

Abram has defeated the four kings in the war. Now, he detaches from the other kings and again goes to live by himself. HaShem approaches him and promises him that his reward will be very great. Abram questions the point of such a great wealth and reward if he has no offspring and his man-servant will inherit him. HaShem then tells Abram about how great his offspring will be.

וַיֵּצֵא אֹתוֹ הַחוּצָה וַיֹּאמֶר הִבְטֵנָּה הַשָּׁמַיְמָה וּסְפֹר הַכּוֹכָבִים
אִם-תּוּכַל לְסַפֵּר אֹתָם וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ כֹּה יִהְיֶה זַרְעֶךָ:

“And He took him out to the outside and He said, ‘Gaze clearly, if you please, at the heavens, and count the stars. Can you even count them?’ And He said, ‘So will be your children.’” (Genesis 15:5).

Did Abram really need to be shown the stars to know how many there were? Did Abram not see stars of the heaven previously? Also, why did HaShem have to take Abram outside when He could have just appeared to Abram when he was already under the heavens to visualize how great his offspring will be. Further, it already said previously, “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.” (Genesis 13:16). HaShem already promised Abram that his offspring would be many. Abram did not question that promise at that time. And why did Hashem have to give the promise again and with another visual aid?

The Gemara Megillah 16a says, “The wise men continued: “But you shall fall [*nafol tippol*] before him” (Esther 6:13). Rabbi Yehuda bar Ilai interpreted a verse homiletically: Why are these two fallings, *nafol* and *tippol*, mentioned here? The wise men said to Haman: This Jewish nation is compared in the Bible to the dust of the earth and it is also compared to the stars

in heaven. This teaches you that when they descend, they descend to the dust, and when they rise, they rise to the stars. Accordingly, when Mordecai is on the rise, you will be utterly incapable of prevailing over him.” This Gemara gives the potential of greatness and lowliness of the Jewish nation; to reach the stars or sink to be dust and worthless. Clearly, there is no value in being as numerous as dusk while also being the value of dust, nothing. The blessing that the descendants of Abram would be like the dusk of the earth must mean more.

The Gemara Nedarim 32a answers the questions of why Abram was told to go outside. The Gemara expounds the verse “and He brought him outside” (Genesis 15:5): Abraham said before Him: Master of the Universe, I looked at my constellation and according to it I will have only one son, and a son has already been born to me, i.e., Yishmael. He said to him: Emerge from your astrology because there is no constellation for the Jewish people, as they are not subject to the influence of astrology.” Abram was told to go outside of his own previous destiny. Sure, if he would have remained an idol maker then he would have no children. Now that he became the Man of HaShem his destiny or luck changed.

Gemara in Shabbos goes further. It says, 156a, “and Rav also holds that there is no constellation for the Jewish people, as Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: From where is it derived that there is no constellation for the Jewish people? As it is stated with regard to Abraham: “And He brought him outside, and said: Look now toward heaven, and count the stars, if you are able to count them; and He said unto him: So shall your offspring be” (Genesis 15:5). The Sages derived from this that Abraham said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: Master of the Universe, “Behold, You have given me no offspring, and one born in my house is to be my heir” (Genesis 15:3). The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him: No. “And, behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying: This man shall not be your heir; rather, one that will come forth from

your own innards shall be your heir” (Genesis 15:4).” The Gemara is saying the same thing that even if he did not have offspring now, or his mazal would not give him offspring, HaShem would.

Rashi seizes on this explanation and explains a nuance based on the Midrash. “Its real meaning is: He brought him outside his tent so that he could look at the stars. Its Midrashic explanation is: Go forth from (give up) your astrological speculations — that you have seen by the planets that you will not raise a son; Abram indeed may have no son but Abraham will have a son: Sarai may not bear a child but Sarah will bear. I will give you other names, and your destiny (מזל constellation/luck) will be changed. Another explanation: He brought him forth from the terrestrial sphere, elevating him above the stars, and this is why He uses the term הִבַּט “look”, when He said “look at the heavens” — for this word signifies looking from above downward (Genesis Rabbah 44:12).”

