

Genesis
FROM CREATION TO COVENANT



Zvi Grumet

GENESIS

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Maggid Books

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First Edition, 2017

Maggid Books
An imprint of Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.

POB 8531, New Milford, CT 06776-8531, USA
& POB 4044, Jerusalem 9104001, Israel
www.maggidbooks.com

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The publication of this book was made possible
through the generous support of *Torah Education in Israel*.

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ISBN 978-1-59264-477-3, *hardcover*

A CIP catalogue record for this title is
available from the British Library

Printed and bound in the United States

*In loving memory of Irving and Beatrice Stone,
who dedicated their lives to the
advancement of Jewish education.*

We are proud and honored to continue in their legacy.

*Their Children, Grandchildren, and Great-Grandchildren
Cleveland, Ohio USA*

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Acknowledgments

I am fortunate to have been surrounded by outstanding students, colleagues, and learning groups for many years. It was with these students and peers that I initially floated many of the ideas presented here, and I am grateful for both their challenging of my ideas and their support. Their questions forced me to clarify and refine many times over, and their support encouraged me to continue. There are too many of you to name individually, but you will recognize yourselves in the various groups I will mention.

The nine years I taught at the Torah Academy of Bergen County provided an extraordinary opportunity for me to explore Torah with my many students there. My special thanks to Rabbi Yosef Adler, who gave me the latitude to teach and create in that remarkable institution. I was also privileged to have a group of parents learn with me. The group started so that the parents of students in my classes could discuss with their children what they were learning in my class, but it grew and over time drew other parents as well. The ideas and discussions that came up in those Monday night sessions taught me immeasurably, and I am profoundly grateful.

During those same years, I taught a class to a group at the Riverdale Jewish Center. Those loyal learners came week after week, adopted

me into their homes, brought insights from a diverse range of backgrounds, and encouraged me to write. Were it not for them, I doubt that this book would have ever come to light, and I thank them deeply.

Soon after moving to Israel, I was invited by two visionary leaders, Rabbis Dovid Ebner and Yehuda Susman, to found the Tanakh department at Yeshivat Eretz HaTzvi. For the past twelve years, I have been privileged to work side by side with outstanding colleagues and have been surrounded by hundreds of thoughtful, eager, and inquisitive young men who challenged me with questions I had never considered, with novel ideas, and with never accepting a thought if it did not completely satisfy them. They were not just my students but my learning partners as we struggled through difficult passages together. They, too, pushed me to write more times than I can count, and I am afraid that this work will be insufficient for them as it contains some of the product but so little of the process we shared. My gratitude to them is beyond words.

I would be remiss if I did not mention Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the Rav, *zekher tzaddik livrakha*, with whom I studied only in his old age. I know that I learned from him only the tiniest drop of what his genius had to offer. More than anything else, I learned an absolute intellectual integrity and educational methodology: to say “I don’t know,” to make his students his partners in exploration, and to completely revise in the face of a good question. His extraordinary teaching continues to inspire me.

I am indebted to Gila Fine, editor in chief at Maggid Books. She embraced this book long before it was ready and encouraged me to rewrite and refine to continually improve the content and presentation. I appreciate her wisdom, guidance, and patience. Thanks are also due to her editorial staff: Deena Nataf, Tali Simon, and Tomi Mager.

My wife, Naomi, is a constant source of support, both in my teaching and specifically in this work. She never misses an opportunity to encourage me. Her love fills these pages. I am blessed with three wonderful children – Ruti, Yair, and Haviva – whose eyes light up whenever we study Torah together. You have helped me understand so much more because of who you are and the questions you ask. I pray that your love for Torah continues to grow even as you learn to question, challenge, and explore deeply.

Acknowledgments

Finally, I truly believe that somehow, God has guided my path throughout the years. Teaching Torah was not my initial career, and the myriad experiences in my life have shaped my thinking and continue to do so. I pray that what I have written reveals new layers of truth in Your Torah, brings Your people to a deeper understanding and appreciation of Torah, and brings them closer to Torah. It has certainly done that for me.

Zvi Grumet
Jerusalem
Shevat 5776

Introduction

I recall being asked years ago to teach a class on the Book of Genesis at a local synagogue. “Of course,” the rabbi continued, “you will begin with *Lekh Lekha*” (the beginning of the Abrahamic saga). I demurred. As much as the uniqueness of the Jewish people is a central thrust throughout the biblical narrative, omitting the context and purpose for which they were chosen misses the Torah’s central thesis.

The essence of the Torah is God’s search for a meaningful relationship with humanity.¹ The idea itself is not new. It is the centerpiece of the prayer commonly known as *Aleinu* and is prominent throughout the liturgy, especially that of Rosh HaShana – the Jewish New Year and traditionally the day of judgment: “Therefore we place our hope in You, Lord our God, that we may soon see the glory of Your power... when all humanity will call on Your name.”²

The idea simultaneously supports both the universality of God’s concern – He loves all humans, as they are created in His image – and the particularity of His special relationship with the Jewish people.

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1. This idea was explicated by Martin Buber, *Darko Shel Mikra* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1978), 65–81.
 2. Jonathan Sacks, trans., *The Koren Siddur* (Jerusalem: Koren Publishers, 2009), 180.

God wants to have a direct relationship with all of humanity, but His initial attempts are unsuccessful. After trying twice, with modifications made to the second attempt, to achieve that direct relationship with all of humanity, He tries a third time – first choosing an individual who would start a family, then a clan, and eventually a nation. It is through this select group, cultivated over the course of multiple generations, that God hopes to eventually build a relationship with all people. Abraham and his descendants are chosen to be the conduits for His message.

