

# NOTES

1:1

**IN THE BEGINNING** (בְּרֵאשִׁית ~ bereishith) - *Onkelos; Saadia Gaon; Radak; Nachmanides*  
 • **in the beginning of** (see footnote 8) - *Rashi; Rashbam; Ibn Ezra* • God's **prime** creation was... - *Maimonides* • **first** God created... - *Chizkuni* • **in the first moment of time** - *Ran; Akeidah; Sforno; Gra* • **with wisdom** (the first *sefirah*) - *Zohar; Targum Yerushalmi; Nachmanides* • **for the sake of the "firsts"** (see commentary) - *Midrash Rabbah; Rashi*  
 • also see exegetical interpretations in fig. 7 (overleaf)

**GOD** (אֱלֹהִים ~ elohim; commonly spelled and pronounced "elokim" in deference to its holiness)  
 Carries the meanings • **almighty, all-powerful** - *Lekach Tov; Nachmanides; Tur*  
 • **master** - *Rashi* • **ruler** - *Kuzari* • **judge** - *Lekach Tov; Kuzari; Maimonides*  
 Connotes • God acting with **justice and law** - *Midrash Rabbah* • the divine attribute of **gevurah** ("might") - *Zohar* • God as creator of and actor through the forces of **nature** - *Bechayei; Ran; Akeidah; Cordovero* • as the source of the **infinite diversity and multiplicity** revealed in creation (hence its plural form) - *Ikarim* • the divine power of **tzimtzum**—self-constriction and concealment - *R. Schneur Zalman of Liadi*  
 Also used • in the generic sense, as in "other gods" (e.g., Exodus 20:3) • as **divine**, in the sense of great and lofty (e.g., Genesis 30:8) • as a reference to **angels** (e.g., Genesis 32:29)  
 • to human **judges and rulers** (e.g., Exodus 7:1)

• (אֶת ~ eith; not translated, as there is no equivalent in English) • in Hebrew grammar, אֶת marks the word it precedes as the direct object of a verb; it may also serve in place of **from, with, to, in or on** - *Ibn Ezra; Radak; Ibn Janach* • in Torah exegesis, אֶת denotes the inclusion of an object's subsidiary elements or the addition of a related element - *Talmud*  
 Here אֶת indicates • that the "the heavens and the earth" referred to here include all heavenly creations and all earthly creations - *Midrash Rabbah; Rashi; Nachmanides* • the creation of the 22 letters of the Torah, א to ת - *R. Dov Ber of Mezeritch*

**HEAVENS** (שָׁמַיִם ~ shamayim) • see commentary from *Nachmanides* to this verse and notes and commentaries to 1:6-8

**EARTH** (אֶרֶץ ~ aretz) • also used more narrowly as **land**, and more broadly as **world** or **physical universe** • see commentaries to 1:10

*Beith* (בֵּית) means "house" and the letter has the shape of a house. This alludes to God's desire that man should settle and civilize the world he created.<sup>6</sup>

-SEFER HA-BAHIR  
 -PAANE'ACH RAZA

The word *bereishith* calls for a midrashic interpretation—namely, "for the sake of the firsts."<sup>7</sup> Meaning that the world was created for the sake of the Torah, which the Book of

Proverbs calls "the first of God's path," and for the sake of the people of Israel, whom the prophet Jeremiah refers to as "the first of his harvest."

-RASHI

## "The heavens and the earth"

*R. Yehudah* says: The world was created in six days. Light was created on the first day, the heavens on the second day, and so on, as is written by each day, "and it was so."

*R. Nechemiah* says: Everything was created on the first day. Subsequently, each creation was set in its form and place on its day—the heavens congealed on the second day, the plants emerged from the earth on the third day, the sun and moon were set in the heavens on the fourth day, and so on.<sup>8</sup>

-TANCHUMA

<sup>8</sup> In the Hebrew text of our verse, "the heavens" and "the earth" are each preceded with the word *et*, indicating the "the heavens *with* all the heavenly creations, and the earth *with* all the all earthly creations." According to *R. Nechemiah*, the Torah's account of the things created on the first day begins with verse 1, and that day saw the creation of the heavens and the earth and all they contain (albeit not in their final format). According to *R. Yehudah*, verses 1 and 2 are a general introductory description of creation, and the Torah's account of the work of the first day begins with verse 3; accordingly, light

God first extracted from absolute nothingness an extremely refined, intangible element that is pure potential—what the Greeks call *hyle*—out of which God formed and made all existences.

