"IN THE BEGINNING OF": A JOURNEY THROUGH TEXT

Brought to you by theGlobalDay.org

A project of the Aleph Society
"In the Beginning Of": A Journey Through Text

Welcome!

The holiday of Simchat Torah celebrates the beginning of a new year of reading the Five Books of Moses – the Torah. This annual cycle is a journey on which we may discover new sights along the way. This guide contains the text of the First Day of Creation (Genesis 1:1-5), with accompanying questions to prompt discussion about the text. Use them as a first taste of the Torah or as part of your Simchat Torah celebrations.

Here at the Global Day of Jewish Learning, our annual study theme serves as a lens to help us focus on new aspects of Jewish texts that we turn and return to each year. The 2018 study theme is Extraordinary Passages: Text and Travels, offering an opportunity to appreciate the annual journey of traveling through the text - the Bible.

With this guide we invite you to join us for that journey at the beginning. Whether this is your first voyage into text study or one-hundred-and-first, the landscape along this route changes each time: our perceptions shift as life reshapes us. What can we learn about ourselves through cycles? When we retrace a path, what do we gain?

The materials included here are taken from the writings and commentaries of Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz in the recently-published Steinsaltz Humash. The Global Day is a project of the Aleph Society, supporting the work of Rabbi Steinsaltz. He is internationally regarded as one of the greatest rabbis of this century, best known for his commentary on the entire Talmud and his work on Jewish mysticism. Let Rabbi Steinsaltz be your tour guide on this trip through the Torah.

Our text selection presents the First Day of Creation with commentary and explanatory notes by Rabbi Steinsaltz, and his introduction to the Book of Genesis from the Steinsaltz Humash. You can engage with either or both of the texts; adapt or add discussion questions in whatever way makes sense for you. Use them for personal study, to launch conversations, or as a guide to bring fresh readings to the Bible.

This journey through the Bible is relevant today for so many reasons. The holiday of Simchat Torah celebrates the communal and the personal voyages we make in our cycle through the text, concluding our readings and immediately starting again. We hope this text selection gives you a new way to discover, unfold and explore, and join us in beginning at the beginning.

Chag Sameach,

Karen Sponder	 Eliana Moskowitz
Project Director	 Community Coordinator

The Global Day of Jewish Learning
and The Aleph Society

Brought to you by the Global Day of Jewish Learning, a project of the Aleph Society, furthering Rabbi Steinsaltz’s mission to “Let My People Know”. Connect your community at www.theGlobalDay.org.
1:1 In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The opening verse takes the existence of God as a given. It does not address questions about God’s origin or nature; rather, God is understood to be the absolute existence from which everything begins. Already at the beginning of the account of Creation, heaven and earth appear as distinct entities and as a framework for all of creation, as detailed in the rest of the chapter.

2 The earth was unformed and empty [tohu vavohu]. The earth was completely lacking any structure or order. The heavens too were unformed and empty, but the verse initially focuses on the earth, its structure and content. Although these two terms appear together in other places in the Bible, the precise meaning of the word vohu is difficult to ascertain; it is even uncertain whether vohu refers to a distinct concept. And darkness was upon the face of the deep. The deep may refer to deep waters, or to the unstructured universe, that existed at the time. At this early stage of Creation, nothing had yet to receive definite shape; nothing had been revealed. Therefore, the darkness upon the face of the deep was merely the absence of the light that was about to be created. Some commentaries maintain that the darkness was not the absence of light, but an entity in itself, based on the verse “I form the light, and create darkness.” And the spirit of God hovered over the surface of the water. Water is the first actual substance mentioned in the Torah, as the heaven and the earth are not substances but general entities or zones. The verse does not discuss the creation of the primeval substance that served as the foundation for all of existence. In any case, the Torah indicates that God’s power, or will, exists in some form in this reality. God is not located within these entities, and He certainly is not to be identified with them; rather, He hovers close by while remaining separate from them.

3 The process of Creation begins: God said: Let there be light, and there was light. It is difficult to understand the meaning or significance of the phrase “God said.” The most that can be understood from this cryptic description is that God transmitted a kind of message that there should be light, and His instruction came to pass. Light was the first creation to emerge from tohu vavohu. It was unlike any form of light known to mankind; it did not emanate from a prior source. Perhaps it was not even a physical light, but a unique phenomenon.