Rashi’s point is that Abram would not *look up* to the stars, but *look down* upon them. The stars would not control Abram as he would not be on another trajectory.

Ramban says brings down the Midrash that Abram would not have children but Abraham would. “But ‘Abram’ did have Yishmael (ibid 16:15). How then could the Midrash say, “‘Abram’ indeed may not have a son?” The meaning of the Midrash, however, is that Abram sought a son who would qualify to become his heir, [which excluded Yishmael, who would not inherit him], even as he said, And, lo, my household slave will be mine heir. (ibid 15:3). The Holy One, blessed be He, then said to him, “This man shall not be thine heir, but one born of thine own body shall be thine heir (ibid 15:4). And leave your astrological speculations. ‘Abram’ will not have a son as his heir, but ‘Abraham’ will have a son as his heir.”

Ramban says further, “It is also possible that the astrological speculation concerned the pair together, namely, the “Abram and Sarai” as a pair will not beget children, and the Eternal now assured him that “Abraham and Sarah” will beget children. In my opinion, however, the Divine assurance now given to Abraham did not mention Sarah, rather, her name is an addition on the part of the Midrash, meaning that such indeed was the case also with Sarah. That “Sarai” will not bear a child, but “Sarah” will. The Holy One, blessed be He, however, did not assure him concerning Sarah at the present time. Even at the time of the prophecy concerning the circumcision, Abraham was still in doubt whether “Sarah” would bear a child.”

This last part of Ramban’s explanation is important. If HaShem was indeed telling Abram that Avraham and Sarah would have children, then there was no need for Avraham to marry Hagar and have Yishmael. He would be confident in the promise and wait for Sarah to bear a child. However, Ramban clarifies that Avraham was never promised that the child will be through Sarah.

However, this still begs an explanation. HaShem did not change Abram’s name for at least another 13 years. (ibid 17:5). Abram had Yismael in the interim. How can the promise now be that *Abram* will not bear children but *Avraham* will? Abram did not know about ‘Avraham’ at this point as it was not changed for at least another 13 years.

Bartanura says, “There is a question on Midrash. How can the Midrash say that Abram was to go out of his mazalos and then he would benefit from this new promise. The word “*habet*” or ‘gaze’ is meant to gaze *downward* like a man looks down upon a snake. Thus, Abram would be looking *down* upon the stars. This means that HaShem took Abram not only outside of his usual mazolos but also out of the physical world. Abram stared *downward* at the stars. It was a miracle. Like all the promises made in our parsha here, Abram was above his own destiny.”

This explanation by Bartanura is not simply that Abram's name change would change his luck. It was that HaShem was showing Abram that the entire world will not serve to be given to Abram. Our conversation starts with HaShem promising Abram great reward. Thus, *Abram, look down upon the stars. Can you count them? They are my treasure. Your offspring will come from you and flourish and they will gain this great reward I am giving you.*

Bechor Shor explains that the uniqueness about gazing at the stars was that it was daytime. He points out, also, that HaShem only talked to Abram in a dreamlike manner. So, Abram did not literally go outside. Rather, in the dreamlike state he would be shown outside, a night sky, even during the daytime, to count the stars. A task impossible, just as it was impossible to then count Abram's eventual progeny and the reward they would get.

Chizkuni learns this way, too, that it was a dream, and in the dream HaShem took Abram outside to count the stars. This makes the explanation that Abram looked *downward* at the stars easier to understand.