All spiritual creations are of one substance, and the earth and all it contains are of one substance. These two primal substances—"the heavens" and "the earth"—were created out of nothingness, and everything else was formed from them.

-NACHMANIDES

## "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth"

The Torah ought to have begun with the first *mitzvah* commanded to the people of Israel—"This month shall be for you the first of months" (Exodus 12). Why does it begin, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth"? So that if the nations of the world say to the people of Israel, "You are thieves, for having conquered the lands of the seven nations," they would reply to them: "The entire world is God's; God created it, and God grants it to whomever he desires. It was God's will to give it to them, and it was God's will to take it from them and give it to us." -RASHI

*Torah* means "instruction." Hence *Rashi's* contention that, notwithstanding the profound meanings its stories contain, the Torah ought to have begun with the *mitzvah*, which are God's direct instructions to us.

*Rashi's* answer is that the story of creation is necessary to establish the right of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel. For the observance of most of the *mitzvot*<sup>9</sup>—and the ideal fulfillment of every *mitzvah*—can be achieved only in the Holy Land.

-MAHARAL

The dialogue between the "nations of the world" and the "people of Israel" which *Rashi* describes also takes place on a personal level, within the heart of man.

We serve God in two ways: 1) by fulfilling the divine commandments, or *mitzvot*, specified in the Torah; 2) by conducting our everyday activities—eating, sleeping, doing business—as ways of experiencing the divine and fulfilling the divine purpose, as expressed

is the first creation and the sole creation of the first day, with the heavens and the earth coming into existence only on days two and three. Amongst the classic commentaries, *Rashi* (citing 2:4 as proof) follows *R. Nechemiah*, while *Ibn Ezra* follows *R. Yehudah*; *Nachmanides* (see next citation) appears to combine both views.

<sup>9</sup> Only about half of the 613 divine commandments contained in the Torah can be observed outside of the Holy Land.

<sup>6</sup> See commentaries to 28:17, 28:22, and Exodus 25:8.

<sup>7</sup> According to *Rashi*, the grammatical form of the word בְּרֵאשִׁית precludes its translation as "in the beginning." Rather, the word either means "in the beginning of," in which case the Torah's first three verses need to be read as one long sentence (i.e., "In the beginning of God's creation of the heavens and the earth, when the earth was desolate and void, with darkness on the face of the deep and the spirit of God hovering upon the waters, God said there shall be light..."); or else it is meant to be interpreted midrashically as "for the sake of the things referred to as 'the first of' (בְּרֵאשִׁית ~ reishith), God created the heavens and the earth" (with the prefix בְּ serving in the sense of "for" as in 29:18). In the same vein, *Zohar* splits בְּרֵאשִׁית to render it בְּרֵאשִׁית, "two firsts," referring to the divine attributes of *chochmah* and *malchuth* ("wisdom" and "sovereignty," in which the Torah and the souls of Israel, respectively, are rooted).





fig. 7: EXEGETICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF THE WORD "BEREISHITH" AND THE LETTER "BEITH"

by the maxims "All your deeds should be for the sake of Heaven" and "Know him in all your ways."

It is regarding the latter area that our internal "nations of the world" (i.e., our worldly outlook) argues: "You are thieves, for having conquered the lands of the seven nations!" What business have you appropriating the secular areas of life? Serve God in the ways he has explicitly instructed, and leave the rest to its rightful, worldly owners... To which the inner point of holiness responds, "The entire world is God's." God created these mundane realms, and has empowered us to conquer

and settle them as a "holy land" – a place permeated with the goodness and perfection of its Creator.

