

5782 - Genesis 1-6 - B'reishit (In the beginning)

Genesis 1:1-2:3

¹In the beginning (*b'reishit*) God created (*bara*) the heavens and the earth.

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ

1. *In the beginning.* Right with its first words, the Torah solemnly proclaims the great fundamental truth: **God is the beginning and the origin of all things**. The matter constituting the cosmos is not eternal, nor is it the primary source nor a regulator of all terrestrial life. **It is God Who created matter out of nothing**. It is He Who created the universe "**at the beginning**," that is to say, at a time depending solely on His own free will.¹

OKE²—^{1:1}**In the first times** the Lord created the heavens and the earth.

PJE³—^{1:1}**At the beginning** the Lord created the heavens and the earth.

TNK⁴—^{1:1}**When God began to create** heaven and earth ...

TKT⁵—^{1:1}**When God began creating** heaven and earth ...

The Torah begins with an affirmation of creation *ex nihilo* (יֵשׁ מֵאַיִן) because on this affirmation is based the faith in a unique and omnipotent Creator **Who is not Himself bound to matter**, but Who has created the world with a definite purpose. If God had been confronted with pre-existing matter, then He would necessarily have been limited and the world of His making would not have been a free and perfect creation. With such matter God could only have made a world which would be relatively good but still nonetheless imperfect. All physical ills, all moral depravity, would then have had their origin in the imperfection of the primal matter, of the raw materials, and God Himself would have been incapable of delivering us from them. And under such circumstances man could no more be master of his body than God could be

master of matter. Freedom would disappear from the world; a blind and disheartening necessity would rule over the earth together with its God and its humanity. **This is the fallacious doctrine which is still fundamental to every heathen conception of life**. This metaphysical lie deprives man of the truth, i.e. of consensus with reality, and, what is worse, it leads to the denial of freedom of will to both God and man, and thereby does away with every notion of morality.

The very first words of the Torah destroy this theory completely, proclaiming for all to hear that **the substance and form of everything that exists have come from the omnipotent free will of the Creator**. And in complete freedom, God continues to be Master of all beings, all forms, all substances, all forces which act on them and all the laws which govern their working and shape their forms. For it is His almighty absolutely free will which has created matter and which has imposed laws on it to give it form. Just as the Creator freely governs His universe, so too has He given man, into whom He has breathed a spark of His being, freedom over his own small world, freedom over his body and its forces. Thus man is a free-willed image of the free-willed Creator in a universe supremely governed by His omnipotence (R' S.R. Hirsch⁶).

a. *The Torah begins with an affirmation of creation ex nihilo ...*

- 1) The "Oscillating Universe" theory (similar to Plato's idea of an "eternal and unchanging universe" proposes that the universe has always existed—that an infinite number of universes have come into existence (by expansion) and disappeared (by contraction).
- 2) The "Steady-State" theory (similar to Aristotle's view of the universe) proposes that the universe has always existed and will always continue to exist in a condition similar to its present condition.

b. *... Who is not Himself bound to matter ...*

- 1) John 4:24

²⁴**God is spirit**, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth."

- 2) Act 17:24-25

²⁴"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth **and does not live in temples built by human hands**. ²⁵And he is not served by human hands, as if he

1 Rabbi Elie Munk, *The Call Of The Torah, Beresishis*, (Mesorah Publications, Ltd.), pp. 2-4

2 ONK—Targum Onkelos is the primary Jewish Aramaic targum ("translation") of the Torah, accepted as an authoritative translated text ... thought to have been written in the early 2nd-century CE.

3 PJE—Targum Pseudo-Jonathan in English. Targum Jonathan is a western targum of the Torah from the land of Israel (as opposed to the eastern Babylonian Targum Onkelos). Its correct title was originally Targum Yerushalmi (Jerusalem Targum), which is how it was known in medieval times. But because of a printer's mistake it was later labeled Targum Jonathan, in reference to Jonathan ben Uzziel (a disciple of Hillel, the Elder). Some editions of the Pentateuch continue to call it Targum Jonathan to this day. Most scholars refer to the text as Targum Pseudo-Jonathan or TPsJ.

4 TNK—JPS Tanakh (1985).

5 TKT—The Koren Tanakh, The Magerman Edition.

6 Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) was a German Orthodox rabbi best known as the intellectual founder of the *Torah im Derech Eretz* (The Torah with the Way of the Land) school of contemporary Orthodox Judaism. Occasionally termed *neo-Orthodoxy*, his philosophy, together with that of Azriel Hildesheimer, has had a considerable influence on the development of Orthodox Judaism.

needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.

b. ... *and the world of His making would not have been a free and perfect creation. With such matter God could only have made a world which would be relatively good but still nonetheless imperfect.*

1) Genesis 1:10-13 (cf. 1:18, 21, 24)

¹⁰God called the dry ground "land," and the gathered waters he called "seas." **And God saw that it was good.** ¹¹ Then God said, "Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds." And it was so ... ¹²**And God saw that it was good.**

¹³And there was evening, and there was morning—the third day.

