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IN THIS ISSUE

PARSHA: NOACH	I-4
PARSHA: BABEL & IDOLATRY	1,5
PARSHA: SAVED THE WORLD	1,6
LETTERS: OPPRESSION	7,8
LETTERS: MAN & NEIGHBOR	8
LETTERS: TZIMTZUM / HERESY	9
SABBATH/NEW MOON	10
PARSHA: BERESHEIT	II,12

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Weekly Parsha

Noach

RABBI BERNIE FOX

The Relationship Between Moral Degeneracy and Idolatry

And Hashem said to Noach: The
end of all flesh has arrived before

(continued on next page)

Weekly Parsha

the Tower of Babel

From Creativity
to Idolatry

RABBI DR. DARREL GINSBERG

One of the most intriguing stories related in Parshas Noach involves the Dor Haflaga, the post-flood generation responsible for the famous Tower of Babel episode. Reading through the verses, one is struck by the ambiguity regarding the sin committed by these people. Their stated objective was to build a tower to the "heavens," ostensibly to make a name for themselves. There is no question that such an objective has an insidious connotation and a slight discrepancy in the verses actually helps to elucidate what the sin was and how it emerged.

The Torah tells us as follows (Bereishis 11:1-2):

"The whole earth had one language, with conforming words. When they journeyed from the east, they found a valley in the land of Shinar and they settled there."

(continued on page 5)

Weekly Parsha



HE SAVED the WORLD

RABBI REUVEN MANN

All of mankind owes a great debt of gratitude to Noach. He is arguably the most unrecognized and underappreciated figure in all of human history. Why is he so important? Well, if it weren't for him the world would have been destroyed and none of us would exist. Is there anyone else you can think of who single handedly saved the entire planet from annihilation? The idea that we might not have been were it not for the righteousness of a single individual who lived thousands of years ago is extremely offensive to our narcissism but it is something that we need to acknowledge. In the introduction to the story of the Flood the Torah states, "And G-d said, I will obliterate mankind that I have created from the face of the earth from man to animal to creeping things and to birds of the sky for I regret having made them. But Noach found favor in the sight of Hashem." The world was steeped in evil and was not worthy of existence. Only Noach found favor. Had there been no Noach, Hashem would have destroyed His creation.

(continued on page 6)

(Noach cont. from pg. 1)

Weekly Parsha

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Me for on their account the world is consumed with violence. I will destroy them with the land. (Sefer Beresheit 6:13)

Three stages in humanity's demise

Parshat Noach deals with the Deluge and its aftermath. The description of the events that led to Hashem's decision to destroy most of humanity begins in the final verses of Parshat Beresheit. The Torah describes humanity's degeneration as a three step process.[1] The initial step is described in Parshat Beresheit. In this stage, sexual mores were abandoned and adultery became commonplace.[2] According to the Sages, the abandonment of these mores ultimately resulted in sexual deviancy.[3] At this juncture, the Torah describes Hashem extending to humanity a period of one hundred twenty years in which to repent. If humanity does not repent by the close of this period, then it will experience a severe but unspecified consequence.[4] The second step in the process of humanity's demise is described as a shift in the focus and values of humankind. In this second stage, no new degenerate behaviors are described; instead, this second stage is described as an obsessive preoccupation with the pursuit of the lusts developed in the first stage. In response to this second stage, Hashem specifies the consequence awaiting humanity. If humanity does not reverse its course, then it will be annihilated.[5] Parshat Noach describes the final stage of humanity's deterioration. In this stage society begins to collapse as violence proliferates. At this point, Hashem initiates the process that will eventually climax with the Deluge.[6]

The concurrence of sexual deviance and idolatry

Our Sages comment that the abandonment of sexual morality was accompanied by an adoption of idolatrous practices.[7] Of course, it is possible that the introduction and proliferation of idolatry in conjunction with the abandonment of sexual barriers was coincidental. However, the possibility of an interrelationship between these two forms of deterioration deserves consideration. Sexual abandon and the violence that ultimately lead to social collapse are both expressions of an inability or unwillingness to exercise control and restraint.

In contrast, idolatry is a theological error. The ancient idolaters believed that Hashem exists; however, He wishes that we serve Him through the worship of His ministers – the stars, constellations, the sun, and the moon.[8] Why would a collapse of self-control and the consequential hedonistic behavior be accompanied by a theological miscalculation?

The G-d of the Torah
The Torah approach to understand G-d and relating to Him is unique in two respects:

1. The Torah requires that we discover and encounter G-d as an objective reality. This means, we understand G-d as the intelligence evidenced in the majesty, and complex intricacy of the universe[9] and as Hashem who revealed Himself to the Jewish people and humanity in an unprecedented and never repeated public revelation at Sinai.[10] The Torah opens by presenting G-d as the solution to the mystery of the universe's origin. The Torah's narrative continues by describing the unfolding of the Creator's plan for humanity which reaches its climax with the Sinai Revelation. Both creation and Revelation are carefully presented in the Torah as objective truths and not as legends or traditions. We are invited – indeed we are compelled – to confirm for ourselves the validity of these truths.



2. The nature of our encounter with Hashem informs the manner in which we serve or worship Him. We do not determine the form of acceptable worship or service based upon our own needs. Instead, we must submit to His will and serve Him as He requires and commands.

These two paradigms are antithetical to idolatry. Maimonides explains that idolatry evolved from the simplistic reasoning that humanity should fashion its service to Hashem after the manner in which a human king wishes to be served. A mortal king expects and demands that his subjects revere and serve his ministers as an expression of their veneration for and obedience to their king. The early idolaters applied this model to service to Hashem and established worship of stars, constellations, and other creations that they understood to be G-d's ministers as a fitting means of serving

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Hashem.[11] However, this simplistic analysis is essentially and deeply flawed. It diverts our encounter with G-d from the objective framework. It refashions the worshiper's perception of G-d. G-d is no longer the unfathomable cause of all existence. He is replaced by the more familiar model of the mortal king. The idolater may still understand G-d as the Creator. But he relates to G-d as a more powerful or exalted version of the familiar mortal king. In other words, in forming a relationship with G-d, the idolater forsakes the objective for the familiar.

