



ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

“The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

Session 1: Parshat Bereishit: Creation from What?

Summary

Bereishit opens the Torah with the Creation of our world filled with creatures of land, sea, and air. Two different scenes tell of making human beings--in chapters 1 and 2. After Eve's adventure eating a forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden and sharing it with Adam, God exiles them from paradise. Humanity embarks on the mortal tasks of hard labor for livelihood and offspring. The couple produces two sons, but Cain's terrible jealousy of his younger sibling Abel ends in murder. Soon the earth is populated by generations of descendants who mostly fall into wickedness. By the conclusion of this first parasha, God regrets the Creation almost entirely, and plans to destroy it. Yet there is one person who finds favor in God's eyes – Noach. We'll learn more about him in the next parasha.

Text

בְּרֵאשִׁית אֵלֶּה בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ. ב וְהָאָרֶץ הִיְתְּהָ תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל-פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל-פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם. ג וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אוֹר וַיְהִי-אוֹר. ד וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאֹרֶז כִּי-טוֹב וַיִּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאֹרֶז וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ. ה וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לְאוֹר יוֹם וְלַחֹשֶׁךְ קָרָא לַיְלָה וַיְהִי-עֶרֶב וַיְהִי-בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד.

Genesis 1:1 When God began to create heaven and earth — 2 the earth being unformed and void [*tohu va bohu*], darkness was upon the face of the deep [*tehom*] and a wind of God vibrating upon the face of the waters — 3 God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. 4 God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. 5 God called the light Day, and the darkness S/He called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, a first day.

Context & Issues

The Torah tells the story of the Creation of the universe paying special attention to our planet earth. At God's bidding, light and darkness, sky, water and continents, plants, creatures of the land, sea, and air appear in the first chapter. The male and female human is the finale, or perhaps the Shabbat, when God ceases to labor, blesses, and celebrates this magnificent world.

According to most readings of Genesis, God creates the world from absolutely nothing. This idea is known as *creatio ex nihilo*. By speaking the words, "Let there be light," God creates light. Centuries of Jewish commentators (as well as Muslims and Christians) have worked hard to persuade their communities that there was no material at all before God brings it into being in Genesis. There are good reasons for this effort. Traditionally, monotheism – belief in One God –



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requires that God exists before Creation. Contemporary Jewish scholar, Louis Jacobs discusses *creatio ex nihilo* in Jewish tradition in [chapter 7](#) of his book, *A Jewish Theology*. Creation begins only with God and nothing but God exists before Creation. If there were *something* prior to Creation, then it would be "outside" God, not caused by or originating with God. The Spanish thirteenth century mystical commentator [Nachmanides](#) claims that in the beginning, God creates the heavens from nothing, and from nothing creates the land. In the same vein, [Chizkuni](#) states outright that heaven and earth, the *tehom* and the water were not created before light. According to this *creatio ex nihilo* view, the first two verses refer to the places where heaven, earth, and water will be once God creates them.

These *creatio ex nihilo* interpreters are trying to settle what appears to be a conflict between the text and a central Jewish belief. Before God speaks light into being in the third verse, the second verse mentions specific existences: "unformed and void [*tohu va bohu*], darkness upon the face of the deep [*tehom*] and a wind of God vibrating upon the face of the waters." Without fearing that our faith in God falters when we raise alternative readings of the text, let us focus on what these words about chaos and water (that have caused so much concern) might mean – what is their relation to Creation and the Creator?

Explorations

One way to consider the meaning of a text is to look for earlier and comparable materials from the same geographic area. The first tablet of an ancient Babylonian creation tale, *Enuma Elish*, tells of a battle among divine forces. The story unfolds into a contest between Tiamat – the great primordial salt water who contains life, and Marduk – the male super-god, who is known to make disturbing dust storms and tornadoes from the wind. *Enuma Elish* begins with the following lines:

When on high heaven was not named,
And the earth beneath did not yet bear a name,
And the primeval Apsû, who begat them,
And chaos, Tiamat, the mother of them both,
Their waters were mingled together,
And no field was formed, no marsh was to be seen;
When of the gods none had been called into being

