

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Bereishit
October 18, 2025 *** 26 Tishrei, 5786

[Bereishit in a Nutshell](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3137/jewish/Bereishit-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

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The name of the Parshah, "Bereishit," means "In the beginning" and it is found in Genesis 1:1.

G-d creates the world in six days. On the first day He makes darkness and light. On the second day He forms the heavens, dividing the "upper waters" from the "lower waters." On the third day He sets the boundaries of land and sea, and calls forth trees and greenery from the earth. On the fourth day He fixes the position of the sun, moon and stars as timekeepers and illuminators of the earth. Fish, birds and reptiles are created on the fifth day; land animals, and then the human being, on the sixth. G-d ceases work on the seventh day, and sanctifies it as a day of rest.

G-d forms the human body from the dust of the earth, and blows into his nostrils a "living soul." Originally Man is a single person, but deciding that "it is not good that man be alone," G-d takes a "side" from the man, forms it into a woman, and marries them to each other.

Adam and Eve are placed in the Garden of Eden, and commanded not to eat from the "Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil." The serpent persuades Eve to violate the command, and she shares the forbidden fruit with her husband. Because of their sin, it is decreed that man will experience death, returning to the soil from which he was formed, and that all

gain will come only through struggle and hardship. Man is banished from the Garden.

Eve gives birth to two sons, Cain and Abel. Cain quarrels with Abel and murders him, and becomes a rootless wanderer. A third son, Seth, is born to Adam; Seth's eighth-generation descendant, Noah, is the only righteous man in a corrupt world.

Haftarah in a Nutshell – Isaiah 42: 5-21

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/573554/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The haftarah of this week's reading opens with a statement by "the Almighty G-d, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who laid out the earth and made grow from it." This echoes the Torah portion's recounting of the creation of the world in six days.

G-d speaks to the prophet Isaiah, reminding him of his life's purpose and duty, namely that of arousing the Jewish people to return to being a light unto the nations, "To open blind eyes, to bring prisoners out of a dungeon; those who sit in darkness out of a prison."

The prophecy continues with a discussion regarding the Final Redemption, and the song that all of creation will sing to G-d on that day. G-d promises to punish all the nations that have persecuted Israel while they were exiled. The prophet also rebukes Israel for their errant ways, but assures them that they will return to the correct path and will be redeemed.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

[A Living Book by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l \(5770\)](https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/bereishit/a-living-book/)

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/bereishit/a-living-book/>

It is the most famous, majestic, and influential opening of any book in literature:

“... בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא ...”

“When God began creating heaven and earth, the earth was void and desolate, there was darkness on the face of the deep, and the spirit of God moved over the waters. God said, “Let there be light.” And there was light.” Genesis 1:1-3

The traditional translation is, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” What is surpassingly strange is the way Rashi – most beloved of all Jewish commentators – begins his commentary on the Chumash:

Rabbi Isaac said: The Torah - which is the Law book of Israel - should have begun with the verse, “This month shall be to you the first of the months” (Exodus 12:2), which is the first commandment given to Israel. Rashi on Genesis 1:1

Can we really take this at face value? Did Rabbi Isaac, or for that matter Rashi, seriously suggest that the Book of Books might have begun in the middle – a third of the way into Exodus? That it might have passed by in silence the creation of the universe – which is, after all, one of the fundamentals of Jewish faith?

Could we understand the history of Israel without its prehistory, the stories of Abraham and Sarah and their children? Could we have understood those narratives without knowing what preceded them: God’s repeated disappointment with Adam and Eve, Cain, the generation of the Flood and the builders of the Tower of Babel?

The fifty chapters of Genesis together with the opening of Exodus are the source-book of biblical faith. They are as near as we get to an exposition of the philosophy of Judaism. What then did Rabbi Isaac mean?

He meant something profound, which we often forget. To understand a book, we need to know to what genre it belongs. Is it history or legend, chronicle or myth? To what question is it an answer? A history book answers the question: what happened? A book of cosmology – be it science or myth – answers the question: how did it happen?

What Rabbi Isaac is telling us is that if we seek to understand the Torah, we must read it as Torah, which is to say: law, instruction, teaching, guidance. Torah is an answer to the question: how shall we live? That is why he raises the question as to why it does not begin with the first command given to Israel.

