



Creation
By David Silverberg

The opening verses and chapters of the Torah tell the story of creation, very clearly establishing God as Creator of the universe. The topic of creation, and specifically God's exclusive role in the genesis of the earth and mankind, constitutes a major theme in Maimonides' writings, particularly in his *Guide for the Perplexed*, numerous chapters of which are devoted to this issue (especially section 2, chapters 13-31). Our discussion this week will present a brief overview of some of Maimonides' major points concerning creation and the concept of God as Creator.

The Three Theories

Maimonides begins his discussion of creation in the *Guide* (2:13) by documenting the three basic philosophical positions concerning the origin of the universe. He first presents the view held by "those who follow the Law of Moses, our Teacher," which asserts that "the whole Universe, i.e., everything except God, has been brought by Him into existence out of non-existence. In the beginning God alone existed, and nothing else..." Maimonides later describes this position, which is generally referred to as the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, or *yeish mei-ayin* in Hebrew, as "undoubtedly a fundamental principle of the Law of our Teachers Moses," adding that "it is next in importance to the principle of God's unity." Indeed, in his commentary to Masekhet Sanhedrin, where he postulates his famous "thirteen principles of faith," Maimonides lists as the fourth principle the belief that "this single entity [God] is absolutely the first, and everything other than Him that exists is not the first." Thus, after the first three principles, which assert God's existence, oneness, and incorporeality, Maimonides establishes the principle of God's having preceded the universe, which means that the universe came into existence out of non-existence. Likewise, in *Mishneh Torah* (Hilkhot Teshuva 3:7), Maimonides includes among those with no share in the world to come "one who says that He is not alone as the first and origin of everything." The belief in God's having preceded and created all existence thus constitutes a fundamental precept of the Jewish faith.

The second theory presented by Maimonides is that of Plato, who contended, in Maimonides' words, that "it is impossible that an object consisting of matter and form should be produced when that matter is absolutely absent, or that it should be destroyed in such a manner that that matter be absolutely no longer in existence." According to this theory, it is scientifically and philosophically impossible for matter to emerge from non-existence or become non-existent. Insistent on maintaining God's role as Creator, advocates of this second theory believed "that a certain substance has coexisted with God from eternity in such a manner that neither God existed without that substance nor the latter without God." God indeed created the universe, but He did not – according to this view – create it *ex nihilo*, out of sheer nothingness. Rather, He fashioned the earth as we know it from some primordial substance, which – like God – had always existed and was not created.

Finally, Maimonides presents Aristotle's famous theory of "the eternity of the universe," that is, that the universe in its present form has always been in existence. As Maimonides describes, Aristotle held

that the Universe in its totality has never been different, nor will it ever change; the heavens, which form the permanent element in the Universe, and are not subject to genesis and destruction, have

always been so; time and motion are eternal, permanent, and have neither beginning nor end; the sublunary world, which includes the transient elements, has always been the same... This whole arrangement, therefore, both above and here below, is never disturbed or interrupted...

Aristotle believed not only that existence cannot emerge from non-existence, but also that the essential properties of the universe are intrinsically inalterable. Hence, he felt compelled to affirm the eternity of the universe and deny God's role as Creator; the universe, according to Aristotle, had always coexisted with God.

Later in the *Guide* (2:25), Maimonides very clearly distinguishes between Judaism's outlook on Plato's theory and its attitude towards the Aristotelian view. Although Maimonides certainly does not subscribe to Plato's concept of some primordial, amorphous matter from which God created the universe, he does not regard such a notion as antithetical to Jewish belief. Aristotle's eternal universe, by contrast, necessarily undermines the most basic tenets of Jewish faith, as it negates the possibility of miracles. The doctrine of an inalterable natural order leaves no room for supernatural events, of which the Torah tells many. Numerous Biblical narratives must be rejected should one subscribe to Aristotle's theory, as must the laws and commands intended to commemorate the miracles described in the Bible as having been performed by God. Jewish faith therefore cannot coexist with the Aristotelian notion of the eternity of the universe.

