

# SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

511 Ave. R Brooklyn, NY 11223-2093  
Rabbi Moshe Shamah, Director

718 998 8171 Fax: 718 375 3263  
Rabbi Ronald Barry, Administrator

בס"ד

## Genesis Chapter 1

### 1. General Remarks

In a majestic account of creation, the first chapter of the Torah articulates the most basic and important principles that a person should know concerning G-d, man and the world. G-d alone brought everything into being by divine fiat exactly according to His plan and purpose. He stands supreme, above the created order, outside of time and space. There are no restrictions on His will.

He created man – the text is explicit that it is speaking of male and female – as the pinnacle of creation and invested him with the highest degree of worth. Indeed, humankind was made “in the image of G-d,” a phrase that implies the faculty of rational thought, freedom of will and infinite value. G-d blessed them and endowed them with the potential for prodigious achievement; He told them: “fill the earth, master it and rule over” its creatures.

Each component of creation is “good” and by the end of the sixth day, when creation was completed, all is “very good.” The diet G-d assigned to man in Genesis 1, as well as to all living creatures, is vegetarian (vv. 29-30), manifesting His intent for the world to be a peaceful and tranquil domicile for man.

The ultimate fulfillment of creation comes with the seventh day, a day G-d blessed and sanctified, “for on that day He ceased from all His work, that G-d had created [for it to continue] to do” (Ibn Ezra). At this point the meaning of the seventh day, beyond being an abstract concept, is not explained; it will only emerge when Israel arrives on the scene.

In what appears to be a reaction to this chapter the Psalmist states:

Hashem, our Master, how majestic is Your name throughout the earth...

When I view Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and stars...

What is man that You are mindful of him...

that You have made him little less than the angels...

and gave him to rule over the work of Your hands...

Sheep and oxen all, as well as the beasts of the field,

The birds of heaven and the fish of the sea?

Hashem, our Master, how majestic is Your name throughout the earth. (Ps. 8:1, 4-9)

The larger implications are clear. Since one G-d created the world and all in it, and granted man his extraordinary status he should express his appreciation to his Creator. Ultimately all human beings are dependent on Him and there is only Him to serve. Moral responsibility and accountability are implicit, as well as the capacity to live in a meaningful relationship with the Creator, topics to be addressed in the immediately following chapters.

That all humans are created in G-d's image and are recipients of His life-affirming blessings, possessing limitless dignity and unique value, is a proclamation that in an important respect means that all human beings are born equal. In Job's words regarding proper treatment of his slave: “Did not He who made me in the stomach make him, did not One form us both in the womb?” (Job 31:15). This egalitarian notion of man being created in the image of G-d set in motion thoughts about the human condition and society that eventually blossomed into a foundation-stone of modern civilization.

Viewed in contrast to contemporaneous Near Eastern beliefs, Genesis 1 constitutes an enormous protest against pagan doctrine. The latter speaks of the origins and characteristics of the gods, their passions, conflicts, schemes and alliances, their inhering in nature and themselves being subject to powerful forces, projecting their selfish and conflicting whims on earth. Humans were consigned to forever living in

a discordant world and in a fatalistic context. Only kings were accorded the status of being in the image of god. All of this, with attendant superstition and magic, is swept away by the Torah in its opening chapter. Man was entrusted with a good and harmonious world, full of the blessing of the one G-d, with the capability (and responsibility) to so maintain it or, in the eventuality, to repair it.

Genesis 1 provides a major thrust forward for the vision of a conflict-free world reflecting a conflict-free heaven, with universal brotherhood and peace among all men, under one G-d. The prophets spelled out these innovative themes. In Isaiah we read: “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard lie down beside the kid...with a young boy to lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze...and the lion, like the ox, shall eat straw. A babe shall play over a viper’s hole...” (Isa. 11:6-8). Humankind is encouraged to work toward the improvement of world society and the day when “they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift sword against nation, neither shall they know war any longer” (Isa. 2:4; Mic. 4:3).