Similarly, the idolater's worship of G-d is no longer predicated upon the desire to fulfill His wishes and directives. Instead, it is designed to create a relationship with G-d that feels familiar and comfortable to the worshiper – a relationship that serves the needs of the servant. Worship loses its very essence. It is not an expression of the worshiper's submission to G-d. It is a process designed to serve the needs of the worshiper to relate to a G-d who is familiar and easily accessible. Ultimately, the idolater has reworked his concept of G-d so that rather being an objective reality, G-d has been transformed into a projection of the needs of the idolater.

The path from idolatry to sexual immorality

Our relationship with Hashem demands that we look past our personal and subjective feelings and seek truth. We are called upon to search for and devote ourselves to a relationship with a G-d whose nature we cannot fathom and whose wisdom we cannot penetrate. We are commanded to resist the temptation to refashion Hashem and thereby reduce Him to a G-d to whom we can more easily relate. The idolater rejects these imperatives. His most fundamental relationship – his relationship with his creator is nothing more than a projection of his personal needs. The idolater who has fled from objective reality and retreated into a reality of his own imagination and construction is predisposed to flawed moral judgments. In his relationship with G-d, his feeling and personal needs have already triumphed over his grasp of objective reality. It is not remarkable that the same obsession with personal need may also obliterate any sexual restraints.

The path from sexual immorality to idolatry

However, the path from sexual immorality to idolatry is even more direct. Our relationship with Hashem requires that we hold in check our desires to the extent that they color our perceptions of reality. The intellect does not easily attain this

freedom from the influence of desire and instinct. The intellect fights a pitched battle to attain its freedom. Even if and when it liberates itself, it must constantly be on the lookout. Its triumph is never so complete that it can let down its guard. If a person over-indulges his desires and abandons restraint, then the battle becomes more desperate and the intellect quickly loses ground to the person's feelings, desires, and instincts. Sexual immorality and the discard of sexual boundaries represent surrender to desire and instinct. A person who adopts this lifestyle will quickly lose any and all ability to apply an unfettered intellect to the objective assessment of reality. A hedonist, totally immersed in the pursuit of pleasure, is not capable of profound intellectual cognition. He is certainly not prepared to form a relationship with a Creator who reveals himself to the intellect as the inscrutable cause of all existence. Also, it is unimaginable that this person can enter into a relationship with his Creator predicted upon submission to objective truth.

In summary, there is ample reason to assume that the moral disintegration of the generation that experienced the Deluge and its adoption of idolatry are interrelated. The two forms of degeneracy actually complement and support one another. Idolatry encourages immorality. Idolatry represents a flight from and rejection of objective reality. Objective reality is replacement with personal subjective perception. Once this occurs, the idolater is predisposed to self-indulgent behavior and moral decline. Immorality breeds idolatry. The hedonistic lifestyle is antithetical to humanity's encounter with its Creator. This encounter requires us to think deeply and clearly. The hedonist is ill-prepared for this endeavor.

Dedicated to the memory of Sam Owen

The Limits of Our Understanding, A Message of Comfort

The sixth day of Creation was "very good"

Last week we read Parshat Beresheit. The parasha describes the creation and formation of the universe in seven days or stages. The description of each stage ends with Hashem observing that the completed stage was "good". However, at the completion of the sixth day, the Torah records that Hashem saw that the day's creation was "very good". Our Sages are intrigued by the distinction made between the first five stages which Hashem characterized as "good" and His pronouncement upon the sixth day – that the product of the that day was "very good". Midrash Rabbah records that many Sages interpreted the term "very" as an allusion to some element of the universe created that day which is not specifically mentioned in the

Torah. These Sages proceed to offer suggestions of possible elements of creation – not explicitly mentioned in the Torah – that were included in the creation of the sixth day. One Sage suggests that the term "very good" alludes to death which was introduced and incorporated into creation of the sixth day.

The Midrash continues and explains that death plays an important role in our individual and collective development. It reminds us that we are limited creatures. It encourages a degree of humility. We realize that our lives in this world are finite and this recognition informs and helps fashion or self-perception and our values. We naturally dread and fear our own demise, but our cognizance of our mortality is crucial to our spiritual, moral, and perhaps, every aspect of our personal and collective development.

According to the Midrash, death is part of creation. It is as much a part of the nature as the rising of the sun and the gravitational pull of the moon upon the oceans. The Creator reveals Himself to us in the complexity and intricacy of the universe. He is revealed in the movement of the constellations and the rhythm of the tides. He is evidenced in seasonal migration of a flock of geese and in the tenacious survival of brilliantly designed sea creatures in the depths of the deepest oceans. He declares Himself with the birth of a child, with the development of that helpless child into a functioning adult. And death also is an expression of Hashem's meticulous and judicious design of the universe.

But we realize that the very laws that Hashem created to sustain us sometimes turn into our cruel adversaries. The forces that shaped the continents upon which we have built our societies produce earthquakes and seismic events that have devastated entire communities and cultures. The complex elements of climate that provide the rains and warmth that nourish our crops can suddenly produce terrible storms or devastating droughts. The antibodies that day after day protect our bodies against deadly disease can turn against us and destroy our own organs. This realization compels us to recognize our dependence of Hashem. It is the catalyst that moves us to prayer and prompts us to consider our actions and our behaviors before our Creator.

Sometimes our prayers are answered. Sometimes they seem to go unnoticed. There are occasions when we realize only after a long period of time that the response we mistook for silence was really an expression of Hashem's kindness and mercy. Finally, there are times when Hashem seems to hide from our prayers and ignore our

(continued on next page)

(Noach continued from previous page)

Weekly Parsha

pleas. We pray knowing only what we want for ourselves. Hashem responds knowing what is good for us and for all humankind.

The Navi describes Chizkiyahu as more righteous than any of the Kings of Yehudah that preceded him. He conducted an extensive campaign to elevate the spiritual life of the Jewish people; he devoted his life to Hashem and serving his nation; he was scrupulous in his service of Hashem and observance of the commandments. In response to his righteousness, Hashem delivered Chizkiyahu and the remnant of Israel from the dominance and conquest of the Kingdom of Ashur and bestowed his blessings upon the Jewish nation and its king.

Chizkiyahu was 39 years old when he was stricken by a mortal illness. He turned to Hashem and prayed that He spare him. Hashem responded to Chizkiyahu's pleas. Through the prophet Yeshayahu, Hashem told Chizkiyahu that He had granted him fifteen more years of life. Chizkiyahu arose from his deathbed believing that his prayers had been completely answered.