The Book of Genesis is concerned with how God's covenantal partners rise to that status, and there is a dynamic between His selection of the partner and the partner's readiness. In Genesis, God's covenantal partners are accorded patriarchal status. The identification of God as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob resonates throughout the book, and, in fact, through the rest of the Bible and subsequent Jewish literature. At what point, however, does each of the Patriarchs achieve that status and through what process?

The Patriarchs aren't born as Patriarchs; they must grow themselves into that status. Abraham starts out as Abram and isn't transformed into Abraham until decades after we are first introduced to him, halfway through the Abrahamic narratives, just as the focus shifts to Sarah. Jacob doesn't become Israel until he returns home after more than twenty years away, just before the focus of the story shifts to his children.

The development of the Patriarchs continues through the narratives in which they are the focus, so it can be argued that Abraham doesn't really become patriarchal until he accepts Sarah as his covenantal partner; Isaac doesn't achieve that status until he learns to accept his father and embrace his own identity; Jacob becomes patriarchal only when the covenantal family emerges.

The search for covenantal partners turns out to be a stepping stone toward cultivating the covenantal family, and that search is fraught with difficulty. Families in the Book of Genesis are, for the most part, failures.³ Cain and Abel's parents are absent from the conflict

3. This might be why Genesis does not hold back critique of its heroes while still extolling them as such.

between the brothers; Noah is violated by his son Ham; Isaac and Rebecca barely speak; Jacob struggles with his wives, his rebellious sons, and the repeated near-fragmentation of his family. Genesis cannot rest until Jacob's family is reunited with a common purpose aligned with the ancestral covenant, and once the covenantal family is in place, the institution of patriarchy can be retired. There is no longer a need for the figurehead when the family, and later the nation, will take on God's partnership.

THE TOLEDOT STRUCTURE OF GENESIS

The word *toledot* appears thirteen times in the entire Hebrew Bible, eleven of which are in Genesis. As such it serves as an important structural element of Genesis and could even be said to represent one of its central themes. There is considerable debate about its precise meaning. Some understand it to mean "descendants" or "generations,"⁴ while others would translate it as "story," so that the former would read the phrase "*toledot Noah*" as "the descendants of Noah," while the latter would understand it to mean "Noah's story."⁵

I believe that both suggestions are lacking, as is evident from the very first appearance of the word in the Torah: "These are the *toledot* of the heavens and the earth" (2:4). The heavens and the earth neither have children nor do they have a story. Instead, I prefer the word *legacy*.⁶ This is the legacy of the creation of the heavens and the earth. It is what eventually emerges from that individual or event.⁷

Genesis is essentially eleven books of *toledot*, each ending just prior to the beginning of the next. Each book of *toledot* concludes with the ultimate legacy of the period, or the identified individual, so that the

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4. See Nahmanides, 5:1; Rashbam, 6:9. Throughout this book, biblical references to Genesis are identified by chapter and verse only.
 5. Ibn Ezra, 6:9.
 6. Saadia Gaon, 2:4, defines it as "development." Robert Sacks defines *toledot* as "the story of what came to be." See Sacks, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 48.
 7. This translation is based on Prov. 27:1: "Who knows what the day will bring forth" (in Hebrew, Y-L-D, literally, "what the day will give birth to"). Ibn Ezra 6:9 references this verse as well.

entire story contained within yields some result or outcome. There is a legacy of the Creation, a legacy of Adam, a legacy of Noah, etc.⁸

These eleven books trace the development of an idea mirroring the central theme of Genesis. For example, the Creation story in Genesis 1 begins with the broadest legacy of all, Creation, and narrows the focus to the legacy of Adam. Of Adam's three children, only one, Seth, has a *toledot*, while the other two are left in the dustbins of biblical history. The legacy narrows even further with the identification of Noah, the only one of Seth's descendants over the course of the next nine generations who warrants his own *toledot*.

Noah represents God's second attempt to establish a relationship with all of humanity as He essentially restarts the entire Creation, this time focusing on the family rather than the individual. Once again, however, the attempt to foster a relationship with all humanity flounders and the focus is narrowed to one family, that of Terah, father of Abraham. It is through this family that God will attempt to have His blessing reach all of humanity. Yet even that family needs refining, and subsequent books of *toledot* continue narrowing the focus to Isaac and ultimately to Jacob.

The *toledot* structure echoes the central thesis of Genesis that God is looking for a partner relationship with humanity. After the two main failed attempts, that of Man and his descendants and that of Noah's family, universal God decides to work with one family in order to reach all of humanity.⁹ As God tells Abram, "Through you shall come blessing to all the families of the earth" (12:3).

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8. One of the features of each book of *toledot* is that it opens by reviewing a critical piece of information from the prior *toledot*. Thus, *toledot* Noah begins with the birth of his three sons, which the Torah had already shared with us; *toledot* Terah begins with the birth of his three sons, which we heard about in the previous verse, the close of the previous *toledot*; *toledot* Isaac begins with his marriage to Rebecca, which the Torah had described in the previous chapter; etc.
 9. If Genesis is the book of *toledot*, leading to God's choice of the covenantal family, it is worth noticing the other two *toledot* in the Bible. The first is in Numbers 3:1, which delineates the *toledot* of the priesthood, and the second is at the end of Ruth (4:18), which lists the *toledot* of the Davidic dynasty. Each represents a further narrowing of the focus to the central leadership positions within the chosen nation.