Torah is not a book of history, even though it includes history. It is not a book of science, even though the first chapter of Genesis – as the 19th-century sociologist Max Weber pointed out – is the necessary prelude to science, because it represents the first time people saw the universe as the product of a single creative will, and therefore as intelligible rather than capricious and mysterious. It is, first and last, a book about how to live.

Everything it contains – not only commandments but also narratives, including the narrative of creation itself – is there solely for the sake of ethical and spiritual instruction.

It moves from the minutest details to the most majestic visions of the universe and our place within it. But it never deviates from its intense focus on the questions: What shall I do? How shall I live? What kind of person should I strive to become? It

begins, in Genesis 1, with the most fundamental question of all. The Psalm puts it thus:

“What is man that You are mindful of him?” Tehillim 8:5

Pico della Mirandola’s 15th century Oration on Man was one of the turning points of Western civilisation, the “manifesto” of the Italian Renaissance. In it he attributed the following declaration to God, addressing the first man:

“We have given you, O Adam, no visage proper to yourself, nor endowment properly your own, in order that whatever place, whatever form, whatever gifts you may, with premeditation, select, these same you may have and possess through your own judgement and decision. The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to whose custody We have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. I have placed you at the very centre of the world, so that from that vantage point you may with greater ease glance round about you on all that the world contains. We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine.”

Homo sapiens, that unique synthesis of “dust of the earth” and breath of God, is unique among created beings in having no

fixed essence: in being free to be what he or she chooses. Mirandola's Oration was a break with the two dominant traditions of the Middle Ages: the Christian doctrine that human beings are irretrievably corrupt, tainted by original sin, and the Platonic idea that humanity is bounded by fixed forms. It is also a strikingly Jewish account – almost identical to the one given by Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik in *Halachic Man*: “The most fundamental principle of all is that man must create himself. It is this idea that Judaism introduced into the world.” It is therefore with a frisson of recognition that we discover that Mirandola had a Jewish teacher, Rabbi Elijah ben Moses Delmedigo (1460-1497).

Born in Crete, Delmedigo was a Talmudic prodigy, appointed at a young age to be head of the yeshiva in Padua. At the same time, he studied philosophy, in particular the work of Aristotle, Maimonides and Averroes. At the age of 23 he was appointed professor of philosophy at the University of Padua. It was through this that he came to know Count Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, who became both his student and his patron. Eventually, however, Delmedigo's philosophical writings – especially his work *Bechinat ha-Dat* – became controversial. He was accused, by other rabbis, of heresy. He had to leave Italy and return to Crete. He was much admired by Jews and Christians alike, and when he died young, many Christians as well as Jews attended his funeral.

This emphasis on choice, freedom and responsibility is one of the most distinctive features of Jewish thought. It is proclaimed in the first chapter of Genesis in the most subtle way. We are all familiar with its statement that God created man “in His image, after His likeness”. Seldom do we pause to reflect on the paradox. If there is one thing emphasised time

and again in the Torah, it is that God has no image. “I will be what I will be”, He says to Moses when he asks Him His name.

Since God transcends nature – the fundamental point of Genesis 1 – then He is free, unbounded by nature’s laws. By creating human beings in His image, He gave us a similar freedom, thus creating the one being capable itself of being creative. The unprecedented account of God in the Torah’s opening chapter leads to an equally unprecedented view of the human person and our capacity for self-transformation.

The Renaissance, one of the high points of European civilisation, eventually collapsed. A series of corrupt rulers and Popes led to the Reformation, and to the quite different views of Luther and Calvin. It is fascinating to speculate what might have happened had it continued along the lines signalled by Mirandola. His late 15th century humanism was not secular but deeply religious.

As it is, the great truth of Genesis 1 remains. As the Rabbis put it (Bereishit Rabbah 8:1; Sanhedrin 38a): “Why was man created last? In order to say, if he is worthy, all creation was made for you; but if he is unworthy, he is told, even a gnat preceded you.” The Torah remains God’s supreme call to humankind to freedom and creativity on the one hand, and on the other, to responsibility and restraint – becoming God’s partner in the work of creation.

