

A Brief Note on Creation

Parsha Bereshit opens the teachings of the Torah with a simple yet majestic statement: “*In the beginning of God’s creating heaven and earth*”. Then the Torah gives a brief account of the steps undertaken by God on each of the six days of creation, during which God, from nothing, conjured up completeness – the heavens and earth, the lands and the seas, the flora and fauna and ultimately His most unique and greatest creation, man and woman.

The Torah’s description of the various undertakings on the six days of creation adds very little to our overall understanding of the forces and processes at work in the genesis of the universe, the earth and man and his world. However, it was not God’s intent to use the instrumentality of the Torah to impart a careful blueprint of the creation process. Indeed, man’s quest to understand his origins has fuelled many scientific explorations and investigations. The Torah is about God and his relationship with and expectations from man, particularly with the descendants of Jacob.

The very brief description of the creation was meant to convey with absolute clarity the overriding message of the Torah; that God was the creator of all and had sole and absolute sovereignty over the heavens and earth. God could do as He wished with the fruits of His labours. In his commentary, Rashi seized on this principle to ground God’s absolute right to grant Abraham and his descendants the inheritance of the Promised Land, notwithstanding that it may have been inhabited by others; their claim fell before the superior grant from God.

That doesn’t mean that the story of creation was ignored, and the how and when of creation has enjoyed a long period of discussion dating back over two thousand years. One early such account is found in the Midrash. [1] There one Rabbi Nehemiah, who lived in the Mishnaic Period, suggested that on the first day of creation, God created its entire constituents; the events of day two through six followed naturally and necessarily – not dissimilar to Isaac Newton’s theory of creation.

The *Ramban* viewed the work of creation as a deep mystery; but also one that could only be comprehended through the tradition transmitted by God to Moses. The *Ramban* saw God’s role in creation and the nature of the creation process as creating the raw matter, from which all life emerged – something akin to the notion of the “primordial swamp” in which amino acids, the building blocks of life, had initially formed. God did not create the full-blown universe as we know it, but only the possibility for that universe to happen — and then to keep on happening.

The *Rambam* not surprisingly, adopted a different approach. He believed that the Torah’s account of creation actually conveyed deeper truths via metaphor; hence it was not required to ascribe a literal meaning to the acts of Creation depicted in *Bereshit*. Importantly, the *Rambam* declared that one was obligated to understand Torah in a way that was compatible with the findings of science; and, if science and Torah were misaligned, it was either because science was not understood or the Torah was misinterpreted. He argued that if science proved a point, then the finding should be accepted and the Torah scripture should be interpreted accordingly. Pointedly, the

Rambam appeared to conclude that one needs only to believe in God as being the source of Creation and that “*He alone made, makes, and will make everything*”.

The science that the *Rambam* was forced to confront was relatively primitive; the age of great scientific discovery would not come for many centuries. In the late 1880s, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch [1] was forced to confront new scientific discoveries and theories, amongst them Darwin’s Theory of Evolution, which would appear to contradict the neat hierarchy established in the Torah.

Like *Rambam*, Rabbi Hirsch did not reject science, though he gave it healthy skepticism, and like the *Ramban* he saw God’s role as the prime force behind Creation. Rabbi Hirsch posited that accepting the existence of evolution will not change one’s appreciation of the universe that God created. Like the *Ramban*, he focussed not on the details of creation, but on God’s role in it:

“... even if the latest scientific notion that the genesis of all the multitudes of organic forms on earth can be traced back to one single, most primitive, primeval form of life should ever appear... if this notion were ever to gain complete acceptance by the scientific world, Jewish thought ... would nonetheless never summon us to revere a still extant representative of this primal form as the supposed ancestor of us all. Rather, Judaism in that case would call upon its adherents to give even greater reverence than ever before to the one, sole God Who, in His boundless creative wisdom and eternal omnipotence, needed to bring into existence no more than one single, amorphous nucleus and one single law of "adaptation and heredity" in order to bring forth, from what seemed chaos but was in fact a very definite order, the infinite variety of species we know today, each with its unique characteristics that sets it apart from all other creatures.”[3]

There are various ways that Jewish scholarship has dealt with the mystery of Creation; however there has only been one way that Judaism has dealt with the creator.

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1. See *Bereshit Rabbah* 12:4
2. Creation was without life of its own; it was instead mere "matter" responding mechanically to a set of fixed mathematical laws.
3. See, *Collected Writings*, vol. 7 pp. 263-264