



The opening section of Parashat Vayetze tells of Yaakov's famous prophecy that he beheld as he slept in Bet-El, along his flight to Charan to escape from his brother's rage. In this prophecy God promises that the Land of Canaan would be given to him and his offspring, and He also declares the famous promise, "Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth" (28:14).

Maimonides cites this verse in his *Epistle to Yemen* (chapter 1), and he explains the metaphor as referring not to the innumerability of Yaakov's descendants, but rather to their eternal existence. In this verse, God foresees the time when Yaakov's descendants will be treaded and trampled upon like the earth, subjected to ruthless oppression, persecution and tyranny. But just as the earth survives the incessant trampling of man, and in fact sees the day when the men who treaded upon it are interred for eternity beneath its surface, so will *Am Yisrael* somehow endure the centuries of degradation and suffering. We have been promised that, like the earth beneath our feet, the years of "treading" will not destroy us, and we will survive even as our oppressors are "buried" beneath us.

Maimonides wrote these remarks in an effort to lift the emotional and religious spirits of the Yemenite Jews who came under harsh persecution and relentless challenges to their faith. He insisted that contrary to what the enemy nations charged, the Jews' feeble condition at that time in no way disproved the theological truth of their beliefs or foretold their imminent demise. Rather, like the earth, they will endure the "trampling" and survive eternally, as their faith will only be strengthened and reaffirmed by the resolute, tenacious commitment they display in the face of ridicule and torment.

As mentioned earlier, God issued this promise to Yaakov as he fled from Canaan to escape the vengeance of his brother, from whom he had "seized" his father's blessing. As many writers have noted, Yaakov's flight from Canaan establishes the precedent of Jewish exile, foreshadowing the homelessness, uncertainty and hostility that his descendants will experience after they, like their ancestor, are driven from their homeland. As he made his way towards Charan, he likely entertained doubts as to whether his exile meant the forfeiting of his rights to the blessing of Avraham, that perhaps it would be Esav, rather than he, who would inherit God's special covenant with his father and grandfather. His descendants, too, would one day be banished from *Eretz Yisrael* and told by their arrogant foes that their banishment meant the end of their stature as God's chosen nation. God therefore appeared to Yaakov to inform him that he and his descendants shall be like the earth of the ground – they shall suffer the scorn and contempt of the likes of Esav and Lavan, but will endure nonetheless.

In this same prophecy, Yaakov beheld angels ascending a descending a ladder that extended from the ground to the heavens. Maimonides offers different interpretations to this dream in different contexts in his writings, but in *Mishneh Torah* (Hilkhos Yesodei Ha-Torah 7:3) he explains the vision as an allusion to the rise and fall

of the world's empires throughout history. God reveals to Yaakov that the crisis he currently confronts will repeat itself numerous times throughout history, as his descendents will be forced to flee from the hostile empires that rise against them. But just as Yaakov ultimately triumphs and returns to Canaan to reclaim his rights to the covenant of Avraham, so will his descendants survive and prevail, and resettle their ancient homeland where they will proudly reclaim their stature as the *Am Hashem*.