HISTORY, PRE-HISTORY, PROTO-HISTORY

One essential assumption this book makes about biblical chronology is that it need not be consistent with external chronologies, but it does need to be internally consistent so that the narrative makes sense in its own context. The Torah is not concerned with history, just as it is not concerned with biology or chemistry. The Torah *is* interested in God and God's relationship with people. What this means is that we should not try to correlate the stories of the Tower of Babel or the Flood with other events in world history, nor should we expend any energy trying to understand the physics of Creation or figure out whether the world is six thousand or fifteen billion years old. The physics and timing of Creation are for scientists to explore; the religious significance of the Torah's Creation saga or the Tower of Babel is for religious thinkers and students of the Torah to probe.¹⁰

The same is true with biblical history; it is not meant as a scientific record of what happened but serves as a religious guide to understand the events that are recorded. As such, the internal consistency of the Torah is what yields meaning, not its accordance with external historical annals or archaeological findings.

A corollary to the challenge of chronology in Genesis is the logical implausibility of some of what it describes in its narrative. Let me be clear – I am *not* discussing here things that the Torah describes as miraculous. Miracles are an essential component of the Torah's message that God, as Creator, reserves the right to intervene when it is deemed necessary for reasons that only He determines. Sarah's giving birth to Isaac at the age of ninety is identified by the Torah as God's intervention in the natural order, as are the Ten Plagues, the Splitting of the Sea, the manna in the desert, the Revelation at Sinai, and much more. Those are miracles, and it is perfectly reasonable for God to decide when and how to perform them.

What does seem odd, however, are twenty generations of apparently average people with life spans four to twenty times what might be considered normal – and for the Torah to present that as unexceptional, not as resulting from divine intervention. Similarly, the speaking serpent

10. Ibn Ezra, in the introduction to his commentary on the Torah, argues forcefully that the study of Torah is not designed to yield any scientific insights.

in the Garden of Eden is presented as if it were normal for snakes to speak.¹¹ These extra-ordinary events which are not presented as miraculous demand our attention.

What this suggests is that there is an early period described in the Torah which is unlike our own, in which miraculous events were so much the norm that they are not even described as such. Whether such a period actually existed or is used as a metaphor is less important than the fact that the description of that period is designed to lead us to conclude that it is an otherworldly time, what I would call a *pre-historic* period in which regular rules do not apply. Attempts to rationalize its irrational elements only distort it and distract from its core messages.

This pre-historic era – in which people live nearly a thousand years and there are talking snakes, cataclysmic floods, and the mysterious appearance of languages – is an important transitional stage from before there was time at all. It is particularly pointless in this pre-historic period to imagine correlating biblical events with those of the world outside the Bible. It perhaps should not be surprising that it is in the pre-historic section of Genesis that God is unsuccessful at establishing a meaningful relationship with humanity. The first section of this book corresponds to the pre-historic phase of Genesis.

As Genesis eases us out of the pre-historic era (beginning with Noah's children), life spans are halved, then halved again, bringing the average life span to just under two hundred years. The shortening of life spans signals the transition into the second era, the patriarchal period, or what I might call the era of *proto-history* – including Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This era is marked by individuals about whom we know quite a bit and whose development we can trace over the course of many chapters. Although their life spans are double the norm, their lives look remarkably similar to our own, with rare exceptions of divine communication and intervention.

But these figures are not just regular people; they are prototypes for a nation. Nahmanides identifies their uniqueness by describing them as archetypes who blazed the patterns of behavior which their descendants would follow and imprinted patterns of history which

11. As distinct from Balaam's donkey, which is described as an act of God.

would be repeated for generations.¹² Those individuals are the forefathers of the nation – real people whose lives have cosmic significance. It is because they are more than individuals that the Torah ascribes to them lives which are double the norm. Those life spans are a literary device used by the Torah to indicate that they are archetypes who lay the foundations for and character of those who would follow them. The second section of this book corresponds roughly to this proto-historic phase of Genesis, one in which God finds individuals with whom to have a relationship but who have not successfully cultivated the covenantal family.

Finally, we have the *historical* era, in which people live normal life spans and are just people, not prototypes or archetypes. God does not speak directly with these people, nor are there overt divine miracles. These “regular” people are introduced to us toward the end of Genesis, namely, Joseph and his brothers, who live slightly longer than the average but nowhere close to beyond the range of reason. They mark the transition from the proto-history of the Patriarchs to the historical period of the Bible beginning in Exodus. This era corresponds to the third section of this book, in which the covenantal family finally emerges. It is only with the emergence of the covenantal family that Genesis can close and the Torah can continue with the ongoing interaction between God and His chosen people.

TORAH AS INSTRUCTION

Ever since the Torah was written, it has been studied as a source of guidance. With the Enlightenment, in many circles the study shifted from seeking moral or religious direction to academic study. That academic examination challenged some of the most fundamental assumptions and sensitivities of the religiously oriented, and for much of the past two hundred years there has been an antagonistic relationship between those who study the Bible from an academic perspective and those who see it as a sanctified, core religious document. In recent decades, however, a new approach has begun to emerge, one which is aware of and enlightened by the contributions of two centuries of academic exploration while

12. See Nahmanides, 12:10.

remaining committed to preserving the Torah as a book of instruction – which is what its Hebrew name means.

On these pages I aim to participate in this emerging trend. I am fortunate to have been exposed to extraordinary thinkers and a growing body of literature written by people with deep reverence for the text and astonishing insights, including those derived from history, philosophy, philology, archaeology, and most important, an exquisitely refined literary sensitivity. The marriage of traditional reverence for the text with an array of new tools for exploring it has the potential to reveal magnificent insights into the text coupled with deep religious inspiration which otherwise would have remained hidden. I write these pages in an attempt to share with others my own religious experience emanating from this multilayered exploration of the Torah.

TERMINOLOGY AND CONVENTIONS

The word “Torah” literally means teaching, or a guiding manual. In this volume I use “Torah” to refer specifically to the Five Books, and the term Bible to refer to the rest of the biblical canon (what Christians call the Old Testament).

