**In the beginning, Israel ‘created’**

**To start from the beginning**

In the passages describing creation, we find neither commandments nor ethical principles, only an extensive description of the process of the creation. Apparently, it is important to begin with the fact that the world is created.

**“In the beginning, God created heaven and earth.”** This verse sums up the relationship between the spiritual and the physical – it is the spiritual that produced the physical, the sacred established reality. Opening with “In the beginning” clarifies the telos of the sacred, which is not only to guide life and purify it, but also to fashion, produce and create. Indeed, the desire to mold the creation and innovate is already evident in the first commandment which Israel was commanded: **“This** **month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you”** (Shemot 12:2). Israel sanctifies the seasons, Israel fashions the character of the seasons.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Rav Kook takes note of this (Orot, Orot Yisrael,7:13):

It is Israel’s unique worldview that makes this nation a single entity in the world, and this perspective is rooted in the creation of the world, as per the Torah’s instruction, **“In the beginning, God created heaven and earth.”** This unique perspective is the basis for all the practical commandments.

Moreover, the commandments, which are the primary purpose of the Torah, are connected to the functioning of the laws of nature. The fact that it is the sacred that produced nature establishes a dependency between the spiritual level of the nation of Israel and creation’s ongoing functioning. This finds expression in the holy land, the land of Israel.

**The land of Genesis**

The connection between the passages on creation and the inheritance of the land of Israel is already noted by Rashi in his first comment on the Torah.[[2]](#footnote-2) This is the land on which creation occurs continually. In the land of Israel, nature is always in a state of renewal, contingent on Israel’s actions:

If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments, I will grant your rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field their fruit… But if you reject My laws… I will make your skies like iron and your earth like copper… Your land shall not yield its produce, nor shall the trees of the land yield their fruit.

(Vayikra 26)

Nature and time are constantly changing and being created by means of human action. Creation is an ongoing process which did not conclude or cease with the six days of creation.

Although Parashat Bereshit is extremely universal and might have been addressed to all of mankind, it was nonetheless incorporated into the Torah which is intended specifically for the people of Israel, who continue the task of the Creator in their lives.

**God created – to do**

According to the interpretation of the holy ‘Or Hachaim,’ just as the connotation of the term referring to Elimelech, namely “**the husband [*Ish*] of Naomi”** (Rut 1:3) is ‘Naomi’s ruler,’[[3]](#footnote-3) so too, the term “**Man [*Ish*] of God”** (Devarim 33:1) referring to our master, Moses, connotes that Moses was, so to speak, the Holy One, blessed be He’s ruler, possessing the power to create.

According to the Malbim, this same capacity is expressed in the verse: **“And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because on it God ceased from all the work of creation that He had created in order to do.” God created** and gave us the responsibility of continuing and **doing** by means of the Torah and its commandments.

When King David composed the psalm praising the Torah (Tehillim 19), he prefaced it by describing the might of the heavenly luminaries, starting with the sun: **“The heavens declare the glory of God… nothing escapes his heat.”** It is only afterwards that David goes on to praise the Torah: **“****The teaching of the Lord is perfect, renewing life; The precepts of the Lord are just, rejoicing the heart; the instruction of the Lord is lucid, making the eyes light up.”** We first discuss those things that are already established and exist in a fixed state like the stars, and afterwards we deal with that which we create.

The light of the sun is minor compared to the light which is created by means of the Torah.[[4]](#footnote-4) The sun’s light already exists, **“and there is nothing new beneath the sun.”** The sun provides warmth and has an impact, but it is static. By contrast, the light of the pure soul, the light of the heart, the light of knowledge and virtue is constantly revitalized. **“They are renewed every morning— ample is Your faithfulness”** (Eichah 3:23). Accordingly, in the morning prayers, we place the blessing of “Creator of the luminaries” to “Eternal love” which deals with Torah. The responsibility which rests on the shoulders of Israel is to innovate and create: “I **have put My words in your mouth and sheltered you with My hand; I, who planted the skies and made firm the earth, Have said to Zion: You are My people”** (Yishayahu 51:16). **“You will decree and it will be fulfilled”** (Iyyov 22:28).

The Torah does not open with the passages on creation in order to prove the existence of God, nor for the sake of scientific research about nature, but rather in order to define the nation of Israel’s mission as creators, as partners in the creation – conferring blessing on all creatures out of a sense of awesome responsibility.

1. Unlike Shabbat which is predetermined and static (Hulin 101b), the entire cycle of the year is set by the establishment of Rosh Chodesh (the beginning of the lunar month) which is determined by Israel: “Israel, who sanctify the seasons” (Berachot 49a). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “R. Yitzchak said: The Torah ought to have begun with ‘This month shall mark for you,’ which is the first commandment that Israel was commanded. Why then did it open with ‘In the beginning’? Because of ‘The power of His works he told to His people [in order] to give them an inheritance of the nations’ (Tehillim 111:6). So that if the nations of the world say to Israel, ‘You are thieves, for you conquered the lands of the seven nations,’ they can reply that the entire world belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He. He created it and gave it to whom He saw fit. He gave it to them when it pleased Him, and He took it from them when it pleased Him and gave it to us.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Rashi ad loc: “And it says, ‘the husband [*Ish*] of Naomi,’ that is to say that he was her husband and dominated her, and she was subservient to him.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. R. Yehuda Halevi, in his work, the Kuzari (II:52), notes the implication of this prefacing: “The Rabbi: You see how David introduces the praise of the Torah, when he first speaks of the sun in the psalm: ‘The heavens declare the glory of God.’ He describes how ubiquitous its light, how pure its body, how proper its path, and beautiful its countenance. This is followed by the words: ‘The teaching of the Lord is perfect, renewing life,’ and that which is contingent on it, as if he wished to convey that one should not wonder at such a description. For the Torah is purer, more resplendent, more widely known, more exalted, and more useful still. If there were no Israelites, there would be no Torah. They did not derive their high position from Moses, rather Moses received his for their sake. The divine love dwelt among the multitudes of descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Moses was chosen in order that goodness might come to them through him.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)