

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Breishit
October 10, 2026 *** 29 Tishrei, 5787

Breishit in a Nutshell

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

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 – Machar Chodesh: I Samuel 20:18-42.
https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/573554/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

Since this Shabbat is the day before Rosh Chodesh, we read a special haftarah that begins with the words "machar chodesh" — "[And Jonathan told David,] 'Tomorrow is the new moon...'"

David, King Saul's son-in-law, fears that his father-in-law views him as competition for his throne, and wishes to have him killed. David enlists his dear friend Jonathan, Saul's son, to ascertain whether indeed Saul has such evil designs. Together they devise a plan, according to which David will be absent from the monthly new moon feast hosted by Saul. At this feast, Jonathan will discover Saul's true intentions with regards to David. Jonathan and David will then rendezvous at a predetermined meeting point where Jonathan will convey to David whether he should return to the royal household or flee.

When everyone is seated at the royal feast, the king notices David's absence and asks Jonathan for his whereabouts. When told that he has gone to Bethlehem to be with his family, the king becomes furious, telling Jonathan to fetch David as he is condemned to death. "And Jonathan knew that it had

been decided upon by his father to put David to death."

Jonathan leaves the royal table in anger. The next morning he travels to David's hiding place and the two separate amidst an emotional farewell, promising each other eternal devotion and friendship.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The Garments of Light by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l (5768)
<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/bereishit/the-garments-of-light/>

The context is one of the best-known stories of the Bible. Together in the Garden of Eden, surrounded by the rich panoply of creation, the first human couple have everything they could possibly want - except one thing, a tree from which they are forbidden to eat. Needless to say, that is the one thing they want. "Stolen waters taste sweet," says the Book of Proverbs. They eat; their eyes are opened; they lose their innocence; for the first time they feel shame. When they hear "the Voice of God" they try to hide, but they discover that God is someone from whom we cannot hide. God asks them what they have done. Adam blames his wife. She blames the serpent. The result is paradise lost.

The episode is rich in its implications, but I want us to study one of its strangest features. The woman has been told that "with pain she will give birth to children." Next, Adam is informed that he will face a life of painful toil. There then follows a sequence of three verses which seem to have no connection with one another. Indeed, they sound like a complete non sequitur:

"By the sweat of your brow," God says to Adam, "will you eat

bread, until you return to the land, for from there you were taken. You are dust, and you will return to dust.” Then the man named his wife Eve, for she would become the mother of all life. Then the Lord, God made garments of skins for Adam and his wife, and clothed them. Gen. 3:19-3:21

The problems are obvious. Adam has just blamed his wife for leading him into sin. He has also been condemned to mortality. Why, at just this juncture, does he turn to her and give her a new name? And why, immediately afterward, as they are about to be exiled from Eden, does God perform an act of kindness to the couple - giving dignity to the very symbol of their sin, the clothes with which they hide their shame? The mood seems to have changed for no reason. The bitter acrimony of the previous verses suddenly dissolves, and instead - between Adam and his wife, and between God and the couple - there is a new tenderness. Rashi is so perplexed that he suggests that the middle verse is out of chronological sequence. It is the end, not of the story of the sin of eating the forbidden fruit, but of the earlier scene in which Adam gave names to the animals and while doing so found “no suitable companion.” As we will see, that is not the only way of interpreting it.

Stranger still is the interpretation given by the first century sage Rabbi Meir to the phrase “garments of skin”, “katnot or” (or “bigdei or”). Rabbi Meir reads the ayin of the second word as an aleph, “katnot or” – and thus interprets the phrase as “garments of light.” This is an almost mystical suggestion and a deeply intriguing one. Why -not when they were in paradise, but as they were leaving it – were the couple bathed with Divine radiance, clothed in “garments of light”?

Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah said, “It is impossible for there to be

a session in the house of study without some new interpretation.” In that spirit let us see whether we can find new meaning in this passage.