Genesis is filled with multiple names for God. Academic works insist on distinguishing between them, and indeed most translations make those distinctions. With rare exception I do not make those distinctions, as they are mostly irrelevant to what I am exploring. While God is neither masculine nor feminine, convention refers to God using masculine terminology (with the exception of the *Shekhina*, the Divine Presence, which is distinctly feminine). This book adheres to that convention.

When referring to humankind, I try to remain gender-neutral, using terms such as “humanity.” There are times when that terminology becomes awkward and I use the capitalized Man. Except when describing Man in distinction to Woman (particularly in the story of the Garden of Eden), the terms Man or mankind refer equally to both genders.

Rendering the biblical text in translation is difficult and robs it of the power of nuance and wordplay embedded in the Hebrew text. Translations in this book are my own and adapted to probe what I believe

is the underlying meaning of many of the words in the original Hebrew text, although I regularly consulted Robert Alter's sensitive translation in his *The Five Books of Moses: Translation and Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2004) and the new JPS translation, *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988).

Unless otherwise specified, all biblical references are in Genesis. Cited commentaries that are linked to a verse being discussed are generally listed without referencing the verse.

The ideas presented here emerged from a careful reading of the biblical text and they are, by and large, very much grounded in that text. Those readings fall into what Rashbam may have called "the deep *peshat*" (text-based reading), what is nowadays sometimes referred to as an emerging school of theologically driven *peshat*, but what others may call *derash* (homiletic readings). Even though it is important to distinguish between what the text means and the meaning which is imposed on that text, *peshat* and *derash* live on a spectrum of interpretation and there is no clear consensus on the dividing line between them. It should be noted that many midrashim were born out of deep readings of the text, but the rabbis used homiletic rather than exegetical language to express those ideas. As such, it should not be surprising that many of the insights coming from contemporary literary readings of the Bible can actually be found in midrashim. I try to highlight some of those as they relate to my reading of the text.

There is a dance between theology and textual reading. Every reader brings his or her own theological biases to the reading. Were we to leave it at that, there would be few revelations about biblical text other than the creative ways of demonstrating that the text supports our pre-determined ideas. To truly uncover the theology of the text requires shedding theological preconceptions. That is both difficult, if not impossible, and rather frightening to those for whom theology is important. And yet it is important to be able to do so, to some extent, if we are to begin to uncover the Bible's theology (as distinct from theology developed over many subsequent centuries). As a result, some of what I wrote here may be jarring to some readers in its boldness, while other readers will be disappointed that I did not go far enough. I hope that, at the very least, my words cause people to consider what their own theological lines are

and open up the possibility of expanding those boundaries when they listen to the voice of the text.

I do have some basic assumptions that guided me in this work. First, the biblical text is a unified work, and any attempt to disassemble it into its disparate components does violence to the text (unless accompanied by an equal attempt to reassemble it into a meaningful and coherent whole). Second, the meaningfulness of the Bible emerges organically from a close reading of it and should not be superimposed on it from external sources. This close reading can be enhanced greatly by literary tools such as wordplays, theme words, pacing, patterns, developing themes, and literary structures embedded within the text. And while the enterprise of Midrash is meaningful as its own discipline, it should not be confused with the meaning that emanates from analysis of the text itself.¹³

Third, I assume that the reader has at least a minimum familiarity with the biblical story. The more knowledge the reader has, the better he or she will be able to appreciate the nuances which support and develop the arguments I present, and those with access to the original Hebrew text will benefit even more. That being said, I aim to have the content of this volume accessible to those who do not already possess comprehensive knowledge of the text, though they should be prepared to open the Bible and read along.

Fourth, I believe that as we broaden the scope of our reading of the Torah, our insight deepens. Drawing conclusions from individual passages taken out of context risks missing or distorting the Torah's fundamental message. A direct corollary to this assumption relates to the Torah's presentation of its central characters or heroes. Those characters develop, and not necessarily in a linear progression. Their growth cannot be observed in a single snapshot, and the attempt to draw conclusions

13. See Rashbam's comment to Genesis 1:1. Included in this is the presumption that unless there is a compelling reason to suggest otherwise, the Torah is very much chronological and sequential. This accords with the position of Nahmanides (see his comments on Gen. 11:32; 35:28; Ex. 24:1; Lev. 16:1; Num. 16:1), who fundamentally disagrees with the notion popularized by Rashi that the Torah is not written chronologically (see Rashi's comments on Gen. 35:29; Ex. 18:9; 19:11; 21:1, 12; 31:18; Lev. 8:2).

about them from any particular incident is premature and misleading. It is the process they undergo which brings them to their moments of greatness. Thus, Abram does not become Abraham until we have followed him for more than a quarter-century of his life, and Jacob does not emerge as Israel until he is well advanced in years. It is the struggles and the growth of these heroes which make them fitting models as they demonstrate the human capacity.

This opens the way to a humanistic reading of the great biblical characters. The greater insight we gain about them and their challenges, their strengths and weaknesses, their struggles and successes, the more we can see ourselves in them. That humanistic approach guides my understanding of the Bible, and it is my hope that I will help many to find inspiration in their biblical exploration.

Part I

Creation and Re-Creation

Genesis 1:1–25

Conceptualizing Creation

The story of Creation challenges our sensibilities. It is so far removed from our lives that we have no context into which we can place it, no framework from which we can attempt to understand it. Creation asks us to imagine what existed before there was existence. It confronts us with the task of imagining the time before there was time. We are forced to grapple with questions such as defining life itself, why we exist, what it means to be human, and why any of that should matter. In just one chapter, which is completely dominated and directed by God, we move swiftly from the initial amorphous mass to humans, the pinnacle of Creation. We understand nothing, and wonder why we are told any of this at all.