4 God saw the light that it was good. As soon as the light emerged from the unformed universe, God evaluated it and distinguished between good and bad. And God divided between the light and the darkness. Once light was created and discerned as good, the next phase of its creation began, namely, the stage of separation, which established the light as a clearly defined entity. The act of discerning and separating between good and bad would continue till the end of time and manifest itself also in human history and civilization.
5 God called the light day. From the inception of the concepts of light and day, there was some measure of synonymy between them. Nevertheless, they are clearly and independently defined. Aside from day’s association with daylight, the day denotes a specific period of time. At this early stage of the Creation, with the formation of light comes the establishment of time. Until this point, the universe was in a raw state, completely unstructured and undefined; even space and time were not yet defined. These concepts came into being when God willed it. And to the darkness He called night. Darkness as well is removed from its previous status as a description of space alone and placed in a framework of time. The concepts of day and night as they appear in this verse express what the Sages called the order of time, in other words, the notions of before and after, relative concepts that did not apply when the earth was still unformed and empty. The verse introduces additional new concepts: It was evening and it was morning, one day.

The essence of time is comprised of evening, which is related to darkness and night, and morning, which is related to light and day. After the passage of evening and morning, one day comes to an end. Therefore, the term “day,” which previously referred specifically to the hours of light and was even identified with light, now receives an additional meaning: A unit of time that includes both the hours of light and darkness. The verse refers to this first day of Creation as “one day” instead of the first day, as the day itself is a distinct entity. In other words, the existence of one day did not indicate the existence of a second. The acts of creation that followed occurred spontaneously. Consequently, the next day may be considered the second day only in the sense that there was already one day preceding it; its existence did not derive from the existence of the first day. The creation of light, therefore, was unique, as its appearance allowed for the basic arrangement of space and time.

Discussion Notes

Note on Genesis 1:1 – 2:3 | It is commonly thought that the beginning of the book of Genesis presents a cosmogony, a theory of how the universe came to exist. While this is mostly correct, the account of Creation appearing in Genesis diverges from other recorded accounts in that it disregards the question of what was the starting point of existence itself. For this reason, the Torah begins the account of Creation with the word bereshit, which literally means “in the beginning of.” The account begins at the beginning of some pre-existing process. Had the verse stated bareshit, it would have been understood as meaning simply “in the beginning.” By contrast, the term bereshit indicates the beginning of some specific, unnamed process. It appears that a fundamental message lies hidden in this first word: At some early stage in the mysterious process of creating existence, God created the heavens and the earth.

1:2 | The earth was unformed and empty: Some of the commentaries maintain that heaven and earth contained all the components of Creation from the outset in a chaotic jumble (see Ramban, verse 1; Bereshit Rabba 1:14). According to this opinion, the process of Creation essentially involved the arrangement of these various components, specifically the establishment of the location, status, and function of each and every entity.

1:3 | And there was light: If one assumes that the light was indeed physical, it can be described as radiating from all of existence. There were no boundaries to it; it spread over the entire universe. Not for naught did the Sages teach that with this light one could see from one end of the world to the other (Hagiga 12a).

1:4 | That it was good: The process of appraisal and judgment will appear in the subsequent stages of Creation as well. It is a fundamental part not only of the book of Genesis but of the other books of the Bible too, and can even be considered a foundational principle of Judaism itself (see introduction to commentary on Leviticus). Consequently, the evaluative term “good” is among the first words of the Torah and is the first abstract idea mentioned in the Torah.
The concept of good can refer to a positive evaluation on a number of levels. Earlier generations differentiated between the moral good, the opposite of which is evil; the practical good, or the effective; and the pleasant (see Rambam’s Introduction to Avot 5; Sefer HaIkkarim 3:35). The Bible also refers to the aesthetically beautiful as good. It seems that throughout the recounting of the process of Creation, the descriptive term “good” is used in all its various meanings.

1:5 | It was evening and it was morning: When does the day begin? Intuitively it begins with morning’s first light. According to contemporary convention, a new day begins at midnight. The biblical account of Creation, however, indicates that the unit of time known as day begins in the evening, so that darkness precedes light (see also Leviticus 22:7, 23:32; Berakhot 2a). This definition represents a worldview in which absence precedes existence (see Tzidkat HaTzaddik 11). That is, darkness is perceived as a more primordial reality from which its antithesis, light, emerges. The day begins with the evening and continues through the morning light, just as the beginning of all existence was hidden in its absence. This idea also conveys a message of hope: From a dark and concealed beginning light shall emerge.

Discussion Questions for Text #1

1. The First Day, according to the text, actually begins in the evening and continues in the morning, creating a “framework of time”. Rabbi Steinsaltz points out that, “The concepts of day and night...express what the Sages called the order of time, in other words, the notions of before and after, relative concepts that did not apply when the earth was still unformed and empty.” How might this inform your understanding of units of time and cycles?