2) Genesis 1:31

³¹God saw all that he had made, **and it was very good.** And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

3) Gnosticism (from Ancient Greek: "having knowledge") is a collection of ancient religious ideas and systems which originated in the first century (CE) (and influenced some early messianic communities). These various groups emphasised personal spiritual knowledge (*gnosis*) over orthodox teachings, traditions, and ecclesiastical authority. Gnostic cosmogony (i.e., the branch of science that deals with the origin of the universe) **generally presents a distinction between a supreme, hidden God and a malevolent lesser divinity responsible for creating the material universe. Viewing this material existence as flawed or evil,** Gnostics considered the principal element of salvation to be **direct knowledge of the supreme divinity in the form of mystical or esoteric insight.** Many Gnostic texts deal not in concepts of sin and repentance, but with illusion and enlightenment.

a) Marcionism originated in the teachings of Marcion of Sinope in Rome (c. 140–155). There, he joined the Syrian Gnostic Cerdo.⁷ Marcion believed that (Yeshua) was the savior sent by God, and Paul was his chief apostle, but **he rejected the Hebrew Bible and the God of Israel. Marcionists believed that the wrathful Hebrew God was a separate and lower entity than the all-forgiving God of the (Apostolic Writings).**

b) Even though Gnosticism was regarded as "heretical" by the early Church, it is probably behind the Christian emphasis on

"leaving this world behind" and "going to heaven" in song, preaching and theology—an emphasis not found in the Bible.

c) Philippians 1:23-25

²³I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Messiah, which is better by far; ²⁴**but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.** ²⁵Convinced of this, **I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith ...**

2. בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים — *Of God's creating.* The word "בָּרָא" is reserved for the Divine creation *ex nihilo*. For man's productive activity, the expression "make" or "form" is used. The concept of creation starting from nothing is given the force of a fundamental tenet of Judaism. For, as Rambam explains, **denying this concept leads ultimately to the determinist philosophy of the eternity of the universe and this precludes all belief in prophecy and in miracles** (Guide for the Perplexed, Vol. 2, ch. 25). Creation out of nothing, on the other hand, is the fundamental principle which allows us to understand the freedom of the Divine will, and hence also the free will with which the Divine will has endowed mankind.

3. אֱלֹהִים — *God's.* The king of Egypt, Ptolemy (305-285 BCE), summoned seventy-two elders and put them each in a separate room without telling them why. He went to each in turn and said, "Translate the Torah of Moses, your master, for me." God then prompted every one of them and they all had the same idea and without exception wrote, "God created in the beginning" (Megillah 9a).

The seventy-two elders who were the first to translate the Torah (into the version called the Septuagint [LXX]) began by inverting the order of the first words of Genesis. This they did so as not to give the idea that "beginning" should be taken as subject of the sentence or that God had been preceded by another principle ... **It mentions the ideas of time and creation before the name of God so that man will know, right from the beginning, that cognizance of the Creator can only be acquired through a knowledge of creation and an understanding of the varieties of earthly life.** It is by observing and studying nature, by gaining an awareness of the Divine attributes, that one progressively approaches the cognizance of the name of God. "And you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen" (Exodus 33:23). Man can come to know God only through His acts, His providence, or His word, but not in His very essence (*Akeidat Yitzchak*, R Yitzchak Arama⁸).

⁷ Cerdo was a Syrian gnostic who was deemed a heretic by the Early Church around the time of his teaching, circa 138 CE.

⁸ Arama (c. 1420-1494) is the author of *Akedat Yitzchak (Binding of Isaac)*, a lengthy philosophical commentary on the Torah, homiletic in style.

a. Psalm 8:1-4

¹For the director of music ... A psalm of David. LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! **You have set your glory in the heavens** ... ³When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, ⁴what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?

b. Psalm 19:1-4

¹For the director of music. A psalm of David. **The heavens declare the glory of God**; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. ²Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. ³They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. ⁴Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world ...

1) Romans 1:18-23

¹⁸The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ²⁰For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—**have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made**, so that people are without excuse. ²¹For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²²Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

c. Psalm 50:6

⁶And the heavens proclaim his righteousness, for he is a God of justice.

d. Psalm 97:6

⁶The heavens proclaim his righteousness, and all peoples see his glory.