Knowledge of Chizkiyahu's unusual success and achievements spread through the region. The King of Bavel sent a delegation of high-ranking ministers with gifts to Chizkiyahu as an expression of his admiration and esteem for the King of Yehudah. Chizkiyahu treated his important guests to a grand tour of his treasures. He showed his visitors all of the riches of his kingdom and the wealth that had been amassed during his reign.

In response to this episode, Yishayahu returned to Chizkiyahu and told him that he had sinned gravely. He had been presented with an opportunity to extol to his guests the greatness of Hashem. They had been sent to Chizkiyahu because their king – the King of Bavel – was astounded by Chizkiyahu's achievements. He was seeking an explanation, an accounting, for these phenomenal accomplishments. Chizkiyahu had been presented with an unparalleled opportunity to sanctify the name of Hashem by explaining that He was the source and cause of all of his success. But he squandered this opportunity. Instead of exalting Hashem, he glorified himself. Yishayahu proceeded to announce the punishment that Hashem had decreed. In days to come, Bavel would seize the treasure that Chizkiyahu had amassed. Chizkiyahu's children would be exiled and become servants of the King of Bavel. Chizkiyahu acknowledged his sin and accepted the justice of Hashem's judgment.

What possessed Chizkiyahu to waste this opportunity to glorify the G-d to whom he had devoted his life, the G-d that had rescued him from his adversaries and delivered him from sure death? Perhaps, the constant adversity with which Chizkiyahu was confronted fostered his profound awareness of his own limits and his reliance upon Hashem. As ruler of a relatively minor kingdom surrounded by hostile neighbors, he accepted and embraced his dependence upon Hashem for survival and prosperity. Paradoxically, the very adversity that compelled him to turn to Hashem was one of the cornerstones of his righteousness. Once success had been secured, peace established, and his own life was vouchsafed, this cornerstone became unstable. Awareness of Hashem and his dependence upon His kindness receded just enough for Chizkiyahu's own ego to emerge.

The Navi is communicating to us a profound lesson. We pray to Hashem for the fulfillment of our desires. But we can never know the extent to which our prayers have been answered or if they have been ignored. Seeming answers may be less or more generous than

we realize. And the response that seems to be absolute silence may be the greatest act of mercy. ■

[1] Rav Yisroel Chait, Dor HaMabul and Dor Haflagah, part 1 (YBT TTL #C-015).

[2] Sefer Beresheit 6:1-2.

[3] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 6:2.

[4] Sefer Beresheit 6:3.

[5] Sefer Beresheit 6:5-7.

[6] Sefer Beresheit 6:11-14.

[7] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 6:11.

[8] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam/Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Avodat Kochavim 1:1.

[9] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam/Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah 1:1.

[10] Rav Aharon HaLeyve, Sefer HaChinuch, Introduction.

[11] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam/Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Avodat Kochavim 1:1.

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(Babel continued from page 1)

Weekly Parsha

At this point, things seem innocuous enough. The Torah then continues (ibid 3-4):

"They said one to another, 'Come (Havva), let us mold bricks and bake them thoroughly.' They then had bricks to use as stone, and the clay for mortar. Then they said, 'Come (Havva), we will build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach the heavens. Thus we will make ourselves a name, so that we will not be scattered all over the face of the earth'."

Upon completion of the city and tower, God becomes involved and the rest is history.

There is a subtle issue that needs to be raised after looking through these verses--why does the Torah tell us, in detail, their idea to make bricks and mortar (verse 3)? Is it crucial we know the exact building process that took place to make the city and tower? The key point to the story would seem to be the erection of the city/tower, not the assembling of materials.

This question becomes even stronger when looking at the similar wording in each verse. The term "havva" is used both in verse 3 and 4. Rashi explains "havva" as follows (ibid 3):

"Prepare yourselves." Wherever {Hebrew Ref} appears it means "prepare," meaning that they should prepare themselves and become united for some work, or plan, or some undertaking."

It would therefore seem that there were two distinct "works" or "plans" in this story--the first being the fabrication of the bricks, and the second the construction of the city/tower. One can understand how a "plan" was necessary for the city/tower. However, why is it imperative to have a "plan" for the brick production?

It is first important to have a clear idea of the background of this story. On a cursory level, the people's wish to build a tower to "reach the heavens" seems absurd.

But the Ibn Ezra (ibid 3) emphasizes that it is a mistake to assume that these people were stupid, all possessing an infantile notion of somehow "reaching the heavens" using a tower. Additionally, they were not afraid of the potential of destruction (i.e., flood) due to the covenant established with Noah. The point here is that to look at these people as a primitive, ignorant group, exemplified by a foolish attempt at thinking their tower could reach the heavens, is an incorrect approach.

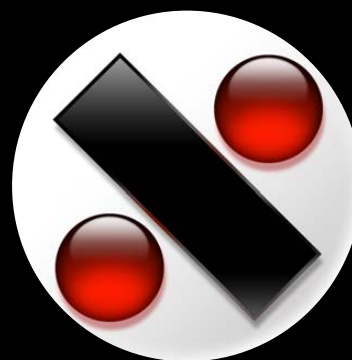
With that said, what exactly was the nature of their error? The objective of this tower, as expressed by the Torah, was to "make ourselves a name." The Talmud (Sanhedrin 109a) explains that this means their intention was idolatrous. Of course, one must ask: where is there any indication of idolatry in their actions? There were no idols, no physical representations of God --merely a city and a tower. The Talmud is teaching us an important insight into idolatry. In this case of the Dor Haflaga, mankind developed a distorted sense of self, an overestimation of their importance and power. It is this societal egocentrism that eventually leads to a denial of God, as man misconstrues his position in the universe vis a vis God. Idolatry should not be viewed merely as the action of bowing to idols; instead, it is an ideology which begins with man viewing himself in a manner incommensurate with objective reality.

This drive to idolatry is found in diverse situations, each with a unique path leading to the same terrible result. What makes the Dor Haflaga different? It is through the "extra" verse that we may be able to understand. Egocentrism does not just spontaneously appear. As the post-flood society developed and became cohesive, they became more advanced. Naturally, a creative drive emerged, an ambition ingrained in any developing society. The desire to create is expressed in verse 3, detailing

their construction of bricks. There was nothing harmful whatsoever in the fabrication of bricks and mortar -- if anything, it reflected their industrial effectiveness and efficiency. But it is what they attached their creative energy to, as outlined in verse 4, which ultimately led to their downfall. They built the city and tower, not to benefit mankind, but to enrich their distorted viewpoint. The city and tower were physical expressions of their overestimation of self. So in this instance, it is the misuse of creativity that is the expression of idolatry. Ultimately, God punishes them in a manner that breaks their unity, undermining their objective.