In addition, Maimonides raises a number of questions regarding Judaism which are unanswerable if one embraces the Aristotelian approach:

Why has God inspired a certain person and not another? Why has He revealed the Law to one particular nation, and at one particular time? Why has He commanded this, and forbidden that? Why has He shown through a prophet certain particular miracles? What is the object of these laws? And why has He not made the commandments and the prohibitions part of our nature, if it was His object that we should live in accordance with them?

Maimonides claims that there is but one answer to all these questions:

He willed it so; or, His wisdom decided so. Just as He created the world according to His will, at a certain time, in a certain form, and as we do not understand why His will or His wisdom decided upon that peculiar form, and upon that peculiar time, so we do not know why His will or wisdom determined any of the things mentioned in the preceding questions.

God's having created the world absolves us from the need to probe His mind, so-to-speak, to determine the reasons behind His policies in governing mankind. He created the world with a certain, unknown purpose in mind, and thus all decisions He makes in relating to the world and its inhabitants serve that mysterious purpose. Since we are not privy to this ultimate purpose, we will never fully understand the reasons underlying His decisions in governing the earth. The answer to these questions, then, is that God reached these decisions to further the unknown purpose for which He created the universe in the first place.

This presumes, of course, that God created the universe. According to Aristotle's view, the world has always existed independent of God, and thus the purpose of its existence has nothing at all to do with the divine will. Hence, the questions that arise concerning God's rule over earth remained unanswered. Since He did not create the earth and its inhabitants, there must be some reason why He intervenes as He does in their existence.

“Bereishit”: In the Beginning?

Among the intriguing philosophical offshoots of this debate involves the definition and classification of time. Amidst his presentation of the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* (2:13),

Maimonides asserts that time is something created; time as an entity did not exist prior to God's creation of the world. He describes time as "an accident of motion," that is, a result of the motion of the celestial spheres, and it therefore cannot exist independently of those spheres. Thus, belief in *creatio ex nihilo* necessarily entails the belief that no concept of time existed prior to the creation of the universe.

This theory compelled Maimonides to reinterpret the famous first verse in the Torah – "*Bereishit bara Elokim et ha-shamayim ve-et ha-aretz.*" The straightforward translation of this phrase yields, "In the beginning, God created heaven and earth." According to this reading, the Torah speaks of creation as having occurred "in the beginning," or prior to the rest of world history. If so, then the act of creation is seen as existing within the same time continuum as everything that transpired thereafter, which would seemingly prove that time existed before creation. If we assume, as Maimonides does, that time came into being only with the creation of the celestial spheres, then creation cannot be described as having taken place "before" any other event, since the notion of "before" and "after" clearly depends upon the concept of time, which had not existed at the moment of creation.

Maimonides (2:30) therefore posits a novel reading of the opening verse, by suggesting a basic distinction between the Biblical words *reishit* and *techila*, both of which are generally translated as "beginning." *Techila*, he asserts, is used to mean precedence in the sense of time, in reference to that which occurred prior to other events. *Reishit*, by contrast, which has its etymological roots in the familiar Hebrew word *rosh* ("head"), refers to an object's role as a source or origin. Maimonides brings as an example the notion that the heart constitutes "the beginning of the living being," in the sense that it is the life-source of the human organism. Thus, Maimonides argues, "*Bereishit bara Elokim*" should not be read to mean that God created the earth "in the beginning" in the sense of time.

A Problematic Passage

However, while we understand very clearly how Maimonides did not read this phrase – "*Bereishit bara*" – it is far more difficult to ascertain how he did read it, due to the ambiguity of the relevant passage in the *Guide* and the trouble encountered by the work's translators. After drawing this distinction between the words *techila* and *reishit*, Maimonides writes the following, according to Friedlander's translation (1904): "For this reason Scripture employs the term '*bereishit*' (in a principle), in which the *beth* is a preposition denoting 'in.' The true explanation of the first verse of Genesis is as follows: 'In [creating] a principle God created the beings above the things below.'" As mentioned, Maimonides' intent in this passage is very unclear. He has just established that *reishit* refers to that which is an origin or source, and now he asserts that the prefix *be-* in the word *bereishit* means "in" (as opposed to the alternative reading of this prefix, as "with"). Thus, Maimonides appears to translate *bereishit* as "in an origin," or, as Friedlander renders it, "in a principle." Of course, it is far from clear what it would mean that God created heaven and earth "in a principle." Michael Schwartz, in his annotation to his recent translation of the *Guide*, observes the difficulties that arise from the various translations of these lines.

