

We are still in the midst of a difficult week. Perhaps this is the first of many difficult weeks to come. On Shabbat we always try to find sanctuary in shul, in community, and in Torah. Here as some beautiful midrashim on creation. In some way, they take our minds off the horrible tidal wave of horrific images and anguish that we are all experiencing.

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| <p>וְאָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה אָמַר רַב: עֲשָׂרָה דְּבָרִים נִבְרְאוּ בְּיוֹם רֵאשִׁוֹן וְאֵלֵי הֵן: שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ תְּהוּ וְהוּ אוֹר וְחָשֶׁךְ רוּחַ וּמַיִם מִדַּת יוֹם וּמִדַּת לַיְלָה. חֲגִיגָה יב.</p> | <p>Rav Yehuda said that Rav said: Ten things were created on the first day of Creation and they are as follows: Heaven and earth; <i>tohu and vohu</i>, (unformed and void;) light and darkness; wind and water; the length of day and the length of night. Chagigah 12a</p> |
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People have lots of mechanisms for dealing with stress. Some people do breathing exercises. Others, go for long walks. We happen to live not far from an ocean. A physician friend once told me that from time to time he takes a short drive to the Jersey Shore just to look at the ocean and remind himself of the vastness of time and space and our place in the larger scheme of things. This short midrash is the literary equivalent of taking a walk near the ocean. Did it ever occur to us, on the hundredth time we are reading this that there are a series of ten things that were created on the First Day in five pairs? The midrash reads like a poem and each of us could probably invent our own simple melody for it. Perhaps it is a meditation, or a mantra. It's possible to read it that way too. And so, what does it mean? Here is an interpretation: *Heaven and earth*. The vastness of everything. The infinity of reality. The experience of smallness. Mystery. Eternity. Astronomers estimate that the universe is 13.787 billion years (+ or - 20 million!). The span of our lives is infinitesimal in that context. And yet we matter. Each life is a universe. *Tohu va-Vohu*. Is *tohu* one thing and *vohu* another? For the sake of this midrash, Rav thought so. What is *tohu*? Emptiness. Waste. Chaos. Confusion. Formlessness. Unreality. Purposeless. What is *vohu*? Also chaos. Emptiness. Related to the word *בהוה-astonishment*. Put those two words together and you it is an indescribable maelstrom of astonishing

emptiness-chaos. It conveys an unimaginable sense of complete and total dissolution. *Light and darkness*. Visible light is only one small fraction of a spectrum of electro-magnetic radiation that exists between ultra-violet and infra-red. Darkness is the absence of any visible light. Creation of light necessitates its separation from darkness so that darkness can be an entity onto itself. Having created darkness, the creation of light makes a murky mixture. The separation of light and darkness establishes not only metaphorical realms of hope and despair but actual realms of possibility and nothingness. *Wind and water*. We have moved from vastness and eternity to things that we recognize from our basic creatureliness. *The length of day and the length of night*. Time. The flow of time. Unrelated to the spinning of the earth or anything to do with physics, the first day of creation is completed with defined units of time. In the midst of chaos, we cannot comprehend time. Awareness of time is one step to emerging from chaos. And what is not part of these pairs? Who is outside any pairing? God. God is singular. God is one. God creates all of these pairs, orders them, separates them and fashions from them, all of the other elements of the universe. But God is separate from them, and totally other from them.

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| <p>עֲשָׂרָה דְּבָרִים נִבְרְאוּ בְּעֶרְבַּ שְׁבֻת בֵּין הַשְּׁמֹשׁוֹת וְאֵלֵי הֵן: פִּי הָאָרֶץ, וּפִי הַבְּאֵר, וּפִי הַדּוֹנָקָי, וְהַקַּשָׁת, וְהַמָּן, וְהַמָּטָה, וְהַשְּׁמִיר, וְהַקֶּטֶב, וְהַמִּקְטָב, וְהַלּוּחֹת. וַיֵּשׁ אוֹמְרִים: אֵף הַמְזִיקִין, וּקְבוּרַתוֹ שֶׁל מֹשֶׁה, וְאֵילוֹ שֶׁל אַבְרָהָם אֲבִינוּ. וַיֵּשׁ אוֹמְרִים: אֵף צִבָּת בַּצִּבָּת עֲשׂוּיָה: פִּרְקֵי אֲבוֹת הוֹ:</p> | <p>Ten things were created on the eve of the Sabbath at twilight, and these are they: [1] the mouth of the earth, [2] the mouth of the well, [3] the mouth of the donkey, [4] the rainbow, [5] the manna, [6] the staff [of Moses], [7] the shamir, [8] the letters, [9] the writing, [10] and the tablets. And some say: also the demons, the grave of Moses, and the ram of Abraham, our father. And some say: and also tongs, made with tongs. Pirkei Avot 5:6</p> |
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It is natural to connect this well-known and often-taught statement from Pirkei Avot with the