Haamek Davar answers the question about the need for 'like the stars' when it already said 'like the dust of the earth.' He says, "And count the stars: Not because of their abundance did He promise him here, since He had already compared the multitude of his children to the dust of the earth, but rather to add here that they will be many men of stature, who will bring light like the stars. And it was not as he had feared upon hearing of their comparison to dust, lest they be small of worth. If you will be able to count them: Because although there are in all the nations of the world men of stature, who bring light to their nations like stars, but they were few in number then in comparison to the amount of the masses. This is not so with the offspring of Avraham; there are great people much more than the amount of the masses, as it is written in the book of Devarim on the verse, "Not because of your being more than all the other nations.'"

Tur Haaroch gives his explanation on the dual comparisons. “And count the stars, etc.” whereas in the previous prophecy Avraham’s offspring had been compared to the dust of the earth, now it was compared to the stars in the heaven. We are dealing with the relative positions of Esau and Yaakov, both descendants of Avraham, one compared to the earthly phenomena, i.e. dust, the other to celestial phenomena, i.e. stars. Whereas the stars are untouchable, beyond harm, dust is something people trample on.”

Interestingly, Daas Zekeinim points out on the last words of the passuk, “so shall be your seed.” Rabbi Tanchuma son of Acha, basing himself on this phrase, commented that it is an assurance that there will never be fewer than 30 righteous people on earth at all times. He uses the word יהיה, “will be (singular),” as his proof.” We have a tradition of 36 righteous that guard the earth. Daas Zekinim is learning that at least 30 of them are descendants of Abram.

The first promise that HaShem made to Abram about his children being like the dust of the earth (ibid 13:16) was made when Abram was about 75, just entered the Land, and separated from his nephew Lot. After returning from a short detour to Egypt, Lot chose to live near the evil Sodomites and Abram chose to live separately. As a reward for his continued piety, HaShem appears to Abram and promises him the entire Land. HaShem asks Abram to walk the entirety of Land—for the first time since coming here—because He promised to give it to Abram’s descendants (ibid 13:14). “North and south, to the east and west.” (ibid). Abram does not question that he has no descendants. He trusts in the promise and the future.

A decade later Abram finishes fighting the Great War, removes himself from the king of Sodom, and HaShem again appears to Abram to renew his reward for Abram’s continued piety. Now HaShem merely promises reward. Abram wonders, “What kind of reward is beneficial to me? My time on earth is limited. Is all my reward just so my man-servant shall inherit me?”

Now, Abram knew about the numerous descendants he would have. They would be like the dust of the earth. However, that promise talked about the Israelites in exile. Dust of the earth is spread all over. The Israelites would be spread from north, south, east, west (ala ibid 13:14). They also would not be very prosperous if they would be like the *dust*. It is pious and a good existence to be humble but not necessarily prosperous.

However, now HaShem was talking about great reward. Abram asks about which descendants will have this great reward? Will it be his man-servant or his other household members, or those he converted? It cannot be his ‘dust of the earth’ descendants that will get this reward. Then who will?

HaShem then answers, “Go out from yourself to the outside. You do not have a single destiny. You are on earth but you can look *down* on the stars. You are greater than anything that is out there on earth. You will be made great and your children will be great. It is they that will inherit you. They will be like the stars: great beings with their merits and their numbers too great to count. Abram already had the promise that his descendants will be numerous, now he is gets the promise that they will be significant.

It is more than just that Israelites are outside of luck/astrology. They *are* astrology. The world now hangs on Abram’s descendants. If they are righteous and they are a light to the world the world can exist and flourish. When they turn from their ways from HaShem and righteousness then the world can sink to be a very corrupt place. It is Abram’s descendants that brought the Torah down to earth when they were gifted it. In this way, Abram’s descendants are not only above the stars, they are the stars. They are the people of earth’s luck/astrology. Just like the dusk and the stars never cease from earth, so will the Israelites and the Jewish People never cease.

After getting this promise, that his offspring will flourish and be rewarded, and about their longevity, Abram then “put his full faith in HaShem.” (ibid 15:6). Abram did not have to ask how it would happen, or when it would happen. He thought, it was no longer my burden. I have the promise and I put my trust in HaShem.