From the description of all human beings deriving from one and the same father, the Mishnah formulates additional insights that serve to better society:

Therefore was man created as a single individual, to teach that whosoever destroys a single life, Scripture considers as though he destroyed a complete world; and whosoever preserves a single life, Scripture considers as if he preserved a complete world. Moreover [was man created as a single individual] for the sake of peace among men, that one may not say to his fellow “My father was greater than yours.” (m. Sanh. 4:3)

The tone of Genesis 1 is formal and austere with the repetition of identical formulae for each step of creation. This befits the monumental lessons contained in this first comprehensive proclamation in history regarding the creative activity of the one G-d, omnipotent and consistent, creating heaven and earth.

Following the account of creation, the Torah details matters concerning Divine command, human free will, moral responsibility and accountability to G-d. These are the subjects of the Garden of Eden narrative and that of the Cain and Abel episode. The chapters that

follow (through Genesis 11) describe man’s proliferation and his failure to establish the righteous and just society that G-d desires for man. After G-d’s major interventions do not solve the problem, He selects a righteous and extraordinary individual and works through him to establish a people that would be based on the values He desires and thereby bring blessing to mankind. The story of Abraham and his progeny and their growth into a clan are the subjects of rest of the Book, chapters 12-50.

## 2. On Verses 1 and 2

There are several very different ways that verse 1 has been parsed and its connection with verse 2 understood. Some render: “In the beginning G-d created the heaven and the earth” (JPS), taking the statement as a one-verse prologue, thus serving as a title. One problem with this translation is that verse 2 begins: “And the earth was *tohu vabohu*,” appearing to be a continuation. The latter argument has been parried by viewing the *vav* that begins verse 2 as a preposition with the meaning of “when” or “now” instead of as a simple conjunction, in essence beginning the narrative with the equivalent of “Once upon a time when the earth was *tohu vabohu* and darkness was upon the deep waters.” According to this reading, the narrative does not address the bringing into existence of the earth and waters. This has been considered consistent with the interests of people in Biblical times who presumably were not concerned with the issue of primeval origins but with the creation (formation) of the world as it is. The root *אָרָץ*, so often used in our chapter, has also been understood as not necessarily referring to “something from nothing” (following Ibn Ezra), although it is employed primarily for G-d’s creative activity, as well as for miraculous phenomena that are achievable only by Him.

Others understand verses 1 and 2 as a prologue referring to a preliminary, albeit comprehensive, creative act prior to the acts of creation that begin with the creation of light and Day 1 in verse 3. Verse 2 thus depicts the earth during that prehistoric stage: chaotic, with darkness spread over the face of the deep. Subsequently, G-d decrees that there should be light (v. 3), and the count of days begins. The name G-d assigned to the firmament, *shamayim* (v. 8), is a secondary usage of the word, not to contradict the creation of *shamayim* in verse 1. The term *בְּרִיאַת הַשָּׁמַיִם*

– “the firmament of the heaven” – in verses 14, 15 and 17 supports such a distinction.

Another school of thought translates verse 1 as a subordinate clause with the verb “create” in a construct state. The subordinate clause finds its completion in either verse 2 or verse 3. Either, “In the beginning of G-d’s creation of heaven and earth, the earth was in a stage of *tohu vabohu*” (Ibn Ezra), or, “In the beginning of G-d’s creation of heaven and earth, when the earth was in a stage of *tohu vabohu* etc., G-d said ‘Let there be light’ and there was light” (Rashi). This approach is now seen as contravening normal subject-verb usage in Biblical Hebrew as regards the opening two words of verse 2 – וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה, “And the earth was.” If the intention was to complete verse 1 with a main clause that describes the earth’s status that resulted from the verse 1 process of creation, the verb should have preceded the noun, and the phrase should have been וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה הָאָרֶץ or preferably וְהָיְתָה הָאָרֶץ. As it is, וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה points to the noun’s status prior to the previous statement’s activity: “had been” (a past imperfect). If verses 1 and 2 flow into verse 3, not only should הָיְתָה have preceded וְהָאָרֶץ, it preferably should have been omitted altogether – וְהָאָרֶץ תְּהוּ וְבִהוּ.

The NJPS translates “When G-d began to create heaven and earth – the earth being unformed and void.” The Schocken Bible translates: “At the beginning of G-d’s creating of the heavens and the earth, when the earth was wild and waste....”

Of course, regardless of the meaning of *bara* and of what exactly the first two verses are teaching, the Biblical view is that G-d is the “maker” of heaven and earth: קָנָה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ (Gen. 14:19, 22) and עָשָׂה שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ (Ps. 115:15; 121:2; 124:8; 134:3; 146:6).