The ideas expressed here have great relevance even today. Mankind has an inherent creative faculty, one that is intrinsic to our definition as a species. This faculty allows for intellectual

progress, as demonstrated in fields ranging from the sciences to medicine to cosmology. When man's creative energy serves to increase his understanding of God, and his own place in the universe, he becomes a more perfected creature. However, there are times when mankind revels in this inventive power, when the creative output merely serves to increase an outsized view of the self. We see it in the rise and fall of empires, marked by tremendous creative advances, yet often linked to a thirst for immortality and power. Looking at the story of the tower, we should realize how our ability to create, that same ability which differentiates us as a species, has the potential to be our downfall. This gift must be understood for its intended purpose, enriching mankind while assisting in a greater understanding of the Creator. ■



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Why did Noah find favor? Because "...Noah was a righteous man, flawless in his generations." Judaism believes in the capacity of the individual to withstand the influence of an immoral environment. Noah was an independent thinker who eschewed the animalistic lifestyle of his society and chose the path of truth and morality for himself and his family. One person can make a difference. He can save the world. You would think that Noah would be above reproach. Judaism, however, is a religion of honesty and truth whose standards are very high. The Rabbis question the implication of the words "...flawless in his generations." Some say it is intended as a compliment, i.e. had he lived in the time of Abraham he would have been even greater. However, other Rabbis take it as a criticism, i.e. compared to the evil people of his time he was righteous, however, had he lived in the time of Abraham he would not be considered anything special. At first glance this negative interpretation seems unduly harsh. What moral weakness did the Rabbis detect in Noah which led them to downgrade his piety and place him below the level of Abraham?

In this week's Haftorah, Hashem refers to the Flood as the "waters of Noah." In Hebrew the word for waters mei can also mean 'from'. Thus, exegetically the verse is saying that the Flood is from or because of Noah. The Rabbis are holding Noah responsible for the waters that inundated the world. At first glance this is incomprehensible. Noah was the Tzaddik. He saved mankind. In what sense is he liable for the calamity which engulfed the world?

The Rabbis don't mean to disparage Noah. He was a great person who had the strength to separate himself from the corruption which surrounded him. However, he was only able to save himself. He did not go out and

correct others, by showing them the evil of their ways and leading them to the truth. In that sense alone, he is depicted as "responsible" for the deluge. However, they don't mean that he was a selfish person who didn't care about others. He certainly did! He just lacked the ability to mingle with the crowd and turn them around. Had he joined together with them he would have been corrupted by their ways. In order to save himself he had to separate from the evildoers. Noah was correct not to sacrifice himself in a vain effort to save others. However, there is a higher level, that of

Abraham who was a "stranger and sojourner" among the people of his society. His knowledge was so firm and love of truth so great that he could mingle freely with the most corrupt people and be a source of light and inspiration to them. Abraham represents the highest level of righteousness and compassion. The mission of the Jewish people is to be a source of light and moral instruction to the nations. To fulfill it, we must strive to rise above the "morality of the moment" and elucidate the eternal truths of Torah.

The story of Noah has great relevance to our lives. We live in an era of technological supremacy and moral depravity. Like the generation of the Flood instinctual gratification is the dominant theme of the culture and the ability to restrain our primal instincts has been seriously eroded. Our children are being raised in a dangerous moral climate. The story of Noah provides hope and inspiration. It illustrates the power of the divine soul which gives us the capacity to recognize truth, rise above the enticements of the time, and lead a righteous life. Let no one say that he can't resist the tide and that he is only one person. It is a wonderful thing to save others, but first and foremost, one must save oneself.

In doing so, you might save the world. ■

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Metaphor

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

Jessie: The end of the midrash on Baba Metzia 59b is very odd. Why would the banishment (cherem) of R. Eliezer be considered wrongful oppression (ona'ah) such that if R. Eliezer said tachanun, God would immediately avenge others on behalf of R. Eliezer?

Rabbi: The story is quite detailed...let's review.

In a specific case, Rabbi Eliezer argued against the rest of the Rabbis, holding the position that certain foods were permissible, while the Rabbis argued that the foods were unfit for consumption. The Torah teaches that in cases where Rabbinic opinions are divided, we must rule in accord with the majority. This Torah principle makes sense, for this process ensures a better chance that we are acting in accord with the Torah's intent. Certainly, if one person contradicts the many, we can safely assume the one person to have erred, and all the other Rabbis to have arrived at the truth. Since all but one Rabbi side with an opinion, the Torah holds "deviation" to be the "infrequent" occurrence among those who uphold Torah (the Rabbis). The Torah finds it more difficult to suggest that all the Rabbis deviated except for one. Thus, we follow the majority opinion.

In our case, Rebbe Eliezer was the minority view that opposed all others. Therefore, his view must not be followed. Surprisingly, Rabbi Eliezer pushed forth his opinion four times, stating time after time, "If the law is in accord with me, let such and such happen" to validate his position. And each time, what R. Eliezer said should happen, had occurred.

First a carob tree leaped 100 cubits, then the waters flowed backwards, the walls of the Torah study started to fall, and even a heavenly voice endorsed R. Eliezer! Amazing, if taken literally. But of course, each case is a metaphor. Why do I say these are metaphors? This is because a "heavenly voice" saying R. Eliezer is correct, cannot be literal. For God will not contradict His Torah that teaches "Torah decisions are not in heaven". Therefore, God would not cause a voice to be heard saying otherwise. But as our Talmudic portion says this happened, it must not be taken literally. So how do we understand this?

R. Eliezer meant to convey that he was so certain of his position, that even the natural world complies with his findings. Thus, he said the carob tree should prove him right, and the tree "leaped 100 cubits". A tree represents a natural object. He said further, "let the waters prove me right" and the waters reversed their direction. Meaning, not only creation sided with him, but even natural "law" sided with Rabbi Eliezer's view. But the Rabbis didn't concede. So R. Eliezer continued, "If the law is as I say, let the Torah study hall walls fall down". And they started to do so, until R. Joshua halted them with his argument. The Talmud says the walls didn't return to their original position in respect to R. Eliezer, nor did they continue falling, in respect to R. Joshua's position. This means both Rabbis had merit. What was their "merit"?