When he heard the words, “dust you are and to dust you will return,” it was the first time Adam became conscious of his mortality. There is no more profound self-knowledge than this - that the world will one day be without us, and we without the world. Much of civilisation has turned on this single fact, that our lives are finite, a microsecond in the context of eternity; that however long we live, our time is limited and all too short. The Torah is silent on what Adam's thoughts were in the wake of this discovery, but we can reconstruct them. Until then, death had not entered his consciousness, but now it did. What, if we are mortal, will live on? Is there a part of us that will continue, even though we ourselves are no longer here? It was then that Adam remembered God's words to the woman. She would give birth to children - in pain, to be sure, but she would bring new life into the world.

Suddenly Adam knew that though we die, if we are privileged to have children, something of us will live on: our genes, our influence, our example, our ideals. That is our immortality. This was an idea that eventually shaped the character of the whole of Judaism in contradistinction to most other cultures in ancient and modern times. The Tower of Babel and the great buildings of Ramses II - the two most significant glimpses the Torah gives us of the empires of the ancient world - testify to the idea that we defeat mortality by building monuments that outlast the winds and sands of time. Judaism had a quite different idea, that we defeat mortality by engraving our ideals on the hearts of our children, and they on theirs, and so on to the end of time. Where the Mesopotamians and Egyptians thought of buildings, Abraham and his descendants thought of

builders (“Call them not ‘your children’ but ‘your builders’”). Judaism became the most child-centred of faiths.

But there is one significant difference between personal immortality and the immortality we gain by those we bring to life and who will live on after us. The latter cannot be achieved alone. Until he became aware of his mortality, Adam could think of his wife as a mere ezer kenegdo, usually translated as “a suitable helper.” He thought of her as his assistant, not his equal. “She shall be called ‘woman’ [ishah] for she was taken from man [ish].” She was, in his eyes, an extension of himself.

Now he knew otherwise. Without Eve, Adam could not have children - and children were his share in eternity. He could no longer think of her as an assistant. She was a person in her own right – even more so than he was, for she, not he, would actually give birth. In this respect she was more like God than he could be, for God is He-who-brings-new-life-into-being.

Once he had thought these thoughts, recrimination ended, for he saw that their physical being, their “nakedness,” was not simply a source of shame. There is a spiritual dimension to the physical relationship between husband and wife. At one level it is the most animal of desires, but at another it is as close as we come to the principle of Divine creativity itself, namely that love creates life. That is when he turned to her and for the first time saw her as a person and gave her a personal name, Chava, Eve, meaning, “she who gives life.” The significance of this moment cannot be sufficiently emphasised. It was not that previously Adam had given his wife one name and now gave her another. It was that previously Adam had not given her a name at all. He called her ishah, “woman,” a generic noun not a proper name (Incidentally, he himself had not had a proper name until now either. He is simply called ha-adam, “the man”

- a word that appears 21 times [3x7] in this early narrative. Not until he confers on the woman a proper name does he acquire one himself, Adam).

With the appearance of proper names, the concept of person is born. A noun designates a class, a group of things linked by common characteristics. Nouns speak of sameness and therefore substitutability. If we lose a belt, we can buy another. If our car is stolen we can replace it. "Belt" and "car" are nouns, in both cases objects defined by their function.

A name is different. It refers not to a class or group of things but to an individual in their individuality. The primary bearer of a name is a person. Only by extension do we give names to non-persons for which we have special affection - a pet, for example. The concepts of "name" and "person" are intimately linked. We cannot have one without the other. The single most important ethical truth about persons is that none is substitutable for any other. As persons, we are unique. "When a human being makes many coins in the same mint," said the Sages, "they all come out alike. [By contrast,] God makes every human being in the same image, His image, and they are all different."

This is what gives human life its dignity and sanctity. Without it, we would not know love - for love in its primary sense is always directed to a person: to this man, that woman, this child, in their uniqueness. One who truly loves does not love abstractly. The lover in The Song of Songs never tires of describing his beloved, her hair, her cheeks, her eyes, her mouth, the things that make her what she is and not woman-in-general.

This is also what gives human love its particular pathos and vulnerability. We know that like us, our beloved will eventually

grow old and die, and that they can never be replaced. If we knew we would never die, we would need no intimations of eternity. But because we know we will one day die, one of the greatest things that can happen to us is the moment beyond time (the one we know we will never forget) when two souls touch and between them form a bridge over the abyss of mortality. That is what Shir HaShirim means when it says, “Love is as strong as death, its passion as unyielding as the grave” (the idea Dylan Thomas translated into the words, “Though lovers be lost, love shall not; And death shall have no dominion”).