These, of course, are precisely the questions the Torah invites us to grapple with by presenting the narrative. The rabbis of the Talmud were concerned about people delving into these questions, not to mention teaching them publicly or writing about them.¹ Much of what the text says defies our ability to comprehend rationally and meaningfully, yet that is precisely what we will attempt to do in these opening chapters.

1. Mishna Hagiga 2:1.

TOWARD A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF CREATION

Ever since the Enlightenment, there has been tension over the biblical account of Creation, which emerging scientific understanding challenged. Most of the attempts to deal with the conflict fell into one of three approaches: (a) rejection of the biblical account, (b) rejection of the scientific approach, or (c) harmonization (either by interpreting science to fit the Bible or by interpreting the Bible to fit science).² This is not the place to fully plumb those approaches with their advantages and disadvantages, as we will be operating under a completely different assumption which I believe allows for both intellectual and spiritual integrity.

As I mentioned in the Introduction, the Torah is not and never was meant to be a textbook of science, history, anthropology, cosmogony, or any other discipline. Rather, it deals with matters of faith, religion, ethics, morality, and theology. The Torah is concerned with God, with the nature of humans, and with the relationship between them. Just as scientific inquiry can shed no light on the nature of God, religious inquiry yields no meaningful information about the mechanics of the universe.³ The conflict between science and religion is artificial, imaginary, perhaps even manufactured.

This fundamental assumption allows us to explore a conceptual model of the Creation story. This model will suggest that the Creation story lays the foundations for my fundamental thesis about the Torah – God creates the human and desires to have a relationship with it. But

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2. Some recent works grappling with these issues are Nathan Aviezer, *In the Beginning* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1990); Daniel C. Matt, *God and the Big Bang* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1996); Robert Pollack, *The Faith of Biology & The Biology of Faith* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Gerald Schroeder, *Genesis and the Big Bang* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990); and Miryam Z. Wahrman, *Brave New Judaism* (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2002).
 3. In Mishna Avot 5:22, Ben Bag Bag states, “Turn it [Torah] over again and again, for everything is in it.” Some commentaries suggest that Ben Bag Bag’s intention is that all knowledge is included in Torah. I understand him to mean that Torah is limited to all divinely revealed knowledge. Knowledge that humans can derive through their intellect does not need to be divinely revealed. Leon Kass, *Genesis: The Beginning of Wisdom* (New York: The Free Press, 2003), 46, writes, “Genesis is not the sort of book that can be refuted – or affirmed – on the basis of scientific or historical evidence.”

what is God? Who is God? If the human is created in the “image” of God, what is that image? This, I believe, is one of the central topics in the opening chapter of Genesis.

Genesis 1 contains the key Creation narrative in the Bible. As it introduces the entire Bible, it focuses not on what God *is* but on what God *does*. A careful investigation of what God does helps paint for us an initial image of God, one which yields insights valuable for this story itself and for the rest of the biblical account as a whole. For example, the simple observation that in Genesis 1, God creates, allows us to describe Him as a Creator. When we delve deeper into this simple statement and break it down based on a thoughtful reading of the biblical text, we will be able to further refine and expand upon the simple “God is a Creator,” yielding a richer conception of the “image” of God in the Bible.

THE STRUCTURE OF CREATION

Pervasive throughout Genesis 1 is a profound sense of order. One example is the five-step format which structures each “day”⁴ of Creation:

- God said...
- God made/did/created/formed...
- God saw that it was “good”...
- (God named...)
- It was *erev* and it was *boker*, a (number) “day”

The regularity of the structure leaves us with a profound sense that the process has been carefully planned in advance and is methodical. Every stage is introduced by divine thought or speech, and speech is the vehicle through which things are created. At the conclusion of each creative stage, God is reflective about His creations, saying that they are “good.”⁵ The structure is so reliable that any deviation from it commands

4. The word “day” is in quotations because it does not refer to a day as we know it. This will be demonstrated later.

5. See Rashi, 1:7. The phrase *ki tov* indicates completion, which is why it is missing after day two, on which the separation of the raw matter into its different forms – solid, liquid, and gas – had only begun and was not yet complete.

our attention and demands explanation. Thus, for example, when *ki tov* (“it was ‘good’”) is missing on the second “day” but appears twice on the third, or when the first “day” concludes with a cardinal rather than an ordinal number (that is, *one* day rather than a *first* day), or the sixth “day” concludes with the definite article (that is, *the* sixth rather than a sixth), a flurry of commentary rushes to explain the anomaly.

The systematic nature of Creation expresses itself in yet another remarkable way. The six days of Creation are organized so that there are actually two cycles of three days each, with the second cycle paralleling the first; each day in the first cycle has its companion in the second. The first and the fourth discuss creations revolving around *or* (we will discuss the meaning of this term later); the second and the fifth focus on the separation of the “upper waters” from the “lower waters” (on the fifth day, those two domains – the upper waters and the lower waters – are populated by the water creatures and the flying things); the third and the sixth focus on the emergence of land and vegetation, and the beings which inhabit that land and consume that vegetation. The chart below illustrates this succinctly:

<i>First cycle of Creation</i>	<i>Second cycle of Creation</i>
Day 1 <i>Or</i>	Day 4 <i>Meorot</i> (from the same Hebrew root as <i>or</i>)
Day 2 Separation of “lower” from “upper” waters	Day 5 Sea animals to inhabit lower waters Flying creatures to inhabit upper waters
Day 3 Emergence of land Vegetation	Day 6 Land animals and humans Consumers of vegetation

What emerges is a picture of a Creation that is not only orderly and sequential, it is carefully planned and organized. It is not six sequential days of Creation but two parallel cycles of three days each,

in which the first round lays foundations that are developed or populated in the second.