[Making Meaning From Chaos by Mychal Springer \(2007\)](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/making-meaning-from-chaos-2/)
<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/making-meaning-from-chaos-2/>

The opening words of B’reishit are exhilarating. “[In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.](#)” Each day, as God creates the world and everything in it, we are told that

it is good. On the sixth day, when God creates people, we are told that it is very good. From the chaos comes order, goodness, and endless possibilities. But the parashah ends with the world on the verge of destruction: “The Lord saw how great was man’s wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time. And the Lord regretted that He had made man on earth, and His heart was saddened” (Gen. 6:5–6).

How did we move so quickly from “very good” to “nothing but evil all the time”? How do we hold on to our sense of possibilities in the face of God’s regret? How do we come to terms with the exile which we are sent into only hours after we are placed in the garden?

The rabbis give us some guidance on these key questions when they pair Parashat B’reishit with this week’s haftarah, from the book of Isaiah. The haftarah begins:

(5) Thus said God the Lord,
Who created the heavens and stretched them out,
Who spread out the earth and what it brings forth,
Who gave breath to the people upon it
And life to those who walk thereon:

(6) I the Lord, in My grace, have summoned you,
And have grasped you by the hand.

I created you, and appointed you
A covenant people, a light of nations—

(7) Opening eyes deprived of light,
Rescuing prisoners from confinement,
From the dungeon those who sit in darkness. (Isaiah
42:5–7)

Verse five, which echoes the first verses of B’reishit, brings together the creation of the world and the creation of human

beings, which comes into focus through the story of Adam and Eve. In a telling twist, Isaiah speaks of God giving breath to the people (noten neshama la'am) in contrast to the verse in Genesis which describes the creation of a single person, Adam. In Genesis we read: "He blew into his nostrils the breath of life (vayipach b'apav nishmat hayyim)" (Gen. 2:7). So we have to wonder at the meaning of focusing on the creation of a single being versus focusing on the creation of the people. In Genesis, we understand that all people come from this one person. We understand that, despite our many differences, we are all linked through this single creative act. The rabbis teach that since we can all trace ourselves to one common ancestor, we have to recognize our equality in God's eyes. The miracle of the creation of Adam is that God took some of the earth (adama) and turned it into a living being (adam).

What then do we understand from Isaiah's version of creation? God gave breath to a people. Instead of pausing over the miracle of the creation of human life, Isaiah moves us directly into the question of meaning. Isaiah focuses on the purpose of this creation:

I created you, and appointed you
A covenant people, a light of nations.

And what is this covenant people supposed to do? To open the eyes of the blind and rescue prisoners from confinement, to make this world the place it should be. The creation story as it's told in Isaiah is a creation story that already knows what it is to live in a broken world. It is a story that is infused with a dark reality, steeped in the experience of a post-destruction, exiled community. The hope for that community involves seeing that the brokenness is not the end of the story. God

wants them—wants us—to see that redemption is possible, that the brokenness can be transformed into wholeness and freedom.

But this role of “light of nations” becomes difficult to understand when, a few verses later, God promises to redeem God’s people.

All who are linked to My name,
Whom I have created,
Formed, and made for My glory—
Setting free that people,
Blind though it has eyes
And deaf though it has ears. (Isaiah 43:7–8)

These verses seem to say that God’s people, Israel, are blind and deaf. That poses a problem for us. How can it be that this people, which is to be “a light of nations” is blind and deaf to God’s truth? How can a people be both blind and entrusted with the task of bringing sight to others who are blind? Some commentators don’t need to wrestle with this problem because they interpret the early verses of the haftarah as referring to an individual servant, either the prophet Isaiah or a messenger who will reestablish the people of Israel. But the rabbis who shaped this haftarah, by starting it at verse five of the chapter, leading right into the reference to “a covenant people, a light of nations,” have privileged the reading in which God’s servant is Israel. So we are back to our problem. How can a people be both blind and help others out of their blindness? The paradox of that challenge captures an essential aspect of being human. God does not make the people of Israel “a light of nations” because we are fundamentally different than the nations. If we were different, then what kind of light would we be shining? The nations would write us off and say that our

reality and theirs have nothing to say to one another. In order to be a light of nations we need to recognize our own captivity and find the strength to trust that God will set us free; we need to recognize our own blindness and make our way in the darkness until some light becomes available to us. It is not some essential difference between us and them that sets us apart, but our commitment to the covenant—a covenant that fosters hope when we are in darkest despair—that enables our drama to inspire others to a similarly redemptive trust.