2. In Genesis 1:4, God says that light is good. Does this mean dark is bad? Why or why not? Rabbi Steinsaltz writes that, “The act of discerning and separating between good and bad would continue till the end of time and manifest itself also in human history and civilization.” How are one's actions part of the ongoing process of defining good and bad?

3. Rabbi Steinsaltz says that a day beginning in the evening and continuing through the morning light “conveys a message of hope.” Indeed, light has some very hopeful qualities: when you share light, you do not have less light, you multiply it; just a little bit of light can dispel darkness, but a little bit of darkness cannot dispel light. How does this inform your understanding of the cycle of a day? How might this complicate your understanding of good and bad? Do you agree with Rabbi Steinsaltz that it is hopeful?

4. The word bereshit (בראשית) is translated here as “in the beginning of”, rather than just “in the beginning”. What do you think came before the beginning of the text? Why do you think the text does not discuss the origin or activities of God before the story of Creation begins?
Text #2 – Introduction to the Book of Genesis


The Book of Genesis is the book of beginnings and roots. It covers a far greater time period than all the other books of the Torah combined, surveying thousands of years, whereas the other books of the Torah deal with events that occurred over the course of 120 years. The early sections of Genesis skim over some two thousand years without much comment, although the narrative interrupts its general survey to focus on specific details and stories. These particulars do not merely add interest and color to the general picture, but together constitute the essential part of the overall tapestry of the book.

Genesis differs from the other books of the Torah in that it is virtually all narrative accounts of events, with very few commandments. In the manner of the Bible, it does not explicitly discuss philosophical or theoretical topics; rather, its contents are presented to the reader in the form of stories. Through its stories, the book deals with numerous fundamental human problems. Thus, the book of Genesis stands on its own, because it is relevant to all people. Rarely can one find in the book definitive positive or negative judgments.

The stories mainly relate what happened. That said, even when the Torah does not offer an explicit judgment, its opinion frequently can be inferred from the verses themselves. Direct messages, insights and revelations, discussions and analyses, questions and answers, are rarely found explicitly in the book. Instead, they are planted in the mind of the learner and left to take root and develop intellectually and emotionally within his or her soul, in accordance with his or her abilities.

At first glance it might seem that Genesis is an orderly book, as it stays faithful to the timeline of the events it describes. However, a more careful examination of the sequence of the verses shows that there are invariably aspects of the text that are not fully elucidated. Some of the missing details are vital for a proper understanding, while others merely arouse the reader’s curiosity.

Even the opening verse, which apparently deals with the very beginning of all beginnings, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,” actually occurs in the middle of the story. After all, the undoubted first and central “protagonist” of the book, as indicated by the number of mentions of His name, is God Himself, and yet He appears in the first verse of the book without any introduction or explanation. Indeed, God is the beginning of existence not only in the chronological sense, but also in the manner described in philosophical literature as the Primary Cause.

Similarly, on more than one occasion, other important characters in the book, human or otherwise, appear on the scene with no background information provided, and their actions are generally described without any accompanying explanatory comments.

Granted, over the generations, the Sages have elucidated these stories with various interpretations, but the stories of the Torah flow without such glosses, as though saying to the reader: The rest is commentary; go learn.

The three main topics of the book are the creation of the world in general, humanity as a whole, and the seeds of the development of God’s elected people, Israel. However, the attention paid to the three subjects is unequal. The stories with the widest scope are short and obscure; the more an incident is focused and limited in scope, the more detail the text provides.

The first topic, the creation of the world in general, is found mainly in the first chapter, which depicts the formation of various cosmic entities and creatures from a primeval state of being. The book describes a world built on internal contrasts yet whose discrete beings somehow unite into a single essence.
These accounts also evoke thoughts on the relationship between creation as a whole, with its many creatures, and the rational being that is man; the reproductive urges and will to dominate that define the biological world; and the complex and problematic nature of man, who is tasked with further developing God’s creation.

The sections of the book that deal with humanity in general touch upon the basic issues of philosophy: human consciousness; the struggle between primitive nature and artifice; the temptations and dangers of the developing mind, as well as the problems of desire and sin, lust and law breaking, jealousy and murder; responsibility and punishment; human creativity and those problems resulting from the very existence and stratification of human society. However, as stated above, these issues are not analyzed through a series of philosophical observations, but arise from the narrative accounts. The stories in the first chapters, Parashat Bereshit and Parashat Noah, can be read as parables, as introductions or keys to an entire world of human thought.

The sections of the book that concentrate on its third topic, the origins of the chosen people, contain the stories of the patriarchs and the nation’s first generations. The individuals depicted are presented in their full humanity. Their lives are full of exertions, confrontations, and trials. The forefathers of the Jewish people must deal with the same problems that occupy humanity as a whole: love and hate, jealousy and competition, errors and their consequences. They are not spared pain, enslavement, or internal and external strife, but they also experience forgiveness and absolution.