The story goes on to tell of how Marduk defeats Tiamat, dismembers her, and forms the world from her corpse. Genesis differs from this mythic tale in many important ways: the Torah does not tell of a male-female divine contest where the brutal defeat of the female is the basis for Creation. Against this pagan myth, Jewish commentators react strongly. However, there are some important similarities to our version of Creation: both begin with heaven and earth, waters,



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and chaos, and the "calling into being" of Creation. Comparing the Babylonian tradition with ours helps to explain possible meanings of the Torah. *Tehom*-the Deep might be a hidden reference to the divine aspect of chaos who is called *Tiamat* in the Babylonian version – the names are strikingly similar. Comparison also clarifies the presence of the waters in Bereishit before the divine Creation, for Apsu and Tiamat are both primeval waters. Indeed, water is a persistent theme in most creation stories, including our contemporary scientific version that also tells of how life emerges from water. *Enuma Elish* points to one possible meaning of the material from which the Creation in Genesis comes: the *tehom*, the chaotic Deep.

Tehom is the Hebrew word for ocean, deep, abyss. In Genesis 1:2, God's spirit hovers over the watery, responsive, and formless Deep. Compared with the idea that the Creator causes the universe to exist solely by a sterile and detached act of speech, the *tehom* suggests a fluid idea of Creation – life emerges from salty tears, amniotic fluid.

Contemporary religion scholar Catherine Keller has written a book about the "The Face the Deep." (Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*, Routledge, 2003). She dives into the depths of the *tehom* as the source of life. In her view, *tehom* is a process of becoming with no clear beginning or end. It is a self-organizing complex, a womb that generates itself and everything else infinitely. According to Keller, *tehom* is a maternal fluid of bottomless potential.

Reading *tehom* out of Creation asserts a master story about God remote from this world and our lives, remote from our bodies, minds, and souls. Facing *tehom* in Genesis is also facing our fear, particularly our fear of chaos, and our sense of inadequacy. *Tehom* suggests participation in the process of Creation, in fulfilling possibility, in the flow of ongoing growth; it opens to evolving life. Catherine Keller calls her work on *tehom*, "an incantation at the edge of uncertainty."

Looking at the early verses of the Torah with the *tehom* idea in mind expands the possible meanings of Genesis. *Tehom* suggests non-linear reading, where time and the order of Creation in the first verses of the Torah give way to an ever-creative, fluid divine process.

Questions for Discussion

How do you make sense of the first five verses of Genesis? – Explain how you interpret Creation from *nothing*, or from *something*.

In *Enuma Elish*, male and female forces war with one another, and the female is overcome. The universe is formed from her lifeless body. Do you sense any such conflict in the early Genesis verses? Explain the meaning of its presence or absence.



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Evaluate the associations between *tehom* and female. How do male-female relationships play out in the two different approaches to the first verses of the Torah – *creatio ex nihilo* and creation with *tehom*?

What affect on the way we understand God and Creation might the idea of *tehom* as a primary life force have?

Study Links

Parallels between the biblical Creation and the Babylonian creation story, *Enuma Elish*:
http://faculty.gvsu.edu/websterm/Enuma_Elish.html#Nelinks

Synopsis of ancient creation stories with links for further reading:
<http://www.historyworld.net/wrldhis/PlainTextHistories.asp?historyid=ab83>

Summary and review of Catherine Keller's *Face of the Deep*:
<http://209.85.129.132/search?q=cache:5kyIwWMsqgcJ:www.jcrt.org/archives/04.3/michaud.pdf+Keller,+Face+of+the+Deep&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=9&client=safari>

A fine site with many resources about evolution:
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/evolution/change/index.html>

Summary of Issues

We are trying to get a fuller sense of what the Torah might mean when it describes the Creation of the world. This question affects how we understand God, the text and ourselves as people, as Jews, and as women.

Methods

Sometimes feminist reading is about paying attention to what has too often been ignored, glossed over, or re-framed in the text.

Custom and traditions affect the way we see the words on the page. For many, the first two verses of Genesis fold into the story that begins with the words that create light *et cetera*.

Returning to the text, we strive to read with care, sensitive to hints about missing voices--questions and stories that women are motivated to express because of our experiences in the world.



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Comparison is an important tool. When we compare, we need to decide whether we assume that the Torah is *like* other traditions, or *different* from them. We need to evaluate in each case where there are shared themes and meanings, and where a text expresses a new idea that contrasts with previous versions.