This sense of structure, pattern, order, and planning is intentional, and stands in stark contrast to many ancient Mesopotamian creation stories in which the world emerges as a result of a clash between gods, is the violent or accidental product of some heavenly conflagration, or came to be to provide the gods with their daily needs.⁶ In the Torah there is but a single Creator who plans, decides, controls, and creates everything. Even the strange reference (v. 21) to the *taninim*, the mythical and mighty sea creatures, may be an expression of this same idea.

In some ancient cultures, the terrifying and mighty sea monsters were themselves considered gods, and the emergence of the world was the result of a terrible battle between them, or between them and God.⁷ The Torah's version explicitly rejects any such notions. Those *taninim* are not gods, but beings which were created by the one and only Creator, and emerged only when the Creator decided that the waters needed to be populated.

If we return to our discussion of the image of God, it is now reasonable to argue that God is not only a Creator, He is intelligent, thoughtful, organized, and powerful, among other adjectives which we can add based on the above observations. These are all part of our emerging "image" of God. It is no wonder that the Hebrew name for God used in this creation story is *E-lohim*, which translated accurately would yield "the All-Powerful," or "Almighty." God as Almighty is an essential thrust of Genesis 1.

THE CHALLENGE OF LANGUAGE

God creates through speech.⁸ Moreover, in Genesis 1 He creates language itself, presenting us with a significant challenge. Language is the primary

6. See Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1969), 1–8.

7. See Cassuto. See also Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, trans. Moshe Greenberg (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 20–70.

8. This has been noted as significant in Psalms (33:6) and in Mishna Avot (5:1), and is featured in the daily prayer *Barukh SheAmar* as well as the first blessing prior to the evening *Shema*.

tool we have in studying text, yet in the Creation story familiar words are used in unfamiliar ways. Five words particularly stand out, demanding attention, including some of the words we take most for granted: *or*, *hoshekh*, *yom*, *erev*, and *boker*, usually translated, respectively, as “light,” “darkness,” “day,” “evening,” and “morning.” All these words appear in the opening passage of Genesis, yet it is only after they are used that they are defined, indicating that they initially mean something other than what we intuitively assume.

Some examples will be helpful in highlighting the difficulty. The words usually translated as “day” (*yom*), “morning” (*boker*), and “evening” (*erev*) are all used on the first “day” of Creation, prior to the creation of the sun (which does not appear until the fourth day). If in conventional terms, a day is defined by one rotation of the earth, what can “day” mean when the earth does not yet exist (as in the first two “days” of Creation)? Similarly, morning and evening are functions of the rotation of the earth and its position vis-à-vis the sun. It is obvious that prior to the creation of the sun they refer to something completely different.⁹

Similarly, in the opening verse we are perplexed by the usage of the terms *shamayim* and *aretz*,¹⁰ usually translated as “heaven” and “land” (or earth), respectively. It is only on the second day that God names something¹¹ *shamayim* and on the third day that dry land appears, which God then names *aretz*. It seems apparent that these words, prior to their definition and prior to the creations with which they are associated, refer to something other than their conventional interpretation.

The confusion generated by these words begs our attention and generates an opportunity to reexamine the text along with some of our basic assumptions.

CREATING TIME

The Torah describes God as separating *or* from *hoshekh*, usually translated as “light” and “darkness,” yet if darkness as we know it is the absence

9. Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed* 2:30, discusses many of these issues.

10. Ibn Ezra, 1:1, s.v. *hashamayim*, struggles with this issue.

11. That “something” is identified in Hebrew as *rakia*, usually translated as “firmament.” This translation is based on ancient notions of the existence of a physical barrier separating the various heavenly spheres.

of light, it makes no sense conceptually to “separate” between the existence of something and its absence. Even more problematic is that God afterward gives new names to *or* and *hoshekh* – *yom* (daytime) and *laila* (nighttime): “God named *or* daytime and *hoshekh* He called nighttime.” Accordingly, at least in the opening of Genesis, *or* and *hoshekh* are not about light and dark at all, but rather are expressions of time, the lit hours being the productive ones and the dark hours less so.¹² The movement between those two kinds of time helps to mark it, frame it, and measure its passage.

This identification of *or* and *hoshekh* as functions of time rather than light and dark is sharpened when we recall that Creation occurs in two parallel cycles. The creation of *or* on the first day is mirrored in the creation of the *meorot* on day four. *Meorot*, based on the root *or*, is usually translated as something like “luminaries,” things whose primary function is to provide light. Yet a careful reading of the Torah’s account of that fourth day indicates that their primary function has nothing to do with light but with time: “God said, let there be *meorot* in the firmament of the heavens to distinguish between daytime and nighttime; and they should serve as signs, time markers, and for days and years” (1:14). The primary function of these *meorot* is not as sources of light at all, but as timekeepers. Their function as sources of light is secondary, mentioned only after their primary function.

It should not surprise us that the first creative utterance focuses on the creation of time. For an infinite God, time is irrelevant. The creation of time allows for the existence of finite beings. In fact, time is so essential for Creation that its very creation may be alluded to in the opening verse of Genesis. That verse presents a substantive challenge for the attentive reader, since the opening word of the Torah, *bereshit*, means “In the beginning of...” The problem is that the Torah does not fill in that ellipsis, leaving us with a verse which, in its simplest translation, reads: “In the beginning of..., God created the heavens and the earth.”

12. Using the word “dark” to denote uselessness is both ancient and contemporary, and is true in English as well as in Hebrew.