In any event, there is a basic question. What is the significance of this information so prominently transmitted at the beginning of the Torah that in an early stage the earth was in a chaotic state with darkness over the deep?

### 3. The Chaotic Stage

Moshe D. Cassuto interpreted the *tohu vabohu* stage as analogous to the craftsman who assembles his materials before beginning his work, employing the human model to portray G-d approaching His work.

However, the graphic description of chaos with darkness upon the deep and “the spirit (or wind) of G-d hovering upon the surface of the waters” appears to signal a meaning beyond merely being artisan’s clay. In addition, since in this chapter G-d creates by verbal decree, a preliminary stage of craftsman’s material is unnecessary and perhaps diminishes the grandeur of the message.

Asserting that there was a preliminary stage of chaos seems to have served as a protest against the contemporaneous Near Eastern belief concerning creation. The *Enuma Elish* depicts creation of the world as having resulted from a conflict among the gods, rooted in chaos, and involving the primordial Tiamat (*Tehom*). The Torah would be proclaiming that all forces and beings associated with chaos, some previously thought to be divine, exist under the mastery of the one G-d; societies that believed in them should know that their day was in prehistory and they are now irrelevant to our world.

A related motive has been proffered to explain a peculiarity of Genesis 1. Throughout the chapter, the Creator’s activity is described in generalities; no particular species of tree, sea creature, bird or animal is cited except for the *taninim hagedolim*, the great sea monsters (v. 21). The reason they were singled out appears to be to combat the idolatrous beliefs of Near Eastern mythology that attributed divinity to them.

Statements pointing to and combating such beliefs are found in *Tanakh*. Psalm 74:12-17, combining G-d’s victories of old with aspects of His creative activities, reads: “O G-d, my king from ancient times...You crushed the sea by Your might, smashed the heads of the *tanninim* in the waters...The day is Yours, the night also, You established luminary and sun, You set all the boundaries of the earth, summer and winter You formed.” Isaiah states, “Awake, awake, clothe yourself in strength, O arm of Hashem; awake as in the days of old, in generations of ancient times. It was you who hacked *Rahab* to pieces, that pierced the *tannin*” (Isa. 51:9).

It also appears possible that the preliminary chaotic state was mentioned to signify that the order and harmony of the creation were imposed upon a prior foundation of chaos and darkness. Order and harmony are not the natural state of affairs of the world but exist because of G-d’s will. This teaches that there is

fragility to the established order. Man must not make the mistake of worshipping the natural order since it has no independent existence. In the eventuality that man may be undeserving of the beneficence of G-d's creative activity of the six days, G-d may revert the world back to its previous state. Jeremiah, in his vision of retribution to a sinful Israel, appears to have had just such a thought in mind: "I look at the earth, it is *tohu vabohu*; at the heavens, and their light is gone. I look at the mountains, they are tottering;...the fertile land is desert..." (Jer. 4:23-26).

Jon D. Levenson understands the verse 2 chaos, water, darkness and the attendant, albeit unmentioned, creatures that were thought to dwell therein, as symbols of negative forces that lurk within the reality of things. These produce tension with the benevolent aspects of creation and possess the capacity to occasionally wreak havoc on human society. The prophets' entreaties to G-d that He smite the prehistoric creatures and create a new order reflect their hope for His redemption of the world from the existence of uncomprehended evil. Regarding His judgment day, Isaiah exclaims, "On that day Hashem will punish with his hardened, great and mighty sword *Leviathan*...and slay the *Tanin* of the sea" (Isa. 27:1). In other words, problems of theodicy that have ever tormented human beings are part of the larger natural order of human existence in this world in this phase of creation, and prayer that G-d intervene to "correct" the situation is appropriate. (See Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*.)

The final clause of verse 2, "and G-d's רוח ("spirit") was מְרַחֵף ("hovering") over the waters," appears related to the imagery of Deuteronomy 32:11, where G-d's nurturing Israel forward is described as an eagle רָחַף גּוֹזְלֵיו יָרֵחַף, "hovering over its young." Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon thought that this might imply that while the earth was in the chaotic state G-d was engaged in nurturing and advancing it forward.