This is the deeper reason why the Torah opens not with its first mitzvah, but with the statement, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth": to emphasize that every aspect of our existence – not just the objects and resources directly involved in the doing of a mitzvah – was created by God for us to sanctify and elevate.<sup>10</sup> – THE REBBE

<sup>10</sup> It is not only the story of creation that precedes the legislation of the mitzvah, but the entire book of Genesis and the first eleven chapters of Exodus. On the basic level of Rashi's answer, this is because

## 1:2

### "And the earth was desolate and void"

This tells us that God was creating worlds and destroying them, until he created this world and said: "Those did not suit me; this one suits me."<sup>11</sup> – R. ABAHU IN MIDRASH RABBAH

When discussing the different stages in God's emanation of worlds and spheres of reality, we need to bear in mind an important distinction between our physical world and the higher, spiritual realms. In a physical, time-bounded world, change and progression mean that the previous state no longer prevails. Wool becomes yarn, yarn becomes cloth, cloth becomes a coat; the person now has a coat, but the sheep is left bereft of its wool. Not so with a spiritual evolution, where all stages exist simultaneously, each on its own plane. There is no change of mind in the Creator, God forbid, nor a "before" and "after" in the temporal sense, but rather a hierarchy of realities which derive from and impact each other.<sup>12</sup>

– CORDOVERO; SHALOH

### "And darkness on the face of the deep"

This is one of the ten things that Alexander the Macedonian inquired of the sages of the Negev: Which was created first, darkness or light? Said they to him: This question has no resolution.

– TALMUD

Darkness is absence. So when it says, "There shall be light," it is as if it would have said, "There shall be existence." This is why "light" is the first creation, as the first thing that God created is existence.

– AKEIDAH

There are two opinions as to the nature of darkness:

1) Darkness is not an existence, but merely the absence of light.<sup>13</sup>

throughout these 61 chapters, God's promise of the Land to Abraham, and then to Isaac and Jacob, is repeatedly reiterated, and established as the divinely ordained birthright of their descendants. Regarding the deeper meaning of Rashi's words, the book of Genesis chronicles the lives of the patriarchs, for whom even the most mundane activity was an exercise in serving and relating to God (see commentaries to 18:1 and 24:42).

<sup>11</sup> Ari interprets this midrash as referring to the primordial "world of tohu" that precedes our existence. See *Tohu and Tikun* on pages 12–15.

<sup>12</sup> See *Firsts or False Starts?* on pages 4–5. Also see commentaries to 6:6.

<sup>13</sup> In addition to Akeidah cited here, such is also the opinion of Saadia Gaon, Radak, Nachmanides, Ran, Bach and Chatham Sofer; also see citation from Maimonides in commentary to 1:31 and from R. Schneur Zalman of Liadi to 1:4. According to



וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאֹר כִּי־טוֹב  
וַיַּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים  
בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ׃  
וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לְאֹר יוֹם  
וּלְחֹשֶׁךְ לַיְלָה  
וַיְהיֶינָה עֶרֶב וַיְהיֶינָה בֹקֶר  
יוֹם אֶחָד׃ פ

4 And God saw the light that it is good;  
and God separated  
between the light and the darkness.  
5 And God called the light "day"  
and the darkness he called "night";  
and it was evening and it was morning  
one day.

*The separation  
of light & darkness*

allowed to see the spiritual vitality flowing from the utterance of God's mouth into every creation, we would not perceive the physicality or substantiality of any created thing. We would see only its divine life-force, in relation to which it is completely nullified, since without that life-force it is utter nothingness.

-R. SCHNEUR ZALMAN OF LIADI

In the human psyche, the faculty of speech is the capacity to transcend our own boundaries and make our perceptions, thoughts and feelings heard within someone other than ourselves. Without speech, all that exists is our own world of sensations, emotions and cognitions. With speech, an entire world of others comes into being.

This is why the Torah describes God's creation of the world as divine "speech." Creation is the actualization of God's desire for an "other": for an entity that is perceived as outside of God's own all-encompassing reality, and as such, is the recipient of God's self-communication and a partner in a relationship with him.