There are in fact two realities:

1) Torah rulings made by man, and even if incorrect, they must be followed, and 2) what God knows to be certain truth. R. Eliezer was correct that the goal of Torah study is to arrive at truth. But he felt absolute truth – what God knows as true – must trump what man achieves through halacha. God is certainly correct! And R. Eliezer was convinced that he uncovered the absolute truth in this case. This is why he kept pushing forth his opinion, and this is what it means that all these "miracles" occurred. The Talmud is teaching that R. Eliezer did in fact uncover the truth, as the universe complied with that truth by way of metaphor. That's why the walls did as he said. This metaphoric portion means that R. Eliezer's Talmudic approach (walls of the study hall) were right on target. However, R. Joshua said that once Torah was given at Sinai, the principle now is that we must arrive at laws without God's intervention but only through man's knowledge via majority opinions. This rendered R. Eliezer's position as null. This is why the walls ceased to fall, in respect to R. Joshua's argument. But both Rabbis had merit, so the walls did not fall any further, but they also did not return upright. This metaphor means that both opinions possessed truth: R. Eliezer did uncover the absolute truth about this law, but R. Joshua was also correct in terms of how man must behave. His view

was that it is not man's task to live by God's absolute truths, but to use human intellect – however frail – and determine law in this manner alone.

The, the Talmud continues and says Rabbi Nassan found Elijah the prophet and asked what God was doing at that moment. Elijah said God was saying "My children have succeeded over Me, My children have succeeded over Me". This metaphor endorses the idea we just discussed, that God does know the absolute truth, but He gave man a Torah through which we are to determine our Torah behaviors (halacha) regardless if we do not arrive at what God knows to be true. That we "succeeded over God" means that Rabbi Joshua was right to dismiss any "heavenly signs" of truth and follow human reason alone. Although God knows what is "absolute" truth, man succeeds when following his frail mind, as this is God's plan. "Success" is therefore measured not in terms of the results (i.e., our matching God's knowledge), but the "process" – using intelligence and Torah principles as God desires. As man follows his mind, and this is all we have, we cannot function more perfectly. This is preferred over seeking to arrive at absolute truths, if the process does not follow Torah principles.

Eventually, Rabbi Akiva breaks the news to Rabbi Eliezer that his fellow Rabbis have distanced themselves a bit from him for his deviation. We then read "Wherever Rabbi Eliezer looked, that place was burned. This does not mean he possessed powers, but that R. Eliezer could no longer enjoy life, as if the earth was destroyed before his eyes.

"Rabbi Gamliel too was at sea and a storm threatened his life. He realized this was due to his rejection of Rabbi Eliezer for his not following the principle of 'Majority Rule'. Rabbi Gamliel stood and prayed to God, 'I did this (banishment of R. Eliezer) not for my honor or the honor of my father, but for Your honor that Torah not be destroyed.' The storm subsided."

Now we must ask, why would God cause this "storm", He knew that Rabbi Gamliel was in the right? Unless, this is yet another metaphor, detected from the clue found in the text: "Rabbi Gamliel too..." What does this word "too" indicate?

This account follows the metaphor that all places at which R. Eliezer looked, were burned. We can then say as follows: just as R. Eliezer was the cause of his own pain and the Earth was not literally burned, but rather offered him no happiness any more (as if burned)...so too, R. Gamliel was the cause of the storm. He must have been troubled over putting R. Eliezer through such grief, despite its necessity. R. Gamliel still felt for R. Eliezer, and was not careful about his sailing direction. He ended

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(Ona'ah continued from previous page)

Letters

up off course, in troubled waters. It wasn't until he collected himself through prayer, that the storm ceased. This was not a case of Divine interaction, but R. Gamliel "too" was the cause of his sorrow, just like R. Eliezer. Once R. Gamliel had presence of mind, we was able to avert the storm.

The final portion of this Talmudic discussion states that R. Eliezer's wife, Aima Shalom, never allowed R. Eliezer to express his grief by reciting the Tachanun prayer. Once, she thought it was the New Month (when Tachanun is not recited) and she left him at home. But she erred, as it was a typical weekday. She found R. Eliezer reciting Tachanun upon her return. Se said "My brother Rabbi Gamliel is dead." News then reached them that this was so. Surprised, R. Eliezer asked his wife Aima Shalom how she knew this, and she said she had a tradition from her family (she was a descendant of the princes from the house of David) that although other gates are closed, the gate of oppression is always open, and God knows and responds to those who are oppressed. Thus, as Rabbi Eliezer expressed the grieving Tachanun prayer, he must have also expressed some of his grief of being banished. Aima Shalom then surmised that God must have avenged her husbands oppressor, her brother Rabbi Gamliel, who initiated the banishment. That's why she said he is dead.

It took time Jessie, but now we can approach your question: "Why would the banishment of R. Eliezer be considered wrongful oppression (ona'ah) such that if R. Eliezer said tachanun, God would immediately avenge others on behalf R. Eliezer?"

As one of the Rishonim cite, R. Gamliel didn't truly banish R. Eliezer. Had Rabbi Gamliel truly banished Rabbi Eliezer for violating the principle of following the majority, you are right: why would Rabbi Gamliel pay a price of death for accurately following Torah, if banishment was warranted? Perhaps then, the fact that Rabbi Gamliel "died" (whatever this means here) means that there was no official banishment. And what occurred was mere oppression of a fellow Jew. Thus, one who oppresses his fellow, without acting in accord with laws of banishment, will himself be punished. Meaning, either cherem (banishment) or nothing at all. One is sinful if he acts with any hostility outside the parameters of Torah banishment. Perhaps R. Gamliel expressed some dismay at R. Eliezer without banishing him and this is called "ona'as devarim", verbal oppression.

Having come this far, can we explain why that is; that although other "gates" are closed, the gate of oppression is always open, meaning God knows and always responds to those who are verbally oppressed? ■

Man & HIS NEIGHBOR

Reader: 1) What is Judaism's definition of man?
2) How does Judaism view the importance of the interaction between a man and his neighbors?

Rabbi: Let us first define the term "definition": it is that which sets a thing apart from all else by isolating a character found nowhere else. Man cannot be simply defined as a living object, for so are plants and animals. Man is not defined as a being with will, for animals too have will...