4. The Torah does not stipulate as an absolute act of faith that God exists. Indeed, the existence of God is presupposed throughout, but it is not the object of a proof, nor even of a doubt. But **the word order in the initial verse of the Torah discreetly suggests that we seek out God in Creation and so progressively acquire with our intelligence that which faith puts forward to us at the beginning of our human experience**. For faith is crowned by knowledge.

The Torah begins with a large ב, the second letter of the alphabet, as if to emphasize that **the creation of the universe is only the sec-**

ond factor. From then on, **it is up to man to go in quest of the first factor, which is the Creator Who precedes time**.

a. **The true essence of God cannot be grasped by anyone but God.**⁹

There is not a single angel in heaven who knows God's location—and certainly not God's true essence ...

So all those descriptions that we read in the Torah, of God's hand, foot, ear, and eye—what do they mean? Know and believe that although those descriptions indicate God's true being, no creature can know or contemplate ... Though we are made in the divine image and likeness, do not imagine that the divine eye is actually in the form of an eye or the divine hand in the form of a hand. Rather, these are inner—innermost—aspects of the divine reality, from which the fountain flows to all creatures through the divine decree. But the essence of the divine hand is not like the essence of the human hand, nor is their form the same, as it is written: "To whom can I be compared?"

Know and understand that there is no similarity in substance or structure between God and us—except for the intention of the forms of our organs and limbs, which are fashioned as symbols of hidden, (spiritual) realities. The mind cannot know these realities directly; it can only be reminded of them. As when one writes "Reuben son of Jacob." The form of these letters is not the form, structure, and essence of the real Reuben son of Jacob but simply a mnemonic device (*i.e., something to assist the memory*). "Reuben son of Jacob" is a symbol of the particular entity called by that name.

1) Luke 10:21-22 (NAS)—when the seventy-two return

²¹At that time Yeshua, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. ²²"All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and **no one knows who the father is except the son** and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

26. וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם —And God said, "Let us make Man." Rashi explains that although no one assisted God with creation and although **here-tics may turn this plural form into an argument against monotheism**, the Torah did not wish to forego this opportunity to teach us the virtue of

⁹ Daniel C. Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah, The Heart of Jewish Mysticism* (Castle Books), p. 81.

modesty: a superior should consult with and seek the approval of his subordinates. On the other hand, had the Torah stated: "I will make man," this would not have taught us that God consulted with His "advisors" but rather that He had formed this plan alone. Moreover, the counter-argument to the heretics is found in the very next verse of the Torah: "God created the man," not "they created."

Rashi's source for the above is the *Midrash Rabbah*. There it says even more explicitly that when Moses came to this passage, which he was to write as God dictated, he asked: "Why do You provide the heretics with a pretext (**their polytheistic theories seemingly being supported by the words 'Let us make Man'**)?" God replied: "Write and let those who want to make the error make it. Since man will be master of creation, it is appropriate for Me to ask the assent of the higher and lower spheres before creating him. **Men will thereby learn from Me that the greatest must seek the approval of the smallest before appointing a ruler over him.**"

Note that the Torah prefers to use an expression which might lead to difficulties and be misinterpreted by polytheists rather than desist from proclaiming an important moral lesson. The present example, appearing right at the beginning of the Torah, is of prime importance. To be sure, there are numerous passages in the Torah which can be misconstrued, which are ambiguous or contain obscure terms or apparent contradictions. Schools of biblical criticism pounce on such cases to cast doubt on the authenticity and originality of the Scriptures, and they eagerly speculate on the presumed authors of the Holy Writings, and go so far as to "resolve" these difficulties simply by changing and disfiguring the text or skipping parts of it. To these aberrations of the human spirit, the Divine voice challenges: "Let those who want to make the error make it." The moral, philosophical, historical, and other teachings which the "incriminated texts contain, and which are generally clearly brought out by the Talmud, are infinitely more important than the fallacious conclusions which heretics might draw. For the Divine Lawgiver, **moral and doctrinal concerns take precedence over philological and sometimes even historical questions.** This idea of the Torah's universality, given its place right at the beginning of Genesis, serves as notice; it is a signpost for us as we encounter other textual difficulties in the Torah.

1. Genesis Rabbah 8:3

AND GOD SAID: LET US MAKE MAN, etc. With whom did he take counsel?⁽¹⁾ R. Joshua b. Levi said: He took counsel with the works of heaven and earth, like a king who has two advisors without whose knowledge⁽²⁾ he did nothing whatsoever ... He took counsel with the works of each day ... He took counsel with his own heart.

(1) This question arises because of the phrase *Let us make*.