-R. SHALOM DOVBER OF LUBAVITCH

#### "There shall be light"

The light which God created on the first day—one could see with it from one end of the world to the other. God saw that it is not proper that the wicked should have use of it, so he hid it away for the righteous in the World to Come.

-R. ELAZAR IN TALMUD  
-RASHI

Where did he hide it? In the Torah. -ZOHAR

The primary function of light is that it reveals the relationship between things. At first God created a dark world—a world in which each entity is separate unto itself. Only then did he create a "rectified" world, in which each part is connected with all others and combines with them to serve one exalted purpose. In this world there is light: the force that unites all creations toward a single goal. -R. KOOK

#### 1:4

##### "God saw the light that it is good"

I have seen that there is an advantage to wisdom over folly, as the advantage of light over darkness.

-ECCLESIASTES

In the beginning of creation, God beheld the deeds of the wicked, and he beheld the deeds of the righteous. But I still do not know which he desires. When it says, "God saw the light, that it is good," I know that God desires the deeds of the righteous, and does not desire the deeds of the wicked.<sup>18</sup>

-R. ABABU IN MIDRASH RABBAH

Darkness has no actual substance, and automatically disappears when light appears. This is why good and evil are referred to as "light" and "darkness": evil possesses no true substance or reality, so that when good asserts itself, evil dissipates to the nullity it essentially is.

-R. SCHNEUR ZALMAN OF LIADI

One can battle darkness, or one can generate light. Our task is to generate light.

-TZEMACH TZEDEK

#### "And God separated between the light and the darkness"

Know that in the beginning, a simple divine light filled the entirety of existence. When there arose in his simple will the desire to create the worlds, God contracted his light, withdrawing it to the sides and leaving a void and an empty space in its very center, to allow

<sup>18</sup> Meaning that there is a pre-creation reality in which God equally transcends both good and evil. From this perspective, God does not desire good because it is good, but rather the converse: good is good because God chooses to desire it.

There is also another level of understanding to this midrash, in which "the deeds of the wicked" refers to the transformation of evil into good through *teshuvah* (repentance or "return")—in contrast to "the deeds of the righteous" who never stray from the path of good. The righteous fulfil the divine desire in creation, but those who err and then return reach higher yet, surpassing even the divine desire and "plan" for creation. See *The Snake in the Garden* on pages 5-6 and *The Problem of Evil* on page 15.

#### NOTES

##### 1:4

SAW (וַיֵּרָא ~ va'yar) also • affirmed, sustained -Nachmanides • revealed -ha-Kethav v'ha-Kabalah  
THAT (כִּי ~ ki) -Rashi; Rashbam; Radak  
• or because -Saadia Gaon; Sforno  
• see note to 18:15

##### 1:5

CALLED (וַיִּקְרָא ~ kara) • carries connotations of naming, summoning, calling forth an implicit potential, defining, and imparting a function and task; see commentaries to 2:19  
EVENING (וָעֶרֶב ~ erev) • means blending; so called because in the dark, objects are indistinguishable from each other -Ibn Ezra  
MORNING (וּבֹקֶר ~ boker) • means to distinguish (see previous note) -Ibn Ezra

for the existence of the worlds. However, this was not an absolute void, as there remained a residue of the divine light within the void. God then drew a single line of his infinite light into the void to emanate the worlds.<sup>19</sup>

-ARI

#### 1:5

##### "It was evening and it was morning"

Such is the model of creation: first comes darkness, then light.

-RAV YEHUDAH  
IN TALMUD

"Night" is fear, and "day" represents love. In our service of God we begin with fear and awe of his greatness, and this leads us to love of God.

-SHALOH

In the Jewish calendar night precedes day, for the people of Israel know this secret of

<sup>19</sup> This is the concept of the divine *tzimtzum* ("contraction") widely discussed in Lurianic Kabbalah. For an explanation of this passage, see *The Tzimtzum* and *The Residue and the Line* on pages 6-8.