Ultimately we come to understand that chaos and possibilities, exile and the yearning to be restored, are present in both B'reishit and Isaiah. While the creation in B'reishit starts with “very good” and moves towards God’s regret, the creation in Isaiah starts with the broken world which makes God want to scream (Isaiah 42:14) and gives us the challenge of partnering with God to make it “very good.” *Ken yehi ratzon, may this be God’s will. (Mychal Springer is an Adjunct Instructor of Professional and Pastoral Skills at JTS)*

[A Work in Progress: God's Ongoing Creation and Our Role in It by Rabbi Scott “Shalom” Klein](https://ajr.edu/parashat-bereisheet-5786/)
<https://ajr.edu/parashat-bereisheet-5786/>

The opening verses of Parashat Bereisheet describe a familiar scene: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” We are taught that creation unfolds over seven days, each marked by a specific act of divine utterance and artistry. From the light to the firmament, from the trees to the stars, we witness a world being meticulously brought into being. And then, on the seventh day, God rests. The story seems complete.

Yet, a closer look reveals that the creation narrative is not simply a historical account of a completed event. The text states: “Vayekhal Elohim bayom ha-shevi’i melakhto asher asah”—“God completed (or ceased from) on the seventh day His work that He had done” (Genesis 2:2). This specific choice of the root k.l.h (כ.ל.ה) for “completed/ceased” (often translated as “finished”) and its association with the work already done (asher asah) is theologically loaded.

The interpretive tradition, reflected in the Midrash and later Jewish philosophy, drives a wedge between two concepts:

- **Beriat HaOlam (Creation Ex Nihilo):** The initial, structured act of bringing the cosmos into being from nothing over six days. The cessation on Shabbat, marked by Vayekhal, signifies the completion of this initial, foundational labor.
- **Hiddush HaOlam (Renewing/Sustaining Creation):** The ongoing process of preserving existence.

By stating that God completed the work that He had done, the Torah affirms the end of the first phase—God is no longer building the world’s structure—but it does not imply that God has withdrawn His power to sustain it. If God is the ultimate source of existence, then the very act of being requires a continuous, active will from the Creator. Therefore, the moment of completion on Shabbat is interpreted not as divine retirement, but as a shift in divine activity: from a creative act of structuring to a perpetual act of sustaining and renewing. This logic is precisely why our daily liturgy insists that God “renews in His goodness, every day, the work of creation.” The world, in this view, is not a static object but a dynamic, unfolding reality that is constantly being renewed and sustained by divine energy.

This understanding is reflected in our daily prayers. In the

Birkhot Keriat Shema, we bless God Yotzer Or, “the one who forms light,” not just “the one who formed light.” We thank God for “the one who renews in His goodness, every day, the work of creation.” This is a radical theological claim. It suggests that the world we see, the sun that rises each morning, and the new life that springs forth are not just the lingering effects of an ancient event. They are, in fact, the direct and present work of a God who is continuously involved in the world.

So where do we fit into this narrative? The creation of humanity on the sixth day is unique. Adam is not simply a creature, but a partner. The Midrash teaches that God asks Adam to give names to all the animals. In this act, humanity is not just receiving the world; we are actively participating in its formation. We are given the ability to name, to categorize, to bring order to the chaos, and in doing so, we become co-creators with God.

Our work, our words, and our choices are not insignificant. When we act with kindness, when we build a community, when we bring a sense of justice to the world, we are participating in the ongoing act of creation. The world is not yet complete. There is still darkness to be illuminated, chaos to be ordered, and brokenness to be repaired. And it is in these very acts that we truly fulfill our purpose—not as passive observers of a finished world, but as active, vital, and necessary partners in the continuous work of creation. *(Rabbi Scott Klein is the new Jewish Army chaplain stationed at Fort Bragg and he is serving as the Interim Rabbi for Beth Israel Congregation in Fayetteville, NC)*

[Bereshit: On Being Human, In God's Image](#)

