

Vibrating over the Face of the Deep: God's Creating, and Ours

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B'reishit (When God began) to create heaven and earth—²the earth being *tohu v'vohu* (unformed and void), with *choshech* (darkness) over the face of the *t'hom* (deep) and a *ruach* (wind/breath) from God sweeping over the water—³God said . . .

Genesis 1:1–3

One cannot begin at THE beginning; one can only start.¹ A full consideration of creation begins by reviewing the rich harvest that scientific evidence has offered, as mediated through the cultural expressions of this age. Ours is a time in which dynamism, interrelatedness, and innovation entice the imagination, and our scientific understandings have benefited from these ways of speaking/organizing/advancing what we know. Keeping our scientific harvest in hand, we can turn anew to the other source of creation material—the wealth of stories, poetry, and wisdom expressed in biblical and Rabbinic scripture. One can view revelation as a subset of creation (after all, our stories and memories are part of the heritage of human creatures), and one can equally view creation as under the rubric of revelation (known through our literature, erupting in our consciousness). For this consideration, we seek to dance with the two poles of human becoming—creation as revelation and revelation as creation—without prioritizing or absolutizing either one. In the same way that science/humanities can benefit from a view of

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mutually-influencing interaction, so too can creation/revelation. What we know from science (and philosophy) makes possible a renewed and liberating understanding of the biblical and Rabbinic tellings. And our renewed philosophical/theological/literary takes on the Jewish canons of creation can stimulate new possibilities for an integration and synthesis of scientific understanding and its significance.

Let us caress the Torah's emergent, embodied creation—one word at a time. While there are echoes of several mythic (and violent) creation tales scattered throughout the *Tanach*, pride of place has been accorded to the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis, and it is with that telling that we will begin. As Rashi so fetchingly observes of the Bible's opening line: "This verse says nothing but, 'Expound me!'"² Rich in layers of meanings the resonant and spare theopoetics of Genesis invites us to swim in its swirling waters and exult in its emerging complexity and creativity. We begin by noting that the very first word, "*B'reishit*" itself invites engagement. Most English translations render the word as if it were an absolute, "In the beginning," implying that a Supernatural God created space, time, and all things *ex nihilo*, out of nothing.

At no point in the Bible itself is a creation out of nothing explicitly affirmed, much less made a point of dogma. The first such clear reference is in apocryphal literature,³ although there are passages in the midrash that do seem to support *creatio ex nihilo*,⁴ and during the Medieval and Early Modern periods, it was the dominant view for Jews as it was for Christian and Muslim believers. The notion of a God unaffected by space and time, eternal and unchanging, creating all ephemeral matter as an act of effortless sovereign coercion fit with the metaphysics and physics of the Middle Ages and offered support for the eternity of Newtonian Law and the Cartesian dualism of timeless Spirit/ephemeral Matter.

Rashi notes, however, that the term "*b'reishit*" is a noun in the construct state with a finite verb—"When God began to create...." This reading understands the first phrase as awaiting completion with sentence three ("...God said, Let there be light"), with a parenthetical insertion ("the earth being unformed and void") describing the state of reality at the time God began the work of creation. God's creating, in Rashi's telling, is within time and space, as is God. It is an organizing of raucous potentiality, transforming chaos into cosmos.

Two and a half millennia of Western theology have made it easy to forget that throughout the ancient Near Eastern world, including Israel, the point of creation is not the production of matter out of nothing, but rather the emergence of a stable community in a benevolent and life-sustaining order.⁵

That understanding of creation as a process within space-time, as a process of organizing the preexistent chaos, also commands a venerable biblical/Rabbinic pedigree. One of the favorite Rabbinic metaphors for God as creator is that of artist: “There is no rock (*tzur*) like our God”⁶ is transformed through a Rabbinic pun: “There is no artist (*tzayar*) like our God.”⁷ Indeed, God is an artist of great enthusiasm: “The Rock is, as it were, an excellent artist. God is proud of God’s world, and exclaims: “See the creation that I created and the form that I constructed!”⁸ And the greatness of God’s creative artwork is twofold: it is constantly unique and new:

How great is the Holy Blessing One! If a person mints a number of coins using the same die, each resembles the other. Yet the Majesty of Majesties, the Holy Blessing One made each person in the die of Adam and no one is like another.⁹

and God’s creations have the capacity to join God as co-creators, artwork capable of itself creating new art!