God created man as the sole being with a soul. So the primary definition of man, is that he is a creation of God. All other descriptions (of man's nature, his design and his goals) are second in definition to his primary feature: that he "is". It may be asked: "Did God not create everything? So why is God's 'creation' of man central to man's definition?" The answer is as follows: man's realization of a Creator is primary to man's definition as a being that can comprehend the Creator. Man was not given intelligence to master the world, but to use the world as a means to draw towards God by studying His creation, His actions and His method of providence over mankind. Studying God's wisdom that permeates all man experiences, man finds the utmost fulfillment. If man ignores a life of intelligent pursuits and study, he will be frustrated, always assuming the next physical indulgence will finally make him happy. But he sees time and again that this fails.

Not only Judaism and the great Rabbis, but many fine thinkers arrived at the conclusion that man is defined as a rational being where wisdom satisfies him most. Newton, Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Noah, Adam and others were not Jews, yet they possessed the same faculty as all men and women: an intellect. They too realized that man is defined by his intellect, and his greatest joy is achieved when he or she ponders the universe and God's words of wisdom. We must appreciate that when the greatest minds like Moses and King Solomon spent their lives not amassing wealth, but in study and education, that there is something to this lifestyle worth uncovering through our own tutelage under the Rabbis.

1) What is Judaism's definition of man? It is not our definition, but "reality's" definition: Man is the only being possessing intelligence, where the use of

this faculty yields the greatest joy when realizing his Creator through wisdom.

2) How does Judaism view the importance of the interaction between a man and his neighbors?

First, without a species, individuals would not exist. Again, we learn that our "existence" is primary to our appreciation for others. We then appreciate it is God's will that "many" individuals exist. Our relationships with others must then be an expression of our realization of God's will, that others too exist. My ego must accept equality among all people. God created us all. Maintaining this perspective, man then arrives at further truths that proper conduct is God's will, since God desires their lives and happiness, and not just mine. I must not steal, rape, murder, oppress, deceive or treat any other human without justice and equality. Had I been the only human, I could maintain my illusion of importance, but a species teaches that I am no more significant than the next human. We all possess great importance. We are all created equal. Judaism does not view any human as less or more. The religious acceptance of our parents is irrelevant; it has no bearing on our potential.

Our interaction with others enables us to perfect ourselves. For with thought alone, we cannot say someone is "convinced" of, or values a given principle. This is why God gave commandments, so man might have a means through which he demonstrates his true convictions. Saying charity is good, is not like actually donating our hard-earned money. Thus actions are required to enable man to truly perfect his values.

Therefore, we require interaction with others to express our conviction in God's will, that others are to exist, and be treated well. This interaction is for the welfare of others, and for our own perfection, since we are perfected through a life that is in line with reality. And "reality", is only that, which God created or says is so. Apprehending the truth that all men are equal must be followed by physical actions that display this conviction. Living in isolation or ignoring such human interactions, we do not show our conviction that God is correct; that God desires the life and welfare of all others. And ignoring God means we waste our life.

We were created with intelligence, so we might study this Creator and follow His ways. No other creature has been gifted this opportunity. We have one life which can eventuate into an afterlife, as the philosophers and Judaism teach. In this afterlife, we are no longer restricted by a physical body and physical needs, so we can then attain an even deeper joy in the higher apprehension of greater knowledge of God. ■

Letters

the HERESY of God existing "in" the World "Tzimtzum"

*Failing to accept Prophets,
man heretically forces God into
a physical definition*

Rabbi Moshe Ben-Chaim

Reader: I am reader who appreciates your work and who has been learning from your site for many years.

Question: Can you offer a reasonable explanation for what the Rav wrote (Rosh Hashana Machzor, pages 350-51), based on the Pasuk of "Gavaso Godla Olam Meyhachil" – "His grandeur is more than the world can contain":

"The Kabbalists, especially the Ari HaKadosh and later the first Lehavitcher Rebbe, discuss how the creation of the world is based on the concept of Tzimtzum, or contraction. God, the Infinite, the Ein-sof, contracted Himself in order to allow the existence of the world. Otherwise, a finite world could not coexist with the Infinite. The Midrash (Shemos Rabbah 34:1) illustrates the concept of Tzimtzum by relating the

following; At the time Hashem instructed Moses to build Him a Mishkan, Moses was astonished, noting that Hashem's glory fills the upper and lower worlds; how would it be possible to build a Mishkan for His Presence? Moreover, he foresaw that King Solomon, after building the Temple, which was much larger than the Mishkan, similarly wondered how even that larger structure could contain Hashem's Presence (see 1 Kings 8:27).

Hashem responded, "I will descend and contract (Tzimtzum) My Divine Presence to fit within an area of one cubit (on top of the Ark between the two cherubs)." If Israel fulfills its mission as the chosen people, then God promises that He will perform this miracle of Tzimtzum (Derashot HaRav, pp 23-24).

Mystics mistakenly assert that man must strive to remove himself from his physical being, for how can the physical-biological stand within a holy place? Yet, because holiness is created by man, it is he who brings the glory of God into this world. A sacrifice is consecrated via man's designation. The Land of Israel became holy through man's conquest. By making a sanctuary for God, man sanctifies space, and through this creation of holiness, infinity contracts itself. Judaism has given the world the secret of Tzimtzum, contraction of the infinite within the finite, the transcendent within the concrete, the Divine within the realm of reality (Halachic Man, 99 47-48).

Rabbi: You quote, "God, the Infinite, the Ein-sof, contracted (tzimtzum) Himself in order to allow the existence of the world. Otherwise, a finite world could not coexist with the Infinite."

We must be loyal to God's words, "I am God, I do not change" (Malachi, 3:6) So any idea of "contraction" (tzimtzum) must not be applied to God's "existence" but rather, is either 1) metaphoric, or 2) refers to God's created, manifestation. Also, "To what shall you equate Me that I should be similar, says God?" (Isaiah, 40:25) Here, God states He has no similarity to the world, including location.

But that first quote as is "God, the Infinite..." is very misleading, and read simply, it suggests the heretical notion that the world and God share something common. In truth, the world doesn't exist "with" God as that quote states. Nor does the world have any affect on God. That too is heretical. These cannot be the words of the Rav, but an editor's addition. But there might be a way to talk about "tzimtzum" in another sense...