[by Rabbi Elyse Wechterman \(2023\)](#)

https://truah.org/resources/elyse-wechterman-bereshit-moraltorah_2023/

The very first thing the Torah tells us about humans is that God made us “in God’s image, after our [i.e., God’s] likeness.” (Genesis 1:26) But how can our own images, our own faces, be that of God? Aren’t we told elsewhere that “no human can see God’s face and live?” (Exodus 33:20)

The rabbis tell us in a midrash that God created Adam as the first human being so that no human could claim a more distinct, auspicious lineage. “Adam was created alone.... so that one person will not say to another: ‘My father is greater than your father.’” (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5) The point, they seem to be telling us, is not that we are akin to God, but rather that we are all, radically and fully, akin to one another.

The teaching of “b’tzelem Elohim,” humanity created in God’s image, is therefore not a meditation on the holiness of the human spirit but rather a warning against a certain kind of arrogance, loftiness, or supremacy to which we humans might fall prey.

This danger is apparent in the realm of the human administration of justice. In the United States, the belief that there is something “less than” or “wrong with” those impacted by the criminal justice system has led to higher rates of incarceration, longer sentences, and more prisons than any other developed country in the world. The U.S. is home to under 5% of the world’s population, but over 20% of the world’s incarcerated.

Mandatory minimums and longer sentences, the prosecution of children as adults, failure to provide adequate representation and legal resources, and the overarching impact of racism in our criminal justice system have left us with a population that has literally been thrown away in the name, allegedly, of keeping the rest of us safer. We lock

people up far away from our communities, segregated from society and unable to gain the skills and growth necessary for reintegration upon release. We are unable to see the humanity of those behind bars. We label them animals or “super-predators” and give them numbers instead of names, making those who are incarcerated the ultimate other. But studies (like this, or this) tell us again and again that this doesn’t keep those of us on the outside any safer. In fact, we know increased incarceration simply exacerbates the marginalization of those communities already struggling for survival.

So why do we do it?

I believe one reason we dispose of people who have done harm (or are accused of doing harm) is to avoid looking at ourselves and our own baser natures. Who among us hasn’t been so angry that we desired to pick up the nearest object and throw it at someone, even a beloved? Who hasn’t been so desperate for something – medicine, food, shelter – that we haven’t contemplated taking it for ourselves? Who hasn’t been so hurt that we haven’t wanted to lash out and destroy property just to make someone pay attention? Who, among our families, has not suffered the consequences of debilitating trauma or addiction?

We call these actions inhuman, but the very reality that they are committed by human beings makes them, in fact, something any one of us capable of. The second generation of humanity in the Torah (also in this week’s portion) is a story of fratricide: Adam’s son Cain kills his brother Abel in a fit of jealousy and rage. Murderous instinct is baked into us from the beginning, it seems. Yet, we lock people away, impose death by incarceration, and create a system that enables us to

turn away from their suffering and deny their relationship to us. When we lock away those we claim have done harm we are not only denying their humanity; we are also denying the similarities we all carry to those individuals.

As Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, reminds us, “Each of us is more than the worst thing we have ever done.” The same truism works the other way as well: None of us should ever think of ourselves as only the best of our potential capabilities. Putting people away in prison lets us off the hook from being reminded of and taking responsibility for the baser instincts of our nature, instincts that are by definition part of what it means to be human. Only through knowing this other — through proximity, community-based justice systems, alternatives to incarceration, stronger community schools and employment programs, etc. — can we see that it is often the randomness of circumstance, access to education and training, the opportunity to move more slowly, or sheer dumb luck that has enabled us not to succumb to our negative instincts. If we treated people humanely, got closer and learned their stories, we would see that they and we are only and always similarly human, all descended from one individual prototype, made in God’s image. *(Rabbi Elyse Wechterman is the CEO of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association. Prior to the pandemic, she served as a volunteer Jewish chaplain to the incarcerated community at SCI Phoenix in Collegeville, PA.)*

Yahrtzeits

Motti Benisty remembers his mother Rachel Benisty on Wed. Oct. 22

Gail Yazersky remembers her mother Edna Yazersky on Wed. Oct. 22

Elaine Berkenwald remembers her father Israel Berkenwald on Thurs. Oct. 23

