

1 1 *From the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.* אֵלֹהִים בְּרָא אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ;
בְּרֵאשִׁית

בראשית

CHAPTER 1

1 **בראשית ברא אלקים.** *ראש* is phonetically related to *רעש* and *רחש*, both of which denote movement; *רעש* denotes spatial movement, whereas *רחש* denotes inner movement. Accordingly, *ראש* is the source of movement, the origin of all outer and inner movement. Hence, *בראשית* means a beginning of movement — a beginning in time, not in space. The beginning of a space is called *קצה*, and likewise the end of a space is called *קצה*; for the two extremities can be beginning or end, depending on the standpoint of the onlooker.

Our verse, then, means: “In the beginning of all existence, it was God Who created”; or, if we add to the predicate the two objects that follow: “From the very beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” In any event, “*בראשית*” proclaims that nothing existed prior to God’s act of creation, and that heaven and earth were created only through God’s Word. Scripture thus teaches us that the world was brought into existence from nonexistence, *יש מאין*. This constitutes the basis of the conviction that the Torah seeks to instill within us.

The opposite notion is the belief in the eternity of the world, which is the cornerstone of pagan belief until this very day. This belief is not only a metaphysical falsehood, a misrepresentation of the origin of the universe, but even worse: it undermines all morality, and denies all freedom in both God and man. If matter had antedated Creation, then the Creator of the universe would have been able to fashion from the material given Him not a world that was absolutely good, but only the best world possible within the limitations of the material. In that case, all evil — natural and moral — would be due to the inherent faultiness of the material, and not even God would be able to save the world from evil, natural or moral. God would not be master over the material of the world, and man would not be master over his body. Freedom would

vanish, and the whole world, including its God and the men who live in it, would be propelled by a blind, immutable fate.

This bleak conception of God, world, and man is dispelled by the light of the Torah with its very first words (פְּתַח־בְּרִיךְ יְאִיר; *Tehillim* 119:130): בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא אֱלֹקִים! Everything that follows hinges on these words. Everything — the matter and form of all that exists — was created by the free, almighty Creator. And the Creator still rules freely over the matter and form of every existing thing, over the forces that act upon matter, over the laws by which these forces operate, and over the resulting forms. For the free and almighty Will of God created matter and caused these forces to act upon it, and His Will set the laws by which forms are fashioned.

And just as God rules freely over His world, so has He made man master over his small world. God breathed into man a spark of His Own free essence, so that man should freely master his body and its forces. Thus, He created man in His image, in the free image of the free God; He placed man as an image of God in a world governed by His omnipotence.

The world that was created בְּרֵאשִׁית is not the best one that can be fashioned with the given material; rather, it is the only good world. This world — with all its seeming flaws — corresponds with the wise plan of the Creator; He could have created a different world, had such a world corresponded with His Will. Man who was created בְּרֵאשִׁית — with all his moral shortcomings — has the ability to attain the moral perfection set before him by the Creator. The possibility of sinning is part of his moral perfection; it is a basic condition for his moral freedom. Both, the world and man, will reach the highest ideal of the good, for which both were created. They will achieve this level of good because God, Who has placed this goal before them, has created them both for this goal, in accordance with His free and unlimited Will. He could have created a different creation, a different world and a different man, had this served the purpose that He set before them in freedom.

This is a truth of which we remind ourselves continually in the קְדִישׁ prayer, in which we express our deep faith that His great Name will be recognized and sanctified in the world כְּרֵעוּתָהּ, דִּי בְּרָא כְּרֵעוּתָהּ, which He has created according to His Will.

In this sense, we can also understand the words of our Sages: בּוֹכּוֹת בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל בּוֹכּוֹת מֹשֶׁה בּוֹכּוֹת חֵלֶה מֵעֶשֶׂר וּבִיכּוּרִים נִבְרָא הָעוֹלָם (*Bereshis Rabbah* 1:4),

for all these are called *ראשית*; and we can also understand the saying: *הקב"ה היה מביט בתורה ובורא העולם* (ibid. 1:1). Israel and Moshe began a new phase in the development of history, and therefore are called *ראשית*; or they represent the first realization of the ideal of man's creation — the first fruits, as it were, of God's harvest — and therefore are called *ראשית*. Through *חלה*, *מעשר*, and *ביכורים* we return the world with homage to its Creator. The Torah is the foundation stone of the structure that God wished to set up through Creation; hence, it, too, is called *ראשית* (ibid.). All these aims, though realized only later, were ensured from the time of Creation, for the world was created *בראשית*, *wholly* by God's Word, and from its very inception it was formed for these sublime aims. Indeed, God looked into the Torah and created the world.

We see, then, that *בראשית* is the foundation of our awareness of God, world, and man. When man lost this awareness, it had to be reestablished. This was the purpose of the revealed miracles: to demonstrate God's free and unbounded mastery over the world with all its elements, forces and laws. Indeed, these miracles were literally *נסים*, emblems raised on high. They restored man's faith in a free and unlimited God. As we have stated, this faith is the basis for all moral and human consciousness, and is the cornerstone of our whole relation to the Torah.