At another and more general level, this is what gives human life its sanctity. “A single life,” said the Sages, “is like a universe.” However lifelike robots may one day become, there will always be this fundamental difference between a machine and a person. Machines can be replaced. Persons cannot.

The moment when Adam turned to his wife and gave her a proper name, Chava, was a turning point in the history of civilisation. It was then that God robed the couple in garments of light. For it is only when we relate to one another as persons possessed of non-negotiable dignity, that we respond to the “image of God” in the other. In a sense the whole of Judaism - or at least *mitzvot bein adam le-chavero*, “the commands between us and our fellow human beings” - is an extended commentary to this idea. The rules of justice, mercy, charity, compassion, regard for the poor, love for the neighbour and the stranger, delicacy of speech and sensitivity to the easily injured feelings of others, are all variants on the theme of respect for the human other as an image and likeness of the Divine Other.

The idea goes deeper still. There is an intimate connection

between the way we relate to other people and the way we relate to God - and this too is expressed in the difference between a noun and a name.

Though God has many descriptions, two are primary: Elokim and the four-letter name we may not pronounce, known generally as Hashem. The Sages distinguished them by saying that Elokim refers to Divine justice, Hashem to Divine compassion. The eleventh-century poet and philosopher Judah Halevi made a different distinction. The word E-l was generally used by pagans to signify a god, by which they meant, a force of nature (the sun, the storm, the earth, the sea, and the many other deities worshipped in ancient times). Monotheism was and is the insistence that none of these forces or powers represents ultimate reality. Each is only a segment of it. The One God is the totality of all powers. That is represented by the word Elokim. It is a collective noun, meaning, “[the force of forces](#).” Elokim is God as we encounter Him in nature, in the vastness and intricacy of creation.

Hashem, by contrast, is not a noun but a name. It refers to God not as a power, or even the totality of all powers, but as a person, a “Thou.” Hashem is the One who speaks to us and to whom we speak, who loves us as a person loves, who hears our prayers, forgives our failures, gives us strength in times of crisis, and teaches us the path of life. In one of the most profound insights in the history of Jewish thought, Halevi taught that the difference between Elokim and Hashem is the difference between the God of Aristotle and the God of Abraham.

A philosopher can come to the realisation that the universe has an author, a creator, a first cause, a “prime mover.” But only a prophet (or a child of Abraham and the nation of

prophets) can relate to God as a person. Hashem is God as we encounter Him not in creation but revelation.

If we now turn to the biblical text, we see a remarkable phenomenon. In Bereishit 1, God is described as Elokim. In chapters 2 and 3, He is called Hashem-Elokim. In chapter 4, for the first time He is called Hashem alone. Something changes in the course of these chapters: not God (who does not change) but the human perception of God.

In the first chapter, which speaks about the birth of the universe and the slow emergence of order from chaos, man is part of nature. That is the (partial) truth in the discovery that we share much of our DNA with other life forms. It is also why God is described as Elokim, the author of nature. In chapters 2 and 3, man begins to use language. He becomes, in the words of the Targum, “a speaking being.” God brings the various forms of life to him “to see what he would name them, and whatever the man called each living thing, that was its name.” But thus far he only uses nouns, first for the animals, and then for his wife, whom he calls ishah, “woman.” He has moved from nature to culture (of which language is the first step), but he has not yet understood the concept of a person. It is only after he gives his wife a proper name that the Torah uses the word Hashem alone. It is only after he has become aware of his wife as a person that he is capable of understanding God as a person.

Judaism was much more than the discovery of monotheism, that there is only one God. That idea is contained in the word Elokim. It was also the discovery that God is a person - that the fact that we are persons, with loves, fears, hopes and dreams, is not an accidental by-product of evolution (as some neo-Darwinians claim) but is an echo of the ultimate reality of

the cosmos. We are not gene-producing machines but persons, each of us unique, irreplaceable, here because God wanted us to be. That is the world-transforming concept of Hashem - and it was only when Adam responded to Eve as a person that he could respond to God as a person. That is why the commands between us and God are inseparable from the commands between us and our fellow human beings.