You also quote Medrash Rabbah, "Moses was astonished"... "how would it be possible to build a Mishkan for His Presence?" Of course, Medrash

Rabbah knows that Moshe did not view God spatially! Moshe's concern was how an Earthly, manmade structure, which is far less lofty than the heavens, can accurately and fully communicate God's glory to man. That is, if the heavens compromise God's greatness (finite heavens cannot contain God's infinite marvels) "certainly this house that I built" cannot relate God's greatness. Shlomo Hamelech says this openly (Kings I, 8:27) with emphasis on "that I built". That is, an edifice (art) is far less accurate in telling of God's greatness, than are the heavens (nature).

And you also quote the Rav, "By making a sanctuary for God, man sanctifies space, and through this creation of holiness, infinity contracts itself. Judaism has given the world the secret of Tzimtzum, contraction of the infinite within the finite, the transcendent within the concrete, the Divine within the realm of reality".

To my understanding, this means that through Torah adherence and sharing its ideas with others through our actions and objects of mitzvah, the Jew publicizes the infinite God in our finite world.

I do not feel Moshe and Shlomo were "concerned" about how truths of God would be successfully transmitted through the physical world, since they were the wisest men and knew Torah was true. Thus, God's command of building a Temple must contain truths. Radak teaches that Shlomo made his statement publicly, as he wished to halt a false notion before it laid roots. As he had just completed building the Temple, he was justifiably concerned that the nation might attribute some "presence" of God Himself "IN" Temple. Therefore Shlomo opens that verse with a rhetorical question, "Can God actually dwell on Earth?!" He is dissuading the nation from any false beliefs. The nation must have been overwhelmed and enamored by this gold and silver structure; the cherubim, the menorah and all the vessels. Shlomo was correct to head off dangerous[1] notions right away upon the Temple's completion. Radak[2] explains that the temple was meant to be a metaphor for God's will and honor. But God has no relationship with physical space, even His Temple.

God does not exist "with" the world, and thus, there is no need for Him to "make room for it" by contracting Himself. This heretical notion exists, since many individuals cannot view an existence that is outside of their senses. They feel everything has location, even God. From this first error, they make a second, suggesting God had to make room for the universe. ■

[1] The Talmud teaches that the instinctual drive is most powerful when tied to religious practice.

[2] Kings I, 8:27

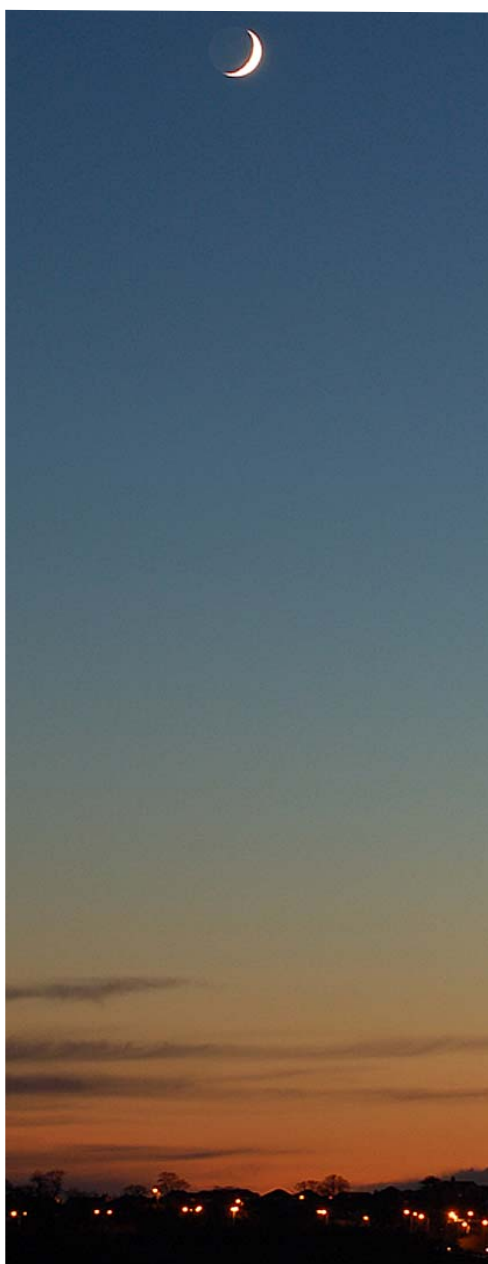
COMPLIMENTS

Torah & Nature

Sabbath/New Moon

G-d created two things; 'substances', and 'laws' governing those substances. On the first Sabbath, although all matter was complete, the laws governing their behavior could not be seen in their completion. For example, the Moon's orbit of the Earth is about 30 days. By definition, on the first Sabbath, the fulfillment of the Moon's cycle had 23 more days to go. In truth, all of Creation could not be witnessed on the first Sabbath, as many of G-d's laws would not display their complete cycles of behavior for months, and for the planets and stars, even years.

What happens on the Sabbath/New Moon combination? On this day, both systems coincide, displaying a completion of both; G-d's physical creation of substances (Sabbath) and the fulfillment or completion of the universe's



laws (New Moon). On this special day, it is appropriate to offer this unique praise to G-d, "You formed Your world from long ago": "formation" of the world corresponds to the Sabbath, but "long ago" corresponds to a system which although enacted at a prior time, only fulfills its mission "in time". "Long ago" is a reference to time, not substance, describing that which only bears G-d's creation, after some time, i.e., the behavioral aspect of Creation. Physical creation can be beheld in a glance, but a system of operation unfolds its design only through a 'span' of time.

Both aspects of Creation are witnessed on this special Sabbath/New Moon: Sabbath recalls physical creation, and the new Moon testifies to G-d's laws operating in their completion. ■

Weekly Parsha



Beresheit

RABBI BERNIE FOX

The Creation Account and the Right of the Jewish People to the Land of Israel

In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the earth. (Beresheit 1:1)

The Torah begins with an account of the creation of the heavens and the earth. Rashi asks an important question. The Torah is a work of law. It presents a system of six hundred thirteen mitzvot. It would seem appropriate for the Torah to concentrate on the objective of teaching us the commandments. Why does the Torah begin with an account of creation? Rashi provides a response from the Sage Rav Yitzchak. He explains that Hashem promised the Land of Israel to Bnai Yisrael. However, the Jewish people would not occupy an empty region. They would dispossess other nations.