ברא. *ברא* is related to *ברה*, *ברה*, *פרח*, *פרא*, *פרע* — which denote aspiration to emerge, emergence from potentiality into actuality, or release from bondage. Accordingly, *ברא* denotes bringing to light, actualizing and bringing something out into external reality. In Aramaic, too, *ברא* means "outside," "that which is outside." *ברא*, then, means to carry out and actualize a thought, which is hidden in the inner recesses of the mind. *ברא* denotes creation, preceded only by thought and will. This is precisely the concept of creation *יש מאין*. Accordingly, "*בריאה*" is applied only to God's creation. Before the world existed, this creation had existed only as a thought in the mind of the Creator — to speak in human terms. The act of Creation actualized this thought and brought it out into reality, giving it an external, concrete existence. The entire world, as a whole and in all of its parts, is nothing but the materialized thought of God. This idea presents itself also in the root *היה*, the Jewish term for being (see v. 2).

This meaning of *ברא* — to become external, concrete, tangible — is related to another meaning of *ברא*: being healthy and stout. And from

this latter meaning we get ברה בְּרִיָּה (*Shemuel II*, 13:5–7), בְּרוּת (see Commentary, *Tehillim* 69:22): the first meal in the morning or after a fast; for the meal refreshes the person physically and makes him feel strong again. Similarly, וּבִרְאֵתָ לְךָ שָׁם (*Yehoshua* 17:15), וּבִרְאֵתוֹ (ibid. 17:18) means: clear a space for yourselves there, so that you can spread out comfortably; or perhaps it is related to ברא in Aramaic — the free and open outdoors — and means: convert the woodlands into an open space. Similarly, in וּבְרָא אוֹתָהֶן בְּחַרְבוֹתָם (*Yechezkel* 23:47), ברא does not mean to slay, but to split open by stabbing to reveal the covered entrails. In this sense, one can also explain ברא in connection with woodlands: to clear away and thin out, to reveal the places hidden in the thick of the forest.

אלקים. The root אלה occurs in the plural of the demonstrative pronoun אֵלֶּה, “these,” a pronoun that denotes a plurality of things joined together into a unity. Thus, whereas אֵלֶּה denotes the plurality of the world, the name אלוה denotes the one unique Being, Whose power and Will unite this plurality into one single whole: it is through Him and their relationship to Him that all the elements in the universe become one single entity — in short, one world. Hence, אלוה means the Master of the universe, Who introduces order into it, prescribes law and enforces justice. This is none other than מִדַּת הַדִּין. By extension, human lawmakers and judges in man’s small world are also called אלהים.

Paganism fragments the whole world into many groups and spheres. At the head of each sphere stands a ruler who has concentrated into his hands special powers. This notion is a direct consequence of the basic error mentioned above. If matter antedated Creation, then the god who shaped this matter was bound and limited to it. As a result, the concept of god is lowered, and god is transformed into a natural power who is unfree in the act of creating. Such a god is unable to create true contrasts and fundamentally different phenomena. The world, however, is full of contrasts and differing phenomena; accordingly, it must have been established by many gods — as many as there are groups of opposing phenomena.

Judaism denies the existence of these numerous אלהים, and ascribes the power that is attributed to them to the one and only God. He alone is called אלקים. Judaism thus unites all the attributes of power that were separated by paganism. The unification of these attributes in the one God raises the one God of Israel above any notion of a mere natural

power. For only the *free and omnipotent Will* of a single Being can create a world of contrasts; only He can unite these contrasts into one great purpose.

In the Hebrew language, the plural form in this sense is found elsewhere as well, and always denotes a plurality of powers concentrated in the hands of one person. This is common in expressions of mastery and control: **בעלים, אדונים**. These words refer to a single individual who unites in himself all the power and authority that give one control over a person or object. Accordingly, the person or object is under the exclusive authority of this individual in every respect.

This sense of **אלה** — Master of the universe, lawmaker, judge — led, by extension, to another sense of **אלה**: oath. For, in Judaism, an oath is not merely an appeal to God; rather, it submits the whole visible world of the oath-taker to the verdict of God's retributive power. (This conception is reflected also by the verb **השבוע**; see *Collected Writings*, vol. III, p. 101.)

By further extension, **אלה** also denotes a curse. The curse reveals the power of the Master of the universe, Who punishes those who swear falsely. **אלה** is apparently none other than a heightened form of **אלה**, and in the **נפעל** means "to be accursed," as in: **נְחַעַב וְנִאָּלֶה** (*Iyov* 15:16); **יִחַדְדוּ נִאָּלְחוּ** (*Tehillim* 14:3 and 53:4).