We might explain this passage by first examining Maimonides' comments one paragraph later, where he turns his attention to the verse's final phrase: "*et ha-shamayim ve-et ha-aretz.*" Based on an ancient rabbinic tradition, Maimonides claims that the otherwise untranslatable Hebrew word *et* means "together with," and thus refers to that which accompanies or is secondary to the item mentioned subsequently. Accordingly, "*et ha-shamayim ve-et ha-aretz*" means, as Maimonides writes, "that God created with the heavens everything that the heavens contain, and with the earth everything the earth includes." The Torah begins by informing us that creation began with the genesis of all creatures and beings – everything contained within the heaven and earth. Meaning, in Maimonides' words, "all things were created together, but were separated from each other successively." Maimonides brings as an analogy the case of a farmer who sows various types of

seeds simultaneously, but they sprout at different times. Similarly, God brought the entire universe into existence at a single instant, but the specific objects took shape during the six days of creation in the sequence described in the first chapter of *Bereishit*. This theory is developed more famously by Nachmanides, in his commentary to the Torah's opening verse, where he writes that creation began with the instantaneous formation of an abstract substance from which all things emerged. This understanding of creation resembles the Platonic theory, only with one critical distinction: whereas Plato believed that the abstract substance coexisted with God even before creation, Nachmanides claims that God Himself created that substance and then fashioned the rest of the universe from it. Maimonides does not speak in terms of a primordial, abstract substance, but he very clearly establishes that God created all things together, simultaneously, and the six-day process of creation entailed the separation and designation of the earth's specific elements, rather than their genesis, which occurred already on the first day.

Maimonides enlists this theory to refute a possible proof against his understanding of time. If, indeed, time results solely from the motion of the spheres and cannot exist without them, then how can the Torah speak of three "days" of creation prior to the creation of the celestial spheres on the fourth day? What meaning is there to the term "day" before the emergence of the solar system, unless there exists a concept of time independent of that system? Maimonides responds that the spheres, like the rest of the universe, in fact came into being at the very onset of creation. He cites an explicit passage from the Midrashic volume *Bereishit Rabba* to this effect: "These lights [of the luminaries mentioned in the Creation of the fourth day] are the same that were created on the first day, but were only fixed in their places on the fourth day." Thus, time likewise existed ever since the initial moment of creation, at which point the celestial spheres came into being.

With this in mind, let us return to Maimonides' discussion concerning the word *bereishit*. As we saw, Maimonides interprets *reishit* to mean "origin" and the prefix *be-* as meaning "in." Seemingly, then, he understood the word *bereishit* to mean "in the form of an origin." The Torah's opening verse informs us that God created all things in heaven and earth in the form of a *reishit*, as a substance containing the entire universe, from which He subsequently separated each individual element. The word *bereishit* thus describes not the time of creation, but rather the manner of creation. The various components of the universe were not created successively, but rather *bereishit* – as a substance from which they were then subsequently separated and set into place.

"This is the Record of the History of Man"

Maimonides returns to the theory of *creatio ex nihilo* much later in the *Guide* (3:50), in a much different context – amidst his explanation of the purpose underlying several seemingly unimportant narratives in the Bible. After asserting that "every narrative in the Law serves a certain purpose in connection with religious teaching," Maimonides attempts to explain the purpose served by the sections of Parashat *Bereishit* (chapter 5) and Parashat *Noach* (chapter 10) which present genealogical records of the early generations. These chapters contain virtually no information other than the names and life spans of the descendants of Adam through Noach, and of Noach through Avraham. Maimonides offers the following insight into the religious importance of these genealogical records:

It is one of the fundamental principles of the Law that the Universe has been created *ex nihilo*, and that of the human race, one individual being, Adam, was created. As the time which elapsed from Adam to Moses was not more than about two thousand five hundred years, people would have doubted the truth of that statement if no other information had been added, seeing that the human race was spread over all parts of the earth in different families and with different languages, very unlike the one to the other. In order to remove this doubt the Law gives the genealogy of the nations and the manner how they branched off from a common root. It names those of them who were well known, and tells who their fathers were, how long and where they lived.