Now we understand that extraordinary sequence of three verses. Discovering his mortality, Adam knew that he could only live on through his children, born through an act of love. That was when he realised that immortality cannot be achieved by one alone, but only by the union of two. For the first time he looked on his wife as a person in her own right, and expressed this by giving her a proper name. Having done this, he was able to experience God through His proper name, Hashem. At that moment humanity ceased to be a mere biological species and became homo religiosus, man-in-search-of-God who meets Hashem, God-in-search-of-man. That is the profound message of the first three chapters of Bereishit, a story about language, relationships, and what it is to be a person.

Judaism is the story of how the love we feel for another person leads to the love of God, and robes us in garments of light.

[How Should We Translate Genesis 1:1? By David Zev Moster](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/how-should-we-translate-genesis-11/)
[https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/how-should-we-translate-genesis-](https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/how-should-we-translate-genesis-11/)

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The opening words of the Torah are surprisingly difficult to translate. The grammatical issues are technical, the stakes are high, and there is pressure on the interpreter to get it right. Here we will explore the pros and cons of the two most

popular approaches. Warning: we are about to get grammatical.

Interpretation #1: “In the beginning”

The Christian linguist William Tyndale (1494–1536) was the first to translate the Torah into English from the original Hebrew. This was forbidden at that time in Catholic England, and in 1536 he was strangled and burned at the stake. Tyndale coined many of the popular “Biblical English” phrases that would later be associated with the more popular 1611 King James Version. Tyndale’s “*In the begynnyng God created heaven and erth*” would in the KJV become “*In the beginning God created the heaven, and the earth.*”

This approach, which accentuates the beginning, can also be found in ancient Jewish Bibles such as the Greek Septuagint and the Aramaic Targums. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, for example, has מן אוּלַא ברא אלקים ית שמיא וית ארעא, “*From the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.*” The key feature is the א at the end of the word אוּלַא. This is the mark of the determined state in Aramaic. Much like the prefix ה in Hebrew, the ending א means that אוּלַא is “*the beginning.*”

Although Interpretation #1 seems to have fallen out of favor in contemporary Jewish English translations, it can be seen in the 1917 Jewish Publication Society version: “*In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.*”

The greatest challenge to Interpretation #1 is the other occurrences[1] of the word בְּרֵאשִׁית. All of these are in the construct state, meaning they are accompanied by the word “of.” The words בְּרֵאשִׁית מַמְלְכוֹת יְהוֹיָקִים mean “*In the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim,*” and the words בְּרֵאשִׁית מַלְכוֹת צְדָקְיָה mean “*In the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah.*” This suggests that Genesis 1:1 does not mean “In the beginning”

by itself, but rather “In the beginning of” some other thing.

The second challenge is the prefix vowel in בְּרֵאשִׁית. There is a difference between a prefix בְּ which means “in,” and a prefix בִּי which means “in the.” The word בְּרֵאשִׁית means “in chariots” but בִּירֵאשִׁית means “in the chariots.” Instead of meaning “In the beginning,” the word בְּרֵאשִׁית appears to mean “In a beginning.”

The third issue is whether Genesis describes creation from nothing, also known as creation מֵאֵין or ex nihilo. This question arises from Genesis 1:2, which mentions darkness, the deep, the waters, and even an unformed earth. All of these seem to be present when the story begins, which would technically make Genesis 1:1 not “the beginning,” but rather “a beginning” that came after other unmentioned beginnings.

These three challenges are not insurmountable. First, despite the other attestations, it is not a foregone conclusion that בְּרֵאשִׁית is in the construct state. The word בְּרִית “covenant,” for example, has the same spelling whether it is in the construct state or not. בְּרֵאשִׁית could easily function the same way.[2]

As for the second challenge, one could maintain that the opening vowel of בְּרֵאשִׁית was a mistake. The Masoretes first wrote down the vowel points in the second half of the first millennium, and even they were susceptible to error.

Questioning the vowel points was not yet in vogue in the times of Tyndale, but it is certainly present in Biblical scholarship today, especially as a last resort.