talmudic teaching cited above. Both start with, *Ten things were created*. But while the Chagigah text talks about the first day, the Pirkei Avot text talks about the absolutely last hour of possible creation, that is, just as day was turning to night on the eve of the Sabbath at the end of the first week. Some quick observations: the items of the first day are almost beyond imagination and create an almost infinite expanse for meditative exploration. That text places the individual within the context of infinity and eternity, and also hint at the events to come. (In the realm of meditation, it is a teaching that enables one to approach the idea of emergence from chaos, the necessity to order one's life after a cataclysmic event. It suggests possibility. Even hope. As such it is a teaching of comfort. It is a teaching that is appropriate for a week like this: a national week of shiva.) This teaching places the individual within the context of biblical time. All of the items are shorthand references to miraculous things or anomalies. The *mouth of the earth* is the place where Korah and his cohort was swallowed up. The *mouth of the well* refers to the miraculous well in the desert. The *mouth of the donkey* refers to Bilaam's donkey. These three seem to form one group linked by the word *mouth* and possibly other characteristics. *The rainbow, the manna, the staff* seem to be anomalous on a different level. *The shamir* refers to the legendary implement that carved the breastplate, *the letters* refers to the lettering of the Ten Commandments and *the writing* refers to the miraculous way that the text of the commandments presented themselves, almost in a kind of holograph that could be seen from all sides. And then the alternate list which we can debate. What interpretation can we give to this list? It opens up a conversation about miracles and God. How do we explain these events that are outside of nature? They were part of creation and as creation unfolds these anomalies emerge. By placing these very specific items at the beginning of time, we are presented with a theology of God's timelessness and an idea that divine interventions, at least as far as they took place in the biblical stories, were all intended from the beginning of time.

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| רבי יהודה ורבי נחמיה. רבי יהודה אומר: | Rabbi Yehuda and Rabbi Nehemya debated the order of creation. Rabbi Yehuda says: |
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| האורה נבראת תחלה. משל למלך שבקש לבנות פלטיין, והיה אותו מקום אפל. מה עשה? הדליק נרות ופנסין לידע היאך הוא קובע תימליוסים, כך האורה נבראת תחלה. ורבי נחמיה אמר: העולם נברא תחלה, משל למלך שבנה פלטיין ועטרה בגרות ופנסין. בראשית רבה ג:א | The light was created first. This is analogous to a king who sought to build a palace, but that location was dark. What did he do? He kindled lamps and lanterns to ascertain how he would lay the foundation. So, too, the light was created first. Rabbi Nehemya said: The world was created first. This is analogous to a king who built a palace and adorned it with lamps and lanterns. Bereishit Rabbah 3:1 |
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Light and darkness. Good and evil. This week we had an illustration of pure evil. This midrash of parables is itself a parable. Does light precede the ordering of the universe, or does the universe exist in some primordial manner, with light coming at God's behest as the first act of ordering? Put less allegorically, does light, ie. the light of God, goodness, kindness, compassion, justice, truth, morality, pre-exist creation, with the messiness of creation eclipsing it, or is creation simply a chaotic mess with God's light imposing an order on it? Is the attempt to be good an attempt to retrieve the goodness emplaced within creation, or is it an effort to fix a chaos, and by extension, an evil that is so deeply embedded in reality? We saw evil this week. Pure, unadulterated evil. We honor and are grateful to peoples of the world who recognize it for what it was. We are astonished, stupefied, and frankly alarmed at the moral bankruptcy of those who equivocate on it and try to explain it any other way. *Yehi Or -Yehi Or. Let there be light!* One should note that these are God's first words in the Bible. Our rabbis debated where and when and in what context they were said in order to debate deeper ideas about the nature of morality and the world. But the first words suggest to us a way of living and a way of coping and that is, to keep searching for light in darkness, and if we don't find that light, become of source of light ourselves.

Shabbat Shalom.