#### 4. The Order of Creation

There is a high degree of orderly progression in the sequence of the six days of creation. For the most part, the text moves from simpler to complex, from inanimate objects to living creatures: light; water; earth, attached to which is G-d's call to sprout forth vegetation to cover it (perhaps considered a completion of it, thus included in the third day's

activity); heavenly luminaries; fish; birds; animals and man. This has lent great support to those who view G-d's creative activity as working through the processes of evolution (albeit not through thoroughly random processes).

Following are two passages from classical rabbinic Midrash that reflect what probably had been an established tradition within learned Jewish circles of old in understanding Genesis 1:

Regarding the verse (Gen. 1:24), תּוֹצֵא הָאָרֶץ נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה, לְמִינָהּ בְּהֵמָה וְרֶמֶשׂ וְחַיִּתוֹ אֲרֶץ לְמִינָהּ ("Let the earth bring forth the living creature according to its species, animals, creeping things and wild beasts..."), R. Eleazar stated: נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה זֶה רוּחוֹ שֶׁל אָדָם הָרִאשׁוֹן, "living creature" refers to the spirit of Adam the first man (*Gen. Rab. 7:5*).

R. Judah son of Simon stated: יְהִי עֶרֶב אֵין כְּתִיב כָּאֵן אֶלָּא וַיְהִי עֶרֶב...From this (that the text implies that the Deity did not command that it should be evening but that evening set in according to its regular schedule) we learn that there was an order of time previous [to the six days]. R. Abahu stated: this teaches that He was creating worlds and destroying them until He created these [creations] – He said: "these satisfy me, those others did not satisfy me." R. Phinehas said R. Abahu's source is from the following verse, "And G-d saw all that He made and behold it was very good" (*Gen. Rab. 3:7*).

In his philosophic-scientific work *Reality Revisited*, written to refute the purely mechanistic explanation of existence in favor of recognition of a spiritual element that suffuses the world, sustained by Divine will, Rabbi S. D. Sassoon addressed this matter as follows:

...we do not regard the fact of evolution, in contradistinction to the materialist selectionist explanation of evolution, as in any way opposed by the account of creation given in Genesis. On the contrary, Genesis stresses the ascent of life in the order: vegetable, fish, reptile, birds, land animals, and finally man. Moreover, the creative act is in each case expressed by the words: "And G-d said" followed by: "let the earth bring forth grass...herbs...fruit trees"; let the waters bring forth the moving creatures"; let the earth bring forth living creatures."

In these expressions we see a combination of two cooperating factors: “G-d’s word” on the one hand and the earth and waters on the other hand. G-d’s word gives power to bring forth and produce whilst the obedience to it points to the cooperation of the creatures...As for the question of the length of time described in Genesis by a day it strikes us as childish to think that the prophet meant by “day” a human twenty-four period; surely, he could only have meant a day of G-d...as it is said, “Are Thy days to be compared to the days of man? Are Thy years to be compared of man?” (Job 10:5).

*Reality Revisited*, Abacus Press, 1989, pp. 209-210 (reissued by Feldheim Publishers)

Commenting on Rabbi Abahu’s above-cited statement, Rabbi Sassoon wrote:

In Rabbi Abahu’s words we see that a faithful believer need not feel that the abandonment of certain lines of development argued a lack of a coherent plan – he could feel that it was perfectly natural to hold that the Creator leaves room for choice among His creatures, or, alternatively, that various species could have outlived their usefulness in the Divine plan. Thus, creatures that were useful when the earth presented one environment may have ceased to be useful after great changes had come upon the earth. Therefore the termination of a certain line of living creatures that had played their part in the unfolding plan certainly does not argue against the existence of a “coherent plan.” It should be added that the Kabbalists (e.g. Rabbi Perez of Barcelona, ca. 1350, and Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, 1522–70) taught that long periods preceded biblical chronology. (See M. Kasher, *Torah Shelemah* Vol. I, pp. 87–89)...Rabbi Israel Lipschitz, as early as 1842...expressed the view that the existence of prehistoric animals found in the rocks...fitted in well with many of the traditional ways of understanding Genesis preserved in Judaism...(see his *Darush Or Hahayim*, published at the end of his *Tifereth Israel* to the Order of Nezikin). (*Reality Revisited*, 209 n. 2)

In another context, regarding the creation of man, Rabbi Sassoon commented: “The flash point between the molecule which is still “earth” and the molecule

into which life has actually been infused is probably hinted at in Genesis where we read, ‘And the Lord G-d formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life’ (Gen. 2:7). Here we have first the preparation of the dust and then the flash of life” (*Reality Revisited*, 240).