The third issue, about creation from nothing (מֵאֵין, ex nihilo) is more of a Genesis 1:2 problem than a 1:1 problem. One could justifiably interpret Genesis 1:1 as “the beginning,” even if there was some preexisting stuff, such as darkness or water, already present.

Despite its obstacles, Interpretation #1 has the advantage of being conceptually well-suited for the opening of a book such as Genesis. If there ever was “a beginning” that should be conceived of as “the beginning,” it would be this one: the beginning of the world as we know it.

Interpretation #2: “In the beginning of”

The second approach can be found in the writings of Rashi (1040–1105), Ibn Ezra (1089–1167), Rashbam (1085–1158), and many other Jewish interpreters. It is perhaps best seen in the translation of contemporary Jewish Bible scholar Everett Fox: “At the beginning of God’s creating of the heavens and the earth...”

According to this approach, the word בְּרֵאשִׁית is in the construct state, which adds the word “of.” בְּרֵאשִׁית is not “In the beginning” alone, but rather “In the beginning of” this one particular event.

The greatest challenge to this approach is the grammar of Hebrew noun chains, and here things get tricky. Nouns in the construct state (סְמִיכוּת) such as בְּרֵאשִׁית are typically followed by nouns or other noun-like words (an example: בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל “the children of Israel”). This is standard for Biblical Hebrew and occurs tens of thousands of times in the Tanakh.

The word בָּרָא, however, is a finite verb—not a noun—and should not follow a construct noun such as בְּרֵאשִׁית. The nonsensical translation would be, “In the beginning of, God created...” The beginning of what exactly? To give an English equivalent, “The breakfast of champions” would become “The breakfast of the champion ate.” It does not make sense.

Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Rashbam all solve this problem by pointing to Hosea 1:2, which also has a finite verb in a noun chain: תִּחְלַת דְּבַר-יְהוָה בְּהוֹשֵׁעַ. Here דְּבַר “he spoke” is treated as

an Infinitive Construct בָּרָא, translated as a gerund: “In the beginning of the Lord’s speaking to Hosea.” Hosea 1:2 is remarkably close to בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים, “In the beginning of God’s creating the heavens and the earth.”

Depending on how one counts, there are up to thirty more examples of noun chains with finite verbs (e.g., Gesenius-Kautzsch-Cowley, §130d).

Despite the occurrences, I do not find this explanation entirely satisfying. As two grammarians plainly put it, “This construction is extremely rare.” (Waltke and O’Connor, Biblical Hebrew Syntax, §9.6e). Just how rare is “extremely rare”? There are approximately 1,000 regular noun chains for every exception. Would the book of Genesis begin with such unusual language without any obvious benefit? Are readers meant to have their Biblical Hebrew grammars open just to understand the very first words?

The payoff for taking Interpretation #2 is immense. One is now free to explore things that existed before creation. The Talmud lists seven things that existed before Genesis 1:1 including the Torah, repentance, and the Garden of Eden (Pesachim 54a). Scientific readers might add the preexistence of space, time, matter, energy, and the universe itself. There is no problem of creation from nothing because this is not necessarily the first creation.

My Approach

Every year, I re-evaluate these two translations. Some years I favor one; some years I favor the other. At times, both are appealing, and at times, both are difficult to accept.

Currently, I favor Interpretation #1 “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” It is not perfect, and it is by no means proven.

This translation grasps the magnitude of the moment. Genesis 1:1 is not meant to be a random verse tucked away inside a grammar book. It is not meant to upend standard Biblical Hebrew. It is meant to be simple, powerful, and awe-inspiring. It is introducing you to God. This is not just another beginning this is the beginning, and hence the beginning of everything as we know it. Genesis 1:1 opens boldly and proclaims: “In the beginning,”—yes, the beginning—“God created the heavens and the earth. (*David Zev Moster is Director of the Biblical Hebrew Program at JTS*)

[1] (Jer. 26:1; 27:1; 28:1; 49:34; also Hos. 9:10) [2] For examples of רֵאשִׁית “beginning” in the absolute state, see Lev. 2:12; Deut. 33:21; Is. 46:10; Psalms 105:36; Neh. 12:44

[Bereishit – The Sacred Knock: What Chaplaincy and the Divine Teach Us About Entering by Hannah Greenberg](https://yeshivatmaharat.org/bereishit-the-sacred-knock-what-chaplaincy-and-the-divine-teach-us-about-entering/)
<https://yeshivatmaharat.org/bereishit-the-sacred-knock-what-chaplaincy-and-the-divine-teach-us-about-entering/>

Completing a unit of Clinical Pastoral Education this summer, I saw that every hospital room has its own threshold.