A mortal may draw a picture, but the picture cannot draw a picture in turn. But when the Holy Blessing One draws a picture, God’s picture makes other pictures. God made a woman, and the woman gives birth and produces others like herself.¹⁰

Artists are creators who take selected raw materials and fashion them into objects of great beauty and greater complexity through the infusion of their energy, intention, talent, and spirit. So too God’s creation. Several Rabbinic midrashim record the notion that God works with preexistent material to fashion the world and all that is in it:

- From what were the heavens created? The Holy Blessing One took the garment of light that God wore and spread it as a cloak.¹¹

- How did the Holy Blessing One create the world? Rabbi Yohanan said, “God took two bundles, one of fire and one of snow and beat them together, and from them earth was created.” Rabbi Hanina said, “God took four bundles, representing the four directions of the compass and one for above and one below.”¹²
- Rabbi Hamma opened by quoting, “Take away the dross from the silver (Proverbs 25:4).” Rabbi Eliezer quoted Rabbi Jacob, “This is analogous to a bath full of water in which there were two beautiful bas-reliefs. As long as it was full of water, the bas-reliefs could not be seen. When the plug was pulled and the water flowed out of it, the bas-reliefs became visible. Similarly, as long as the world was *tohu va-vohu*, the heavens and earth could not be seen. When these were removed, the heavens and earth became visible.”¹³

At the very moment God begins the process of creating, we encounter *tohu v'vohu*, the undomesticated chaos awaiting God's engagement and a *choshech*, darkness, permeates the surface of the *t'hom*/deep. While most dominant theologies pay short shrift to this soothing darkness and the inviting pool, let's soak in its waters for a moment.¹⁴ *Tohu v'vohu* is raw and chaotic—and we know that fractal beauty and order self-organize from the very heart of the chaotic. Chaos—an iterative nonlinear process—is neither rigid repetition nor pure random disorder, it offers rather a third way—an emergent, unpredictable becoming: “The iteration of a fractal algorithm depicts not a predictable continuity of sameness, but a rhythm of repetition with a difference. Fractal ‘self-similarity’ unfolds at different scales, like the whole enfolded in each part, the macrocosm in the microcosm.”¹⁵ Linear formulas fail in the face of the very complexity, beauty, and fluidity of what emerges from the chaos. Too rich, too full of unpredictability and verve for objectified contemplation, what emerges from *tohu v'vohu* can only be lived, experienced, encountered, integrated into the patterns of becoming.

Rabbi Huna quoted Bar Kappara: “Had the words not been written specifically, we would have been forbidden to say them: ‘When God began to create the heavens and the earth’ Of what did God create them? ‘The earth was *tohu va-vohu*.’”

The sheer promise of the *tohu v'vohu*, its expectant potentiality, invites God's world-making attention, and ours, at every beginning, in every occasion.

Then there is the *choshech*, the darkness, on the face of the deep. To attend, patiently, with resolve and steadfastness, one must be free from glittering distraction. Darkness need not mean deprivation. Indeed, living in a world in which Blackness still carries the toxins of racial degradation, poverty, and marginalization, it is particularly pressing to recognize the blessing of blackness—a shelter from white-knuckled terror that offers moments of creativity, that invites us to close our eyes in the security of the protective dark, in the quiet of the *choshech* of repose and renewal. Rav Saadyah notes, "Darkness is not a principle opposed to that of light, but merely the absence of light."¹⁶ Sometimes the relentless glare of a hot white beam can rivet our attention to our wrinkles, inabilities, failures, and despair. In the shelter of the shadows, we can bask again in the embrace of promised new beginnings; ruddy good health and return where there was only fatigue and pallor. The sanctuary of darkness can be the shielding safe space. The dark phase of our twenty-four-hour cycle around the sun, according to Rav Saadyah, is also the time God gave us as a loving gift, for relaxation, for play, and for love: so we could "spend the night in relaxation, rest, sex, the practice of solitude, and similar pastimes."¹⁷ When space-time first exploded into becoming, it was the dark matter and dark energy that were the potent causes luring the point of infinite potential to expand. That dark energy permeates everywhere and always, and it continues to bid the cosmos to swell. *Choshech* is an expansive, pervasive, healing, powerful darkness—and it opens the face of the deep even now.