In any event, in any serious reflection on this topic several basic thoughts should be borne in mind. A degree of a moral sense together with an ingrained sense of guilt feelings for wrongdoing, beyond the generative processes of evolution, seem to be embedded in the reality of the universe. And the functionality of various features of ultra-complex organisms implies higher purpose even while natural selection is doing its work.

An anomalous feature punctuating the otherwise orderly sequence of creation of Genesis 1 concerns creation of the sun. Three phenomena universally recognized as dependent on the sun were brought into existence before that luminary’s creation on Day 4: the light of Day 1, the ongoing regularity of day and night and the vegetation of Day 3. Some scholars have interpreted this to be intended as a diminishing of the status of the sun. Since that luminary had been a chief object of idolatry throughout history and was the item that most likely would be a snare to Israel (cf. Deut. 4:19), in the creation narrative its primary functions are disengaged from it, emphasizing that these benefits that the world receives from the sun ultimately stem from the Deity’s will. He assigned the sun its tasks, and when it provides its great good, it is only He who created it who should be thanked!

Thus, Genesis 1 is not to be seen as intending a literal, chronological record of creation, which in any event would have no practical value to man. It should rather be understood in a metaphoric sense depicting basic insights regarding G-d, man and the world. As a declaration of doctrine clothed in narrative symbolism, any literal inconsistencies that might exist between it and the following chapters are of no consequence.

## 5. Some Remarks on Structure

The six days divide into two parallel groups comprising three days each, with each creation of the first three days receiving the items that relate to it, in proper sequence, on the next three days. Light, the

creation of Day 1, is linked with the sun, moon and luminaries of Day 4. The sky and waters of Day 2 are the habitat of the fish and birds created on Day 5. The dry land and vegetation of Day 3 constitute the abode and food of the land creatures and man who were created on Day 6.

The narrative contains significant number symbolism. The number seven – well-attested in ancient Near Eastern literature as connoting completion and perfection – as well as its whole number multiples, are conspicuous throughout the pericope (see Cassuto). The number of days and the number of statements of Divine approval are seven. The first verse comprises seven words, the second verse fourteen words, the closing passage thirty-five words. The three attestations of יום השְׁבִיעִי are each part of a seven-word colon.

The 469 words of the complete narrative (Gen. 1:1–2:3) are a multiple of seven (7 x 67) as are the word counts of the narrative’s three divisions, as follows:

prologue (1:1–2)	21 words	7 x 3
six days (1:3–31)	413 words	7 x 59
Shabbat (2:1–3)	35 words	7 x 5

Although we may not as yet know the interpretation of such symbolism, it is important to recognize it, especially as it is right in front of us, obviously intended to be recognized, and bespeaks the integrity of the text.\*

## Endnote

\* Symbolic deployment of the number eight, which in covenantal contexts supplanted the seven (see our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon* for a discussion and many examples) also appears to be present. There are eight attestations of וַיֵּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים, the only formula used to initiate each step of creative activity, and the eighth proclaims the creation of man. This appears to reflect the Deity’s intention from the beginning to enter into a covenant with man.

Considering the first two verses of chapter 1 as prologue (a very likely interpretation) and accordingly as its own subsection, the six following subsections for each of the six days make the Shabbat passage the eighth subsection of our pericope, linking it to the Covenant. It appears appropriate that symbolism of both seven and eight are present in this pericope. It should be noted that in the articulation of the Shabbat Covenant in *Parashat Ki Tissa* (Ex. 31:12-17), the *sh-b-t* root is attested eight times. In that context, from its first attestation until its eighth are eighty words. The Shabbat *musaf* offering of two lambs also appears to transform what otherwise would have been symbolism of seven (one lamb daily each morning and one each afternoon) into that of eight. The movement of the seven days of the *Sukkot* festival into *Shemini Asseret* (the festival of the eighth day) also appears to contain similar symbolism.

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