Before walking in, I knocked or announced my presence. On busy days, it would be easy to treat this as nothing more than a protocol to check before entering a patient’s space. From what I saw modeled by my chaplain educators and from the more time I spent at the edge of a curtain—all that separates a patient from the rest of the hospital—I’ve learned to see the knock itself as an act of empowerment. It says: even here, even now, you still have a say over who comes in and how. Being hospitalized strips away so much. The knock is a small way of handing something back.

After Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge, they don't run to God; they hide among the trees of the Garden, fear of what they have done, innocence stripped away. And God, who, of course, already knows exactly where Adam is and what has happened, calls out anyway: "**Ayekah—Where are you?**" (Bereishit 3:9).

Rashi is careful to head off the obvious question here. God isn't confused about Adam's location. Rashi explains that the question is a way of opening a conversation gently, so that Adam wouldn't be caught off guard and thrown into panic or distrust if judgment fell on him all at once. Rashi draws out two other biblical moments that work the same way: God asking Cain, "**Where is Abel your brother?**" (Bereishit 4:9) and Balaam being asked, "**What men are these with you?**" (Bamidbar 22:9). In each case, the question isn't a request for information. It's a knock on a doorway. It gives the other person room to speak before anything else is said. It gives power back to the one being questioned by allowing them space to tell their story on their own terms.

That, on its own, reframes the whole scene. God isn't opening with an accusation. God is opening with an invitation to talk.

This moment, the act of invitation, is picked up on by Chazal, our sages. Tractate Derekh Eretz Rabbah, a minor tractate of Talmud on etiquette and morals, teaches that a person should never enter someone else's home suddenly, and that we learn this from none other than God, who stood at the entrance of the Garden and called to Adam rather than simply walking in (Derekh Eretz Rabbah 5:2). The Creator of the universe, confronting the first transgression in human history, does not barge in demanding an account. God pauses at the threshold and calls out first.

Derekh Eretz Rabbah then makes the idea concrete with a story. Four sages, Rabban Gamliel, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah, and Rabbi Akiva, are traveling to a council that includes a philosopher. Twice, Rabbi Yehoshua asks Rabban Gamliel whether they should visit him; twice he's told no, until finally the answer is yes. When they arrive, the Rabbis don't just enter without notice. Rabbi Yehoshua knocks. The philosopher, hearing it, thinks to himself that only a sage would knock that way. On the second knock, he rises and washes his face, hands, and feet to prepare himself. Only on the third knock, once he is ready to receive, does he open the door. The philosopher is empowered to answer and join in on his own terms. Rabban Gamliel cites God's action here from Bereishit as why he commanded Rabbi Yehoshua to wait and then go and knock.

Tractate Kallah Rabbati, an Aramaic commentary on personal ethics, reinforces this by teaching that one should never take leave of a teacher or friend without permission (Kallah Rabbati 9:1). Once again, this traces back to God waiting at the entrance of Eden and calling out. Even in the most consequential encounter imaginable, the confrontation after humanity's first act of disobedience, God models openness and respect before rebuke.

Rav Joseph B Soloveitchik (1903-1993), quoting Shir HaShirim, a biblical love story, in Kol Dodi Dofek (1956) clarifies this imagery. The beloved approaches: “Kol dodi hineh zeh ba”—“The voice of my beloved! Here he comes” (2:8). Later, the image becomes even more intimate: “Kol dodi dofek”—“The voice of my beloved knocks” (5:2). Rav Soloveitchik draws on this imagery to describe the human encounter with God as one in which God approaches the human being, but does not erase the distance between them.

God comes close enough to knock, but the door remains something the human being must open.