The existence of so many different peoples, of such different appearances, cultures and habits, who live on lands so distant from one another, might seem inconsistent with the principle of *ex nihilo* – the notion that all existence originated from a single source. The Torah therefore found it necessary to trace all peoples back to their root – Adam, and for this reason we find the detailed and otherwise uninteresting lists of names and ages in the early chapters of the Book of Bereishit.

This explanation perhaps sheds light on a somewhat mysterious passage in *Torat Kohanim* (Parashat Kedoshim) and the Talmud Yerushalmi (Nedarim 9:4), where a debate is recorded as to which verse in the Torah represents the *kelal gadol ba-Torah* – the “great principle of the Torah.” The more famous view, that of Rabbi Akiva, affords this status to the famous adage, “*Ve-ahavta le-rei’akha kamokha*” – “You shall love your fellow as yourself” (Vayikra 19:18). Ben-Azai, however, responds that another verse encapsulates an even greater “principle” – the verse with which the Torah introduces the genealogical record in Parashat Bereishit: “*Zeh sefer toledot Adam*” (“This is the record of the history of man”). Many commentators have struggled to identify the “great principle” latent within this seemingly ordinary verse, particularly in comparison to the far-reaching implications and demands of the obligation to love one’s fellow as himself. The Ra’avad, who wrote one of the earliest commentators to *Torat Kohanim*, explains that Ben-Azai refers to the verse’s closing phrase: “on the day on which God created man, He made him in the image of God.” The “great principle” conveyed through this verse is the notion that all humans are created in the divine image, a quality that demands their respect and proper treatment. This message transcends that of “love your fellow as yourself” because it obligates one to treat others with dignity even if he does not request that he himself be treated properly by others. (This interpretation also appears in *Raboteinu Ba’alei Ha-Tosafot al Ha-Torah* – a compendium of Biblical commentaries by the Tosafists.)

In light of this passage in the *Guide*, however, we might arrive at a much different explanation of Ben-Azai’s view. The “record of the history of man” indeed constitutes a “great principle of the Torah,” because it serves to substantiate and confirm the fundamental belief of God as Creator. Since, as Maimonides explains, the rapid reproduction and dispersion of the human race threatened to undermine this tenet, the genealogical records of the Book of Bereishit play an indispensable role in supporting the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, which Maimonides describes as “one of the fundamental principles of the Law.”

Maimonides and *Ex Nihilo*

In academic circles, there is considerable discussion concerning Maimonides’ attitude towards the notion of *creatio ex nihilo* and the Aristotelian doctrine of the eternity of the universe. Many scholars believe that Maimonides did not necessarily oppose Aristotle’s theory, and they detect various nuances in Maimonides’ formulation in several contexts that might suggest his acceptance of the Aristotelian view. Naomi K. Frankel summarizes and examines these arguments in an article available at www.aishdas.org/articles/rambam_creation.htm. However, the passages cited and discussed here hardly leave room for doubt regarding Maimonides’ firm belief in the earth’s creation out of non-existence. His numerous references to the importance and centrality of this belief, as well as the relatively vast amount of space he allocates to this subject in the *Guide*, suffice to convince us of his unequivocal stance in favor of *creatio ex nihilo*. What more, as we saw in the previous section, Maimonides considered this belief so vital that it warranted the Torah’s inclusion of two large chapters of intrinsically trivial genealogical data. (This point is made by Rabbi Dr. Gidon Rothstein, at www.rjconline.org/mn50.html.)

After presenting the theory of *ex nihilo* (2:13), Maimonides explicitly cautions, “Do not follow any other theory.” We may reasonably assume that he heeded his own advice, and resolutely subscribed to the basic tenet of creation and rejected Aristotle’s theory of the eternity of the universe.