The Torah teaches justice. How can we justify the seizure of the Land of Israel from these nations? The account of creation provides the response. Hashem created the universe. Therefore, He has the right to apportion the earth to various nations. Also, He has the authority to command the dispossession of these nations. We did not take possession of the Land of Israel on our own authority. We were commanded by Hashem to possess the Land. Because it is His creation, He has the right and authority to apportion the Land of Israel to the Jewish people.[1]

Rashi's answer is difficult to understand. To whom is Rav Yitzchak's response directed? Certainly, Rav Yitzchak did not expect the nations dispossessed by the Bnai Yisrael to be so impressed by this argument that they would meekly abandon their homelands! These nations were idol worshippers. They did not accept the authenticity of the Revelation and the Torah. They would quickly dismiss any assertion that the Creator had promised their ancestral homes to the Jewish people. They would never acknowledge that Hashem – the true owner – had confiscated their land from them.

Alternatively, if Rav Yitzchak is directed his comments to the other nations of the world that would witness Bnai Yisrael's conquest of Cana'an, then his argument has proven completely ineffective. The nations of the world have repeatedly contested the right of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel. Even in our own day, despite the United Nation's creation of Jewish homeland in the Land of Israel, the State of Israel is arguably the most politically beleaguered, and derided nation in the world. Israel receives more criticism for its measured responses to ongoing terror attacks than Sudan receives for sponsoring the massacre of its own citizens. And although some nations are willing to acknowledge the legitimacy of the State of Israel, barely any nation are Israel's allies or supporters. Many of these nations that condemn Israel and question our right to the Land of Israel are familiar with the Torah, its account of creation, and its record of Hashem's promises to the Jewish people. Yet, these nations do not recognize the Jewish people's Divine right to the Land!

Israel's former Chief Rabbi Rav Yisrael Meir Lau explains that we must carefully study Rav Yitzchak's comments in order to answer this question. Rav Yitzchak supports his views with a verse. This verse from Tehilim – Psalms –

(continued on next page)



states that Hashem revealed the power of His works to His nation in order to give to them an inheritance of the nations.[2] It is obvious from Rav Yitzchak's comments that he understands this verse to mean that Hashem included in the Torah the account of creation in order to facilitate Bnai Yisrael's possession of the Land of Israel. In other words, the account of creation provides a legal basis and ethical justification for our claim to the Land. However, Rav Lau suggests that a more careful consideration of Rav Yitzchak's passage is required if we are to fully understand his position. The passage states that Hashem revealed the story of creation to His nation in order to bolster its claim to the Land. But if the purpose of the creation account is to provide a response to the protests of the nations of the world, then Hashem should have directed the message of His revelation to these nations not to the Jewish people. Apparently, in order Bnai Yisrael needed to receive the Torah and its account of creation in order to prepare the Jewish people for the challenge of conquering the Land, possessing it, and responding to inevitable criticism. Rav Yitzchak is not suggesting the nations of the world will be convinced of the Torah's argument. Rav Yitzchak does not maintain that the message is addressed to these nations. Instead, the Torah is speaking to Bnai Yisrael!

According to Rav Yitzchak, Hashem recognized that the morality of the Jewish people would be challenged by the nations. He also realized that Bnai Yisrael would be sensitive to this reproach. After all, we are a moral people. Ethical values and moral conduct are fundamental elements of the Jewish spiritual identity. We cannot disregard or ignore challenges to our ethics of the conduct and actions. Therefore, we need to know that, despite all accusations, we have a Divine right to the Land of Israel. For this reason, the Torah teaches us the basis of our claim.

In our time, when blessed with possession of the Land of Israel, we can appreciate the wisdom of Rav Yitzchak's lesson. The world does not recognize our right to the Land of Israel. We must work to overcome this obstacle. We must also strive to live in peace in the Land. This may require accommodation and compromise. To succeed, we must be steadfast and confident in our right to the Land. We cannot meet and overcome the overwhelming opposition with which we are constantly confronted if we ourselves are uncertain of our rights. We will never succeed in retaining the Land; we will not have the commitment to make the

physical, and emotional sacrifices, if we are not certain of our own unassailable right to the Land. We need to know that the Creator promised us the Land of Israel. No other nation's occupation of the Land supersedes this Divine right.[3]



The Meaning of Hashem's Spirit Hovering over the Waters

And the earth was without form and in confusion with darkness on the face of the depths. And the spirit of the Lord hovered on the waters' surface. (Beresheit 1:2)

The Torah describes the spirit of Hashem hovering over the primordial waters. This is clearly an allegory. However, its meaning is not easily grasped. The meaning of this pasuk can best be understood in conjunction with the previous pasuk. The Torah begins with the statement that Hashem created the heavens and earth. The terms heavens and earth are proceeded with the article *et*. This article generally implies some inclusion. Our Sages explain that, in this case, the term *et* is intended to include all derivatives. In other words, the pasuk should be understood as stating that creation began with the forming of the heavens and the earth and all of their derivatives. The derivatives are the stars, plants, and other elements that came forth on the subsequent days.[4]

Now this seems very confusing. The first pasuk asserts that the heavens and earth with all

of their elements were formed on the first day. The subsequent pesukim assert that these various elements emerged during the full course of the six days of creation. Our pasuk resolves this difficulty.

The initial creation contained all that emerged on the subsequent days. However, these elements existed only in potential. This is the meaning of the earth's formless and confused form. The darkness also represents this concept. In darkness, individual forms cannot be discerned. These terms describe the initial creation. The various elements had not yet emerged into their actual form. The Divine influence was required in order to transform the potential to actual.

Based on this interpretation of creation, Rabaynu Avraham ben HaRambam explains the "hovering" mentioned in the pasuk. The term used for hovering is associated with the bird hovering over its nest. Why is this term used to describe the Divine influence? A bird hovers over its nest in order to protect and nurture its eggs. The eggs contain a living entity - in potential. Through the efforts of the mother, hovering over the eggs, the potential of the eggs emerges in the form of offspring. In a similar manner, the earth included its eventual elements in potential. G-d's "hovering" represents His influence in converting potential to actual.

It is interesting to note the correspondence between this understanding of creation and the modern scientific view. Science maintains that the building blocks for all that now exists were formed during the initial creation. Over time, the universe we now see eventually emerged. This occurred through the organization of these primitive elements. However, science is faced with the challenge of explaining the emergence of design and organization from chaos. The Chumash provides the resolution of this riddle. G-d's influence caused the normal pattern of the physical universe to be reversed and organization emerged from chaos. ■

[1] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 1:1.

[2] Tehilim 111:6

[3] Rav Yisrael Meir Lau, Why Does the World Contest Our Right to Eretz Yisrael?

[4] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 1:14.