Our Sages note (*Megillah* 9a) that instead of **אלקים ברא בראשית**, Scripture says: **אלקים ברא אלקים**. If God's Name **אלקים** derives from **אלה**, it follows that He can be called **אלקים** only after the creation of the world; for this Name signifies the relationship between God and the world. The meaning of our verse, then, is as follows: God Who reveals Himself today as the Master of the universe is the One Who created this world through His Will and almighty power.

את derives from the root **אוח**; thus **אותי, אותך**, and so forth. **אוח** is related to **אוד**. An **אוד** is a handle, a lever, the means by which an action is accomplished. Thus, an **אוד** is a fire-rake, a piece of wood with which to stir the fire. **אודות** means "the causes"; hence **על אודות**. Hence, perhaps also the **איד** (vapor) that rises from the ground and that brings about the rain. An **אוח** is a means of precipitating awareness; it is a sign or indication of something, but is not the thing itself. This is also the meaning of the accusative particle **את**. It presents the object in its characteristics, effects, and relationships, through which the nature of the

object is expressed, and by which the object can be recognized. As it were, the characteristics, effects, and relationships of the object serve as its identifying marks, the means by which it can be known.

Characteristic of the concepts underlying the Hebrew language is that א is used only for the object, but never for the subject. The object is perceived from the viewpoint of the subject. Action flows from the subject to the object. The object is perceived, then, not as it is, but as it appears to another. The true nature of a thing remains hidden from the eyes of others and cannot be comprehended by another. We know a thing only by its איות and only by means of its effects; these give expression to the thing's unique individuality and enable it to be known.

Our Sages, in their deep understanding of the language, distinguish between (a) an object that is mentioned simply by its name and (b) an object that is mentioned by means of the word א. In the first case, the meaning of the name extends to the object alone; in the second case, the meaning of the name extends also to other elements. Thus, had Scripture said כבוד אביך, only the father would be the object of honor. כבוד אה אביך extends the concept of the father; honor is to be given to all representatives of the father, who represent his personality through their very relation to him. אה אביך includes אשת האב, the stepmother; אה אמן includes בעל האם, the stepfather.

We see, then, that א is actually a ריבוי; it takes the object in its wider sense. The same is true in our verse. אה השמים includes all the heavenly bodies, and אה הארץ includes all the creatures of the earth; for through these, the effects of heaven and earth come to characteristic expression.

אה השמים ואת הארץ. Elsewhere (*Collected Writings*, vol. VIII, p. 32ff.), we tried to understand the concept of שמים and ארץ by analyzing the roots of the words. שמים denotes the vast extraterrestrial world. שמים is none other than שם ("there") twofold, a higher "there" and a lower "there," a boundless double space above and beneath the earth. Alternatively, שמים may derive from the root שום — meaning "to determine the place of something": שמים is the whole complex of extraterrestrial bodies through whose mutually attracting and repelling forces the earth — like every other body in space — keeps to its appointed place. It follows, then, that every body in space has its own שמים. The surround-

ing space and all the bodies inside that space are the שמים of every body in the universe.

In any case, the very word שמים in our verse teaches us that we should not expect here revelations about the creation of wondrous superterrestrial worlds. The extraterrestrial world is mentioned and considered only in its relation to the earth. God's Torah, true to its name, is תורה: it shows us our way in the world, and guides our steps in the lands of the living. The Torah wants us to understand ourselves and our world, and wants us to attribute our existence to God the Creator. The Torah says to us, at the sight of *our heaven* and *our earth*: את השמים ואת הארץ. This heaven with its countless stars, and this earth with its countless creatures — this whole boundless diversity unites, in God's hand, into one world. He is the One Who created this world in earliest times and brought it into primordial existence.

With this first verse the Torah has already revealed the principal and fundamental truth, the principal and fundamental reality, that totally transforms our view of the world and of ourselves. This single verse would have sufficed to teach us to view the world as God's world and ourselves as God's creatures, and to recognize the world and ourselves — created by God — as God's own sacred possessions. This single verse would have sufficed to teach us our duty: to do God's Will in God's world with all our energies — which also belong to Him.

But the Torah is not content merely to make a general announcement, in one single verse, that God the Creator created the world in one utterance of Creation. The sole purpose of this entire first book, which relates the origins of the world, of human history and of the people of Israel, is to introduce the Law that is destined to be given to Israel. For this reason the Torah will now present to us all the individual phenomena of creation in all their diversity, to teach us to perceive the formative, lawgiving Word of God not only in the world as a whole, but in each and every species and group of species. This should enable us to ascend to the lofty heights of the perception expressed by David to the music of the harp: Since every one of God's creations everywhere in his kingdom — each in its own particular sphere and state of existence — does God's Will and obeys His Word, therefore בָּרַכְתִּי נַפְשֵׁי אֶת ה' (*Tehillim* 104); we, too, are to obey the Law ordained for us by God, and in this obedience to God we will find all the bliss of our lives.

Our Sages teach us further, in light of the utterances of Creation