That image helps me hear God's call of "ayekah" differently. The question is not simply "Where are you?" It is what comes after the knock: I have come close. I am here. Will you open the door? The threshold remains real, and so does the person's freedom to cross it or not. Perhaps that is part of what makes the divine invitation so powerful. God does not force intimacy. God creates the possibility for it. These sources tell us what happens before a question is even asked: a pause, a call, a respected threshold. Together they describe a single unbroken gesture: God stops at the door, waits, calls out gently, and only then asks the vulnerable question.

That is a pattern I hope to carry with me beyond the hospital room. The knock comes first; a small acknowledgment that each person is still the one who decides whether and how I enter their world. Only after that do I get to ask anything close to "ayekah," "Where are you?" And when I do ask it, I try to ask it the way God does: not as an interrogation, but as an offering. I'm here if you're ready.

My patients answered that question in every register imaginable: fear, anger, exhaustion, gratitude, silence. My job was never to resolve what they're carrying. It was only ever to knock, to wait, and then, if invited in, to sit with them wherever they were.

Perhaps this is one meaning of being made in the image of God. We imitate God not only through the acts of clothing the naked, comforting the mourner, but through this more easily missed one: honoring the threshold of another person's inner world before we ever try to cross it. We knock. We wait. We ask, "Ayekah?" And then, if invited in, we have the privilege of

bearing witness to another's story. *(Hannah Greenberg, originally from Bucks County, PA, is a Maharat rabbinical student and Jewish educator in NYC who specializes in working with students with disabilities. She holds a Master's in Education in Exceptional Children and Youth from the University of Delaware and a certificate in advanced Judaic studies from the Pardes Institute.)*

Breishit by Rabbi Michael Kohn (AJR 2009)
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There are numerous cycles embedded within a Jewish year – the daily cycle of prayer, the weekly cycle of ordinary days and Shabbat, the monthly cycle of new moons, and the annual cycle of holidays and festivals. This week we experience another yearly cycle, as we start to read the Torah once more from the beginning.

Making our way through the first six days of Creation, we learn that the word “tov”, usually translated as “good”, appears seven times. The light on the first day was tov (Gen 1:4). The land and the seas were tov (Gen 1:10), as were the seed-bearing plants and trees of every kind bearing fruit (Gen 1:12).

The two great lights, separating light from darkness were tov (Gen 1:16-18). The great sea monsters, and all the living creatures of every kind that creep... and all the winged birds of every kind were tov (Gen 1:21). The wild beasts... and cattle of every kind, and all kinds of creeping things of the earth also were tov (Gen 1:25).

According to Ramban, as used in the Creation story, tov is not the opposite of “ra” – “bad”. Rather, it means “permanence”; “And G-d saw ... that it was good, meaning [God] desired its existence forever....[1]

Near the end of the sixth day, a single, solitary, human being – called ha’adam – was created in the Divine Image. But God did not say that it was “tov”, even though that was how the land animals (created earlier that day) were described (Gen 1:25-26). Rather, it was only later, when God’s work on the that day was finished, “God saw all that had been made, and found it to be “tov me’od” (Gen 1:31). While many authorities translate “tov me’od” as “very good”, Ramban tells us, “[t]he meaning of the word me’od here is “mostly”. [2]

Perhaps God realized that something was missing.

Unlike the plants, trees, and animals, which were created in multiplicity, this single human being walked alone. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says, “With the birth of the individual, a new reality makes its debut: loneliness” [3]

God observes the human’s condition and says, “lo tov he’yot ha’adam l’vado – it is not good for the human to be alone.” (Gen 2:18) According to Ramban, “In the work of Creation, ‘the good’ means existence. . . .” [4] In his view, a lone human being is not a sustainable state. Thus, God creates a second human being (Gen 2:22).

Our sages tell us that “[h]umans are social by nature and need love and unity more than any other living creature, ...” [5] “that [we] cannot survive in isolation.... [A]s Maimonides put it, ... we are ‘social animals.’ ... We want to be independent, but we are also inescapably interdependent.” [6]

King David, alone, cries out to God, “Turn to me, have mercy on me, for I am alone and afflicted”. (Psalm 25:16) Job becomes alienated from his community — his relatives and friends forget, disown, and detest him (Job 19:13-15). Moses found himself alone, even if he did not realize it.