Nevertheless, alongside the human, personal, and familial aspects of the lives of the patriarchs, the book of Genesis depicts their relationship with God, together with their commitment and extreme devotion to the covenant with Him. Their personalities are molded through all of these factors.

God’s elect are capable not only of asking questions, but also of receiving answers and instructions, and these figures create the foundations for the rest of the books of the Torah.

**Discussion Questions for Text #2**

1. Rabbi Steinsaltz points out that the Creation story begins in the middle of the action, but does not say what was happening before the narrative begins. How do you react when you hear or read something that is missing information, or is given in pieces? How do you fill in those blanks? Why is it important to think about what is unsaid or unwritten?

2. Genesis establishes boundaries: the arrangement of things in a sequence of events, creating timeframes, making order out of nothingness. How can we travel “to” and “from”, or “between”, if there are no defined spaces? What does the Creation story tell you about the way Judaism grapples with our Earthly existence?
About the Global Day of Jewish Learning

The Global Day of Jewish Learning unites Jewish communities across the world through the study of our shared texts. Explore the richness of our Jewish heritage with the 2018 Global Day of Jewish Learning on Sunday, November 11. The study theme is Extraordinary Passages: Text and Travels. What are the journeys that matter most to us? From ancient adventures to the modern diaspora, spiritual to physical, you can experience the journeys of individuals and the Jewish people. Tens of thousands of Jews in 500+ communities in 46 countries across 6 continents come together for this truly unique learning event.

The Aleph Society

The Aleph Society is the parent organization of the Global Day of Jewish Learning. Founded in 1988, its mission is to expand Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz’s goal of the development of Jews, Jewish identity and Jewish communities. With operations in Israel, Russia, the United States, and the United Kingdom, The Aleph Society has given Jews everywhere access to fundamental texts, the skills with which to understand those texts, the motivation to study, and an appreciation for the contributions of fellow Jews of all backgrounds.

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz

Rabbi Steinsaltz is a teacher, philosopher, social critic and prolific author of more than 60 books. His lifelong work in Jewish education earned him the Israel Prize, his country’s highest honor.

Born in Jerusalem in 1937 to secular parents, Rabbi Steinsaltz studied physics and chemistry at the Hebrew University. He established several experimental schools and, at the age of 24, became Israel’s youngest school principal.

In 1965, he began his monumental Hebrew translation and commentary on the Talmud, which was completed in 2010. The Rabbi’s classic work of Kabbalah, The Thirteen Petalled Rose, was first published in 1980 and now appears in eight languages. In all, Rabbi Steinsaltz has authored some 60 books and hundreds of articles on subjects ranging from zoology to theology to social commentary. In 2012, Koren Publishers released the English edition of Rabbi Steinsaltz’s Talmud translation and commentary, and in 2018 will publish the groundbreaking Steinsaltz Humash.
INTRODUCING

THE LOUIS WEISFELD EDITION

STEINSALTZ HUMASH

• Explanatory introductions
• Clear translation that reflects Rabbi Steinsaltz’s ‘back to peshat’ understanding of the text
• Maps, illustrations and charts clarify concepts
• Real-life color photos
• Explanatory notes on language, history, archeology, science, and more

SAVE $10 + get FREE Shipping on your purchase with code Aleph

Valid until November 1, 2018
JOIN THE CELEBRATION!

GATHER YOUR COMMUNITY TOGETHER FOR THE

2018 GLOBAL DAY OF JEWISH LEARNING

ON SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 11, 2018

JEWS WORLDWIDE UNITE IN A DAY OF STUDY, AROUND THE THEME OF

EXTRAORDINARY PASSAGES: TEXTS AND TRAVELS

WHAT TIME: Whenever works best for you and your community schedule.
IDEAS: breakfast, Hebrew school, lunch-and-learn, a full-day of sessions...

HOW: Get started using the FREE, easy-to-use study guide.
Your community can explore the richness of Jewish texts in your very own Global Day event.
IDEAS: follow the curriculum, adapt the materials, invite a guest speaker, watch learning videos...

WHERE: Jews in 500+ communities in more than 40 countries across 6 continents will learn on the same day. Add your community to the Global Jewish Map! Together we can unite the Jewish people.

RSVP: Register your event at theGlobalDay.org/register. When you register, you gain FREE access to the curriculum, event-planning tools, video classes and more!

Registration is FREE. Materials are FREE.
Questions? Call us at +1 (212) 840-1166 or email eliana@theglobalday.org.

The Global Day furthers the mission of Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz, to “Let My People Know”