T'hom is the whirling, primal waters out of which all life, all creativity emerge. Maternal in its nurturance, womb of fecundity and giving, of sheer abundance and sprawling becoming, *t'hom* births worlds. Interestingly, *t'hom* is treated like a female name: she "crouches below"¹⁸ and "roars loud,"¹⁹ perhaps like a mother giving birth? Indeed, the Mesopotamian cognomen was Tiamat, a female personification of the primal ocean. Might we hear the muffled voice of the female, so often shunted aside and silenced? Shut her up, keep her home, yet here she comes, bubbling up again and again, turning her face to the vibrating flutters of creating. She will not be put aside; she cannot be domesticated or contained. So

profound is our “tehomophobia,”²⁰ our fear of this chaotic, creative fertility, this female capacity to birth anew, that we leap over it in our most sacred story—even though it is right there, even though it is the very locus where habit is sundered, where creation happens, always happens: “Your justice is like the great deep.”²¹ It is in the chaos that novelty is birthed. It is in the openness and the potential that creativity advances. In the mutations are death but also evolution. It is there that renewal has a face—she beckons to us as the deep, *creatio ex profundis*.²²

What we know about the Divine is that it returns again and again, to the darkness, to the deep. And it is precisely this tidal ebb and surge between chance and constraint, regularity and singularity, between novelty and conservation, continuation and change that drives the process of becoming. The deep, dark resurgence of what is possible gestates creation anew:

Who closed the sea behind doors
 When it gushed forth out of the womb,
 When I clothed it in clouds,
 Swaddled it in dense clouds,
 When I made breakers My limit for it,
 And set up its bar and doors,
 And said, “You may come so far and no farther;
 Here your surging waves will stop”?²³

It is precisely here, at the face of *t’hom*, that the breath of the Divine flutters, we are told, like a nesting dove over her fledgling chicks.²⁴ Concerned, protective, nurturing, urging her brood into flight, so too the breath/wind/spirit of God returns again and again to the edges of disorder and chaos, unsettling the norms, disrupting the habitual, comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable,²⁵ cracking an opening for novelty to emerge. The Hebrew verb, *m’rachefet*, to sweep or flutter, is “vibration, movement. . . Motion, which is the essential element in change, originates with God’s dynamic presence.”²⁶ There are physicists who remind us that the components of matter are really vibrations, fluttering packets of energy shimmying the dance of becoming: “the microscopic landscape is suffused with tiny strings whose vibrational patterns orchestrate the evolution of the cosmos.”²⁷ The divine vibrating resiliently invites chaos toward cosmos, organizing, constraining,

enticing, luring. The work of creation is never ending and never static. We are a/part of its harvest, and we are, with the cosmos and the Divine, co-creators. The *ruach* continues to vibrate across the face of *t'hom*, through us, in us, with us: *creatio continua*, continuous creating.

Notes

1. It is often noted homiletically that each of the volumes of the Talmud begin on page 2, to indicate that there is no place for an absolute beginning—every page presumes familiarity with the entirety of Talmud. Lacking THE beginning, in Talmud learning, one must simply dive in.
2. Rashi to Gen. 1:1.
3. II Macc. 7:28.
4. *Genesis Rabbah* 1:9.
5. Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 12.
6. I Sam. 2:3.
7. *B'rachot* 16b.
8. *Kohelet Rabbah* 2; *B'reishit Rabbah* 6:3.
9. *Sanhedrin* 38a.
10. *Tanchuma, Tazria* 3.
11. *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer*, 3.
12. *B'reishit Rabbah* 6:3.
13. *Sochar Tov* 22:4, *B'reishit Rabbah* 10:2.
14. For an extended reflection, see Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).
15. Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning God in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 50 – 51. This entire essay is swimming in Keller's waters.
16. Saadyah Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs & Opinions*, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 64.
17. Saadyah Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs*, 343.
18. Gen. 49:25; Deut. 33:13.
19. Habakkuk 3:10.
20. The term is Catherine Keller's, *On the Mystery*, 58.
21. Ps. 36:7.
22. Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery*, 48, and *Face of the Deep*, xix.
23. Job 38:8–11.

24. *Chagigah* 15a, *Midrash T'hillim* 93:5. See also Deut. 32:11, where the same term describes an eagle hovering over his eaglets.
25. The author of this pithy doublet is the journalist Peter Finley Dunne.
26. Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 7. Indeed, Gerhard von Rad identifies *m'rachefet* as "vibrate!" See *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 49.
27. Brian Greene, *Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions, and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory* (New York: Norton, 1999), 135.