This difficulty invites the reader to fill in the gap creatively. One of those possibilities is that the Torah leaves it open since an infinite and eternal God needs to first create the possibility, or the beginnings, of everything – including space and time – to allow for the existence of anything besides Himself.¹³ If so, the creation of time in Genesis can be viewed as occurring in three stages. In the first stage, time itself is created: “God created the Beginning.”¹⁴ In the second stage, time can oscillate between two expressions, and those two phases of time can be used to mark its passage: “God distinguished between time associated with light and time associated with darkness.” Both of these stages are created on the first day of Creation, and relate to time as linear. Linear time has a beginning, and any given moment in time exists only once – in either the past, the fleeting present, or the future. These two acts of Creation, even with the oscillation between daytime and nighttime, basically represent time as linear.

Linear time is meaningful because it is limited. Like any resource, endless access to it renders it meaningless. Limited access means that we have to make choices regarding how to use that resource, and the choices we make both say something meaningful about us and are meaningful in and of themselves.

But God does not stop with the creation of linear time. There is a third stage in the creation of time, just as revolutionary as the first two stages – the creation of cyclical time. Cyclical time helps make time manageable and meaningful for humans. In cyclical time we can make statements such as, “I’ll meet you tomorrow at the same time,” or “Next year in Jerusalem,” or “on the first of each month.” Viewed cyclically, time becomes an anchor for organizing and evaluating our

13. A variation on this would yield, “God created the Beginning with the *shamayim* and the *aretz*.” This possibility emerges because the Hebrew *et* can be translated as “with.”

14. One implication of this is that anything prior to Creation is beyond human comprehension. R. Yona, cited in Y. Hagiya 2:2, suggests that the Torah begins with the letter *bet* because it is closed on three sides, indicating that what came before Creation is closed and unknowable. Interestingly, this corresponds with the concept of singularity in physics, i.e., that which preceded the “Big Bang” is not only unknown but unknowable. See, for example, Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam Books, 1996).

internal and external selves. This is the creation of the fourth day, as the *meorot* distinguish daytime from nighttime, one day from the next, and year from year.

Prior to the Creation there is no time, as there is no need for time – for an eternal God, time has no meaning. The creation of time, both linear and cyclical, allows for the very existence of finite beings like us. More important, it allows for us to make time meaningful in multiple ways. The creation of time is perhaps God's first step in making room for people.

THE PROCESSES OF CREATION

The model of an initial Creation followed by refinement is deeply embedded in the text. We earlier saw that the terms *shamayim* and *aretz*, usually translated as heaven and earth, cannot mean “heaven” and “earth” in the opening verse of Genesis, as those do not appear until the second and third days of Creation. Following the lead of Nahmanides,¹⁵ I'd like to suggest that the terms refer to an initial creation *ex nihilo* of the raw materials from which the rest of the universe ultimately emerges, whose initial state is described as *tohu* and *bohu* – *tohu* meaning perplexing (as in, “What is it?”)¹⁶ and *bohu* suggesting that it has the potential in it for everything (*bohu* being a contraction of *bo* and *hu* – literally, “it is in it”).¹⁷ While that initial state is chaotic and useless, God will bring its potential to fruition via the processes of separation, formation, and combination.

The theme of separation dominates the first three days of Creation: daytime from nighttime, “upper” waters from “lower” waters,¹⁸

15. 1:1.

16. The adjective *tohu*, meaning amazement or wonderment, describes the initial state of the *aretz*. The initial raw materials were all mixed together, so that they were unlike anything in the human experience. This is akin to the name the Israelites give to the manna, which would roughly translate as “What is it?”

17. Nahmanides, 1:1.

18. The separation on the second day between the “upper waters” and the “lower waters” may refer to the distinction between liquids (lower waters) and gases (upper waters). The Torah text speaks of a *rakia* as something infinitesimally thin, perhaps even merely a conceptual distinction between two states of matter. The “firmament” found in most translations is based on primitive conceptions of the universe.

water from land, etc., and is meaningful in that it takes the raw materials which are initially unidentifiable and unusable, and distinguishes them to make them usable. Following an intensive series of separations, God brings them together in constructive ways – a different form of creation. Water, recently separated from solids, is carefully remixed with those very solids, as it irrigates the dry land to enable the growth of vegetation.

In this light, I'd like to suggest the following as a reading of the opening two verses of Genesis: God created – *ex nihilo*¹⁹ – the Beginning, alongside the raw material of which everything else will be made.²⁰ Initially, that raw material was in a state in which it was indistinguishable and unrecognizable yet brimming with potential, but since that potential was not actualized, the raw material was effectively useless.²¹

The fundamental process is clear – generate the raw material out of nothingness, separate and refine it into its components so that they become usable, and then make something from them. This process is actually reflected in two of the puzzling words we mentioned earlier, *erev* and *boker*. Etymologically, the Hebrew word *erev*, conventionally understood as evening, comes from the word meaning mixture. Evening became known as *erev* because that is when two days melt into one another, when the light from the sun and the moon mix in ways that render neither of them fully functional, when the world around us grows increasingly murky and unclear.

By contrast, the root of the word *boker*, usually translated as morning, means “to be able to distinguish.” The morning time (*boker*) is when we begin to distinguish those things which have been unclear since the previous *erev*, when the new light enables us to see and distinguish that which had been unclear. In fact, Mishna

19. The creation of something where there was nothing before is marked in this story through the verb *bara*. See Nahmanides, 1:1. In the next chapter we will discuss the significance of the fact that this particular verb is used in only three contexts in the Genesis 1 Creation narrative.

20. While the *aretz* is subjected to multiple stages of refinement, what happens to the initial *shamayim* remains something of a mystery.

