week's *parashah*, Toldot, lo and behold—we find Isaac receiving the following blessing from God:

בראשית כו:ד

וְהִרְבֵּיתִי אֶת זַרְעֲךָ כְּכּוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם וְנָתַתִּי לְזַרְעֲךָ אֶת כָּל הָאֲרָצַת הָאֵל וְהִתְבָּרְכוּ בְּזַרְעֲךָ כָּל גּוֹיֵי הָאָרֶץ:

Genesis 26:4

I will multiply your descendants like the stars in the heavens, and I will give to your descendants all the lands of God, and your descendants will be blessed by all the nations on earth.

So it turns out that Isaac and Jacob—Abraham's son and grandson—each receive one and not the other of Abraham's blessings. Why is that so?

A closer look at the two original blessings makes clear that, though they may appear similar in content, they are not just two ways of describing numerous descendants. The comparison to the stars of the sky is indeed about numbers of people, a way of reassuring abundance in the

² Abraham will eventually receive one other simile that seems related to these two. After the trial of the Akeidah, he is told, "I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heavens and the sand on the seashore (וכחול) (אשר על שפת הים) (Genesis 22:17).



lineage of inheritors of the covenant. Recall that God gives this blessing to Abraham in direct response to his worry that he would have no heir.

The image of the dust, meanwhile, also promises abundant offspring, but specifically in connection to their filling the land. God says that Abraham's children will be like the dust, not just because they are numerous, but because—like dust—they will cover the earth.

So one blessing is geographic and the other is demographic, one about land and one about survival. Abraham needed both. He began his journey as a wanderer, a man without a land. Well into that journey, he still had no children, no inheritors. So he had reason to be anxious on both fronts. In each moment, God reassured him not just with a general promise of abundance, but with specific metaphorical language meant to address his most urgent concern.

So, too, Isaac and Jacob each receive the assurance that they need, given the insecure forces in their lives. Isaac receives the blessing that emphasizes lineage and offspring because, from before his birth and throughout his youth, both his status as an inheritor of the covenant and even his very existence (at the Akeidah) were put into question. Like his father, he has troubling conceiving children. Of all the patriarchs, however, he is the one most securely placed in the Land of Canaan. In fact, Isaac's blessing is immediately preceded by God's insistence that he not descend to Egypt, but, "גור בארץ הזאת - stay in this land" (Genesis 26:3).

In contrast, back in our *parashah*, we find that Jacob's anxieties turn out to be the inverse of Isaac's. He will soon prove to have no trouble reproducing. But his ability to reside in the land will be in a constant state of insecurity. Our *parashah* takes its name from a phrase that begins the story of Jacob: "ויצא יעקב" - Jacob went out." He is leaving his homeland. He will eventually return, but will be forced to leave again to survive a famine. And Jacob will die



outside the land, having settled in Egypt and—significantly—having brought all of his descendants with him. At the very moment that he is about to leave the land for the first time, then, Jacob surely needs the reassurance of this particular comparison: that his descendants shall be like the dust of the earth, not just numerous, but spread out on this very ground: to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south.

In all these stories we see that God gives our ancestors exactly the blessing and the image they need in their lives, at that moment in history. Abraham, who started this mission, needs both reassurances: that his people will grow and thrive, and that they will have a place to live that they can call home. In Isaac's day, there is still a basic struggle for this family's survival. Jacob manages to turn the family into a tribe, but that tribe will be forced to leave their land, and will struggle for the rest of the Torah to get back.

Jews have often, in their long journey through history, had to return to the longings and fears addressed by one or another of these images. During the Holocaust, the last great catastrophe we faced as a people, our numbers, our very existence, were in great jeopardy. In the current crisis, it is not only our lives that we worry about, but our ability to live safely in our homeland. This is a moment when we need to be reassured by God that we will be like the dust of the earth, spreading out freely across the land.

Why then, does God choose to use similes to reassure us? The answer is similar to the one we began with, when we considered why we use metaphors to describe God. We describe God with figurative language as a way of indicating that the actual God is unfathomable. God uses figurative language to reassure us, in moments of great terror and uncertainty, because God wishes to convey to us a hopeful future that—as yet—we cannot begin to fathom.