(2) The Hebrew implies knowledge and consent.

a. Genesis Rabbah 8:8

R. Samuel b. Nachman said in R. Jonathan's name: When Moses was engaged in writing the Torah, he had to write the work of each day. When he came to the verse, AND GOD SAID: LET US MAKE MAN, etc., he said: 'Sovereign of the Universe! Why dost Thou furnish an excuse to heretics?'⁽¹⁾ 'Write,' replied He; 'whoever wishes to err may err.'

R. Hila said: There is no taking counsel here, but it may be compared to a king who was strolling at the door of his palace when he saw a clod lying about. Said he, 'What shall we do with it?' Some answered: '[Use it in building] public baths'; others answered: 'private baths.' 'I will make a statue of it,' declared the king. Who then can hinder him?

(1) For maintaining a plurality of gods.

b. Genesis Rabbah 8:9

The heretics asked R. Simlai: 'How many deities created the world?' 'I and you must inquire of the first day,' replied he, as it is written, *For ask now of the first days* (Deut. iv, 32). Not, 'Since the day gods created (*baru*) man' is written here, but *God created*—*bara* (*ib.*)⁽²⁾ Then they asked him a second time: 'Why is it written, *In the beginning Elohim* [plural] *created*?' 'In the beginning *baru* Elohim is not written here,' answered he, 'but *bara* Elohim *the heaven and the earth.*'

R. Simlai said: Wherever you find a point [apparently] supporting the heretics, you find the refutation at its side. They asked him again: 'What is meant by, And God said: Let us make man?' 'Read what follows,' replied he: 'not, "**And gods created (*va-yivre'u*) man**" is written here, but "**And God created—*va-yivra***"' (Gen. i, 27). When they went out his disciples said to him: 'Them you have dismissed with a mere makeshift, but how will you answer us?' Said he to them: 'In the past Adam was created from dust and Eve was created from Adam; but henceforth it shall be *In our image, after our likeness* (*ib.* 26); neither man without woman nor woman without man, and neither of them without the Divine Spirit.'⁽³⁾

(2) *Elohim* is plural in form, but *bara* is singular, *bara'u* being plural. **Thus he answered that the verb is in the singular, so that the plural form of *Elohim* is merely the plural of majesty.**

(3) He interprets the verse: man has already been made and his seed shall henceforth be *in our image*, etc., as explained in the text.

בְּצִלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ — *In Our image, after Our likeness*. "The best of all explanations on this verse," writes Rambam, "is the one in which צִלְמֵנוּ (*image*) refers to the facial features and expression and דְּמוּתֵנוּ (*likeness*) refers to the corporeal form which resembles those of the other earthly creatures. For

man's body is like those of the other terrestrial beings but his soul is like the souls of heavenly beings."

It is the face of a holy and righteous person, alive with wisdom, goodness and love, which above all reflects the image of God. His magnanimity graces his features, his eyes shine with intelligence and understanding, the fire which burns within him bestows upon his whole being that radiance which made the Psalmist exclaim, "'Yet You have made him but slightly less than the angels, and have crowned him with glory and honor" (Psalms 8:6).

In what sense is man created in the image of God? He bears within him a spark of the Divine spirit. Because of it he is "unique in the world just as God is unique above; he is the only earthly creature to be aware of good and evil" (Rashi on Genesis 3:22), for only he among all creatures has free will. Accordingly, his mind gives him the power to govern matter. To this spark he owes the immortality of his soul and the light of understanding which shines within him, permitting him to know God, to love Him and to cleave to Him.

God endowed each human being with this Divine spark by breathing into his nostrils the breath of life (Genesis 2:7). But the **דמוּת**, the corporeal shape of man, albeit soil taken from the ground (ibid.), is also fashioned to resemble God. For Rambam, who is always careful to avoid the slightest hint of anthropomorphism, the words "image" and "likeness" are to be taken figuratively (Guide for the Perplexed 1:1) ...

Thus, man represents, as it were, the "shadow" cast on the earth by the Divine Majesty (**צלם** being derived from **צל**, *shadow*, according to interpretation of R Moshe Cordovero¹⁰).

2. Hebrews 8:1-5

¹Now the main point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, ²and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being. ³Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices, **and so it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer.** ⁴If he were on earth, he would not be a priest, for there are already priests who offer the gifts prescribed by the law. ⁵They serve at a sanctuary **that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven.** This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: "See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain" ...

¹⁰ Moses ben Jacob Cordovero (1522-1570) was a central figure in the historical development of Kabbalah, leader of a mystical school in 16th-century Safed, Ottoman Syria. He is known by the acronym the Ramak.