The phrase “lo tov” is found only one other time in the Torah.

Moses' father-in-law, Yitro, is watching as Moses sits alone as magistrate, explaining God's laws and teachings (Ex 18:14). Yitro admonishes Moses, "lo tov ha'davar asher atah oseh – this thing you are doing is not good ... lo tokhal asohu l'vadekha – you cannot do it alone (Ex 18:17. Yitro advises Moses to create a community of judges around him (Ex 18:19-22).

Yet even a nation can be alone. "A people that dwells alone," was how the pagan prophet Bilaam described our ancestors (Num 23:9). Bilaam's prophecy feels all too prescient in our generation.

American Jews today increasingly are feeling more isolated and alone than they have felt for generations.[7] We have read countless stories reflecting this situation, like those from Rabbi Hirschy Zarchi of Harvard Chabad, who spoke of incoming freshmen feeling hate for the first time,[8] and from Ahuva Mahalel, a 16-year-old with many Jewish friends, but none at her high school,[9] filled with anguish. Former ambassador Michael Oren's barber lamented to him, "We're all alone." [10] Feeling alone is one of the most common forms of emotional distress.[11] Yet, there is a powerful antidote – community.

The Jewish concept of Klal Yisrael—the collective people of Israel—reminds us that every Jew is part of a larger whole, even in moments of isolation and solitude.

On the night of the Exodus from Egypt, Moses spoke for the first time "to the entire community of Israel" (Ex 12:3). Since then, we have remained a community, even though we are not, and likely never have been, a homogeneous one.

Andrew Sillow-Carroll writes: "Judaism, at the end of the day, ... is really about giving people a community, a sense of belonging." [12] Indeed, we are told that "[t]he holiness of G'd

depends on the community,”[13] and we are admonished by Hillel, “do not separate yourself from the community”[14] as the entire Jewish people are responsible for one another. [15] Rabbi Sacks reminds us that “[W]hat we cannot do alone, we can do together....[16]

When Jews reach out, whether to seek, or to offer, a connection, when we support one another, and when we are together in community, we will not be alone, nor will we feel that we are alone. And we will see that it is tov.

[1] Ramban [13th C] to Gen 1:4 [2] Ramban to Gen 1:31

[3] R. Jonathan Sacks, Radical Then, Radical Now, Part II; The Journey, Covenantal Morality 7, 2000 [4] Ramban to Gen 12:18

[5] Kli Yakar [Poland 17th C] to Gen 2:18 [6] The Jonathan Sacks, “Haggadah; Essays, The Omer and the Politics of Torah” 11, 2007

[7] When belonging breaks: The Psychological Crisis Facing American Jews, The Times of Israel, Aug. 7, 2025 [8] Feeling Alone and

Estranged, Many Jews at Harvard Wonder What’s Next, www.RSN.org, Aug. 3, 2026 [9] I Was Very Alone Today’: Young Jewish Americans Grieve Over Israel, New York Times, Oct.15, 2023

[10] Michael Oren, Jews have been cursed to be lonely. The war is a reminder to fight back against that fate, <https://forward.com/opinion/593849/jews-lonely-israel-gaza-war/>, Mar. 18, 2024 [11] Why Do I Feel So Lost and Alone? The Science Behind It, Mar. 11, 2026 [12] Andrew Sillow-Carroll, He went to a

different Manhattan synagogue every week. Here’s what it taught him, September 7, 2026 [13] Akeidat Yitzchak [15th C Spain] 74:1:4 (Munk transl.) [14] M. Avot 2:4 [15] B.T. Shevuot 39a

[16] R. Jonathan Sacks, Lessons in Leadership; Haazinu; A Leader’s Call to Responsibility

Yahrtzeits

- * Motti Benisty remembers his mother Rachel Benisty on Sunday October 11th
- * Gail Yazersky remembers her mother Edna Yazersky on Sunday October 11th
- * Elaine Berkenwald remembers her father Israel Berkenwald on Monday October 12th
- * Treasure and Rich Cohen remember their grandson Andrew Morris Levy on Friday October 16th