21. In verse 2 this is indicated by the darkness in which the *tohu*, or *tehom*, is shrouded.

Berakhot 1:2 clearly understands that the defining element of morning hinges on the ability to distinguish a friend's face or the colors on the strings of tzitzit. The movement from *erev* to *boker* refers not to times of day (which cannot exist until the fourth day of Creation) but to the movement from chaos to greater clarity. That movement is one of the landmark features of the Creation narrative, and defines each phase of Creation known as a *yom*, or "day."²² Thus, a "day" of Creation does not mark time but a meaningful transition out of chaos into functional order.

This reading of the initial verses of Genesis yields a bizarre twist. The word *or* does not refer to light but is a function of time. *Erev* and *boker* have nothing to do with time, but reflect God's overall interest in His world being carefully organized and structured. So too, the word *yom* is not about time but refers to God's achieving a meaningful phase of Creation marked by the movement from disorder to order: "It was *erev* and then it was *boker*; a meaningful stage in the creative process." The creation of time makes room for Man; the move to orderliness within Creation models for Man the creative process.

ORDER AND HIERARCHY

The move from chaos to order almost defines the Creation story: concepts are followed by actions, raw materials are refined and then used. In physics, the law of entropy states that without the input of energy things will naturally tend toward disorder. The Creation story presents a picture of reverse entropy, in which God invests creative energy into the world to move it progressively from chaos to order.

The orderliness in Creation is apparent in numerous other expressions throughout the story. One fine example can be found in the creation of vegetation, where the language is unmistakable:

"Let the ground carpet itself – grasses which produce seeds, fruit trees bearing fruits of their own species containing their own

22. Leon Kass, *Genesis*, 46, writes: "Creation, according to Genesis 1, is the bringing of order out of primordial chaos, largely through a process of progressive separation, division, distinction, differentiation."

seeds on the ground” – and it was so. The ground brought forth its carpet: grasses producing seeds of their species and fruit-bearing trees containing the seeds of their own species. (1:11–12)

Three times in these two verses the Torah emphasizes that vegetation needs to be self-propagating and self-perpetuating – each according to its species. Orange trees need to produce oranges which will contain the seeds necessary for growing new orange trees. The preservation of the species line could not have been made any clearer.

The same emphasis emerges in the description of the imperative for animals to be fruitful. Twice in 1:21, another time in 1:24, and three times in 1:25, we hear variations on the word *lemino*, “according to its own species.” God is intent on preserving the distinction between the species, whether in the plant or animal kingdom.

This intensified focus on the self-perpetuation of the species serves as a backdrop for some of the most inexplicable laws spelled out later in the Torah. There are prohibitions on crossbreeding animals and even on hybridization of crops.²³ Those attempts to tamper with the natural order of the world threaten the careful orderliness of Creation itself.²⁴

And it is not only the species which must be maintained, the domains of those creatures must be maintained as well. Beings of the water are meant to be in the water, flying creatures dominate the skies, and land animals belong on land. (The land animals even belong to a different day of Creation.) It is fascinating that there is not a single kosher animal that crosses those boundaries (as opposed to turtles, frogs, penguins, water mammals, etc., which are all non-kosher animals). It is almost as if the Torah has boycotted animals that have violated the boundaries of their domains.

The meticulous order of Creation also suggests hierarchy. The Torah begins with inert matter, which contains the building blocks of everything. By the third day we find organic matter, vegetation,

23. See Leviticus 19:19, and especially the comments of Rashbam and Nahmanides.

24. A tension will later emerge in the text between this imperative and God’s instruction that people “conquer” the earth (1:28).

emerging from the lifeless ground. When we reach the fifth day we are introduced to animate beings, first the creatures of the sea and then the flying creatures. The sixth day brings us land animals, and finally humans.

This hierarchy of life-forms actually finds expression in the Jewish codes of law. Inert matter and vegetation need no special preparation to be rendered kosher – theoretically, you can put your mouth under a waterfall to drink or take a bite out of an apple while it is still attached to a tree. While impolite, it is certainly not forbidden. In the animal kingdom, even kosher animals need some kind of preparation to render them halakhically permissible to eat, and those preparatory acts – which are all related to the need to sever the body of the animal from its life source – have a hierarchy parallel to the hierarchy within Creation. In practical terms, for a kosher fish to be rendered fit for consumption, it must be caught and killed (unlike the apple); for a bird to be rendered kosher, it needs to be slaughtered, with either the trachea or the esophagus being slit; for a land animal to be made kosher, it needs to have both the trachea and the esophagus slit.

The higher the being is on the hierarchy of Creation – that is, the closer it is to the human – the greater the demonstration necessary to make the animal permissible to eat.

IMAGE OF GOD

The biblical Creation story weaves a complex tapestry illuminated by intelligent planning, thought, sequence, order, and hierarchy – all done in a staged, spiral process. Both the content and the structure of the description serve as foundations for understanding some of the more obtuse laws and narrative passages spelled out later in the Torah, and we will later see further examples of this.

Perhaps even more important than what the Creation story teaches us conceptually about Creation is what it teaches us about God. As we discussed above, the description in Genesis 1 presents God as All-Powerful (E-lohim), Independent, Intelligent, Thoughtful, Orderly, Purposeful (even though we do not as yet know what the purpose is), and Creative, along with a host of additional adjectives which emerge upon subsequent careful readings.

Genesis 1:1–25

This “image” of God is significant not only for our understanding of God but for our understanding of Man. Man will be created in the “image” of God, and the opening chapter of Genesis provides insight as to what that might mean. The description of the Creation paints for us an image of the Creator, and that image will help us understand what makes the creation of Man, the pinnacle of Creation, so extraordinarily unique.