12 וַתוֹצֵא הָאֲרֶץ דָּשָׁא  
 עֵשֶׂב מִזְרִיעַ זָרַע לְמִינֵהוּ  
 וְעֵץ עֹשֶׂה-פֶּרִי אֲשֶׁר זָרְעוֹ-בּוֹ  
 לְמִינֵהוּ  
 וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי-טוֹב:  
 וַיְהי-עֶרֶב וַיְהי-בֹקֶר  
 יוֹם שְׁלִישִׁי: פ 13 And the earth brought out a sproutage  
 herb that seeds seed after its kind  
 and trees that make fruit that has its seed within it  
 each after its kind;  
 and God saw that it is good.  
 And it was evening and it was morning  
 a third day.

14 וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים  
 יְהי מֵאֵרֶת בְּרָקִיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִם  
 לְהַבְדִּיל  
 בֵּין הַיּוֹם וּבֵין הַלַּיְלָה  
 וְהָיוּ לְאֹתוֹת וּלְמוֹעֲדִים  
 וּלְיָמִים וּשְׁנָיִם:  
 וַיְהי לְמֵאֵרֶת בְּרָקִיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִם  
 לְהָאִיר עַל-הָאָרֶץ  
 וַיְהי-כֵן: 15 And God said  
 "There shall be luminaries in the firmament of the heavens  
 to separate  
 between the day and the night;  
 and they shall be for signs and for seasons  
 and for days and years.  
 And they shall be for luminaries in the firmament of the heavens  
 to give light upon the earth";  
 and it was so.

## 1:14

**"For signs and for seasons"**

The year, month, week, day, and hour are not arbitrary measures, but integral components of time as formed by its creator. Thus the *Baal Shem Tov* taught that it is preferable to perform two mitzvot on two different days than to do both on the same day, so that two different time-entities are elevated by their participation in a Godly act.

-TZEMACH TZEDEK

Reading this verse, we are struck by how different our own perspective can be than the higher perspective of the Creator. A human observer would assume that the primary function of the sun, moon and stars is to yield light, and the fact that these are used to measure and categorize time is secondary. But the Torah describes their first function to be "for signs and for seasons and for days and years," and only subsequently speaks of their role as sources of illumination.

-CHAFETZ CHAYIM

## 1:16

**"The great luminary... and the small luminary"**

First it says, "God made the two great luminaries." But then it says, "the great luminary... and the small luminary." How are these two verses reconciled?

Originally, the sun and moon were equal in size and luminescence. But then the moon complained: "Can two kings wear the same crown?"

Said God to the moon: "Go diminish yourself."

Said the moon: "Because I have said a proper thing, I must diminish myself?"

Said God: "You shall rule both by day and by night."

Said the moon: "What does a lamp accomplish at high noon?"

Said God: "The people of Israel will calculate their dates and years by you."

Said the moon: "But they will calculate the seasons by the sun."

Said God: "The righteous shall be called by your name—Jacob the Small, Samuel the Small, David the Small."

Still the moon was not appeased. So God said: "Offer an atonement for my sake (the he-goat offered in the Holy Temple on the new moon<sup>32</sup>) for having diminished the moon."

-R. SHIMON BEN PAZI IN TALMUD

The whole of creation is comprised of suns and moons: spirit and matter, male and female, teacher and student... nothing in our

<sup>32</sup> See Numbers 28:15.

## NOTES

## 1:14

**SIGNS** (אוֹתוֹת ~ othoth) • omens -Rashi; Nachmanides; Chizkuni • moments -Ibn Ezra • hours -Radak • the Sabbath -Midrash Rabbah • signs by which to navigate -Hirsch; R. Meir Meiri  
**SEASONS** (מוֹעֲדִים ~ mo'adim) -Onkelos; Saadia Gaon; Radak; Nachmanides • hours -Ibn Ezra • appointed times, festivals -Midrash Rabbah; Rashi

## 1:15

**LUMINARIES** (מֵאֵרֶת ~ me'oroth) • spelled "deficiently" without a ם as if related to the word "plague" (מִאֲרָה ~ me'irah), a reference to the prevalence of croup in children on Wednesdays -Jerusalem Talmud; Rashi • a reference to the fact that all suffering is time related -Keli Yakar • to the "deficiency of the moon" (see commentary to 1:16) -Raavad II; Tur

world is created or accomplished without a giver/receiver dynamic.

As God created them, both are "great luminaries." From the Creator's perspective, the recipient's contribution is equal to that

- וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים 16 And God made  
 אֶת־שְׁנֵי הַמָּאֹרֹת הַגְּדֹלִים  
 אֶת־הַמָּאֹר הַגָּדֹל לְמִשְׁלַת הַיּוֹם  
 וְאֶת־הַמָּאֹר הַקָּטָן לְמִשְׁלַת הַלַּיְלָה  
 וְאֵת הַכּוֹכָבִים:  
 וַיִּתֵּן אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים 17 And God put them  
 בִּרְקִיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִם  
 לְהָאִיר עַל־הָאָרֶץ:  
 וּלְמִשְׁלַת בַּיּוֹם וּבַלַּיְלָה 18 And to rule in the day and in the night  
 וּלְהַבְדִּיל  
 בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ  
 וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהִים כִּי־טוֹב:  
 וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר 19 And it was evening and it was morning  
 יוֹם רְבִיעִי: פ a fourth day.

The fourth day:  
 sun, moon & stars

- וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים 20 And God said  
 יִשְׂרְצוּ הַמַּיִם  
 שָׂרָץ נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה  
 וְעוֹף יַעֲוֹף עַל־הָאָרֶץ  
 עַל־פְּנֵי רְקִיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִם:  
 “The waters shall swarm  
 a swarming of living creatures;  
 and the bird shall fly upon the earth  
 upon the face of the firmament of the heavens.”

of the giver. But from the luminaries' own perspective, there are “great luminaries” and “small luminaries.” The givers of the world are motivated by a sense of greatness and self-perpetuation, and its recipients are driven by a sense of neediness and insufficiency.

Indeed, it is the moon, not the sun, who complains about the status quo, and the moon, rather than the sun, who must diminish herself. The sun is perfectly comfortable in his role as a “great luminary”; it is the moon who intrinsically possesses the sense of dissatisfaction that makes her a recipient.

God speaks to the moon about the greatness in smallness: how unlike the giver, the recipient illuminates also when its light is invisible; about the unique qualities of lunar time, where diminution and extinction give rise to rebirth and renewal; about the righteous who achieve true greatness by virtue of their humility and perpetual sense of inadequacy.

But the moon is not satisfied. She cannot be, for if she could fully sense her greatness, she would not be a recipient.

#### NOTES

1:16

GREAT... SMALL (גָּדוֹל / קָטָן) ~ gadol / katon - R. Shimon ben Pazi in Talmud; Rashi • greater and lesser - Saadia Gaon; Rashbam; Radak

1:20

SWARM (יִשְׂרָצוּ ~ yishretzu) • also spawn - Ibn Ezra; Nachmanides; Ohr ha-Chayim  
 A SWARMING (שָׂרָץ ~ sheretz) refers to • legless or short-legged creatures - Rashi • creatures categorized by perpetual movement - Onkelos; Nachmanides  
 CREATURE (נֶפֶשׁ ~ nefesh) • lit. soul  
 BIRD (עוֹף ~ of) • lit. flying creature, a category that includes flying mammals and insects

So God acknowledges that he must atone for the moon's malaise. For it is only because God desired a creative world—a world in which new realities are born out of the giver/recipient partnership—that its moons experience want and discontent.

Only in the messianic age, when creation attains its ultimate perfection, will the greatness of receiving be revealed. In the words of Isaiah, “The light of the moon will be as the light of the sun.” -THE REBBE

#### “And the stars”

Having diminished the light of the moon, God appeased her with her entourage of stars.

-R. ACHA IN MIDRASH RABBAH; RASHI

In the daytime, the light of the sun overwhelms all other celestial luminaries. Not so the moon, whose diminished light allows the stars to also shine and for mankind to benefit from them. Such is the way of the righteous: to withhold much of their own light so as to allow others to shine. -CHATHAM SOFER