

**What It Means to Be a Jew II**  
**This is the Day of the World's Birth**  
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*"Hayom harat Olam!"* "This is the day of the world's birth!" That is what we proclaim each time we hear the Shofar's blast! It is a central theme of this day of Rosh Hashanah!

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." So begins our Torah and one of the most familiar and most misunderstood stories in all of literature. So many ask: How could God have created the world in seven days? What about the dinosaurs and evolution? Don't we believe in that?

Of course we believe in that! The creation story in Genesis never was meant to offer a scientific account of HOW the world was created. It is rather an exquisite religious poem offering insight as to WHY we are here.

The biblical authors were not interested in writing science. The truths of the creation story are the religious ideas that it sets forth --ideas upon which all subsequent Jewish thought depends.

The first assumption of the story is that God is behind creation. However the world came to be our story contends that a single, good caring God initiated the process. God acted with purpose and meaning. Therefore, our lives have purpose and meaning.

In the story, everything builds on what comes before. Note the rhythm and the repetition of certain key phrases: "And God said Let there be...and there was" "And God saw... that it was good." "And there was evening and there was morning ..." These recurring refrains convey a sense of order and intention.

The next major teaching of the story is that we human beings are in charge of and responsible for the world. Until the text (Chapter 1, verse 26) begins to tell of the creation of human beings, the method by which God creates is simple and clear: God said, "Let there be..." and the next step in creation unfolds.

When it comes to humanity, though, the method of creation changes. "And God said: Let us create humanity in our image after our likeness. And they shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the air on the cattle and all the earth and everything that creeps on the earth." And God created us human beings – male and female – in the Divine Image.

That does not mean, of course, that we look like God. God has no shape or form. It means that we human beings have God-like powers, and the Almighty has set us in charge of and responsible for the earth. It is an awesome power, and we can use it for good or for ill.

The Midrash (Bereshit Rabbah 8:11) teaches that we human beings stand midway between God and the rest of the animals. Like the animals we eat, sleep, drink, procreate, eliminate our waste and die. But in a God-like way we have the power to think, analyze, create and shape the environment in a way that far surpasses any other creature.

We are the only creatures on earth that can go to the side of a mountain, mine ore from the mountain, and turn the ore into iron, the iron into steel and with that steel forge the most delicate of surgical instruments to heal and to save lives.

We are, also, the only creature that can go to the same mountain, mine the same ore and from that ore fashion bombs and bullets whose only purpose is to kill and to maim.

The implicit and overriding message of the story is that God wants us to use our power to form a just, caring, compassionate society on earth. But we—not God—must decide if we will.

The final religious teaching of the story concerns Shabbat. “And the heavens and the earth were finished and all of their array. And God rested on the seventh day from all the work of creation that he had done. And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy because on it God rested from all the work of creation that he had done.” (Gen 2:1-3 1/2)

Traditional Jews chant or recite these words from the beginning of Genesis Chapter two prior to chanting the Kiddush – the blessing over the wine – on Friday night. The Torah portrays God resting on the seventh day to teach us that we too need each week a day that is different from our daily routine. We need a day to step back, and ponder, “What is the purpose of all of my striving? What is the point?”

Shabbat is not meant merely for rest in a physical sense. Rather it is to be a day of spiritual and intellectual replenishment as well. Through worship, Torah study, personal contemplation, family time, even physical recreation --all are ways to honor Shabbat.

So taken as a whole, the Creation Story in Genesis stands as a glorious headline over the rest of the Torah. It encapsulates the cardinal ideals of our faith in these assertions:

1. However it happened, God is behind creation
2. The world is no accident. Everything is done in orderly and purposeful fashion. That means that life has purpose and meaning. Moreover it means that **OUR** lives have purpose and meaning. It is a precious gift that God wants us to use wisely and in ways that enhance this world that we live in.
3. We humans are in charge of and responsible for this world. It is an awesome responsibility.
4. Shabbat is God’s gift to us, but it also is a responsibility we have to God. If we understand Shabbat and observe it – not necessarily in the Orthodox sense – but as a day of meaningful contemplation of our purpose in life – we equip ourselves to fulfill God’s hope that we use our talents to make the world a better place.

Now if we look in the Torah, we notice that Rosh Hashanah – this first day of the seventh month receives scanty mention. How then did this day become such a vital observance for Jews around the world?

For me, the answer is clear! So central to Jewish thinking are the teachings of the Creation story we have discussed – so central are they to who we are and what we believe—that we absolutely needed a major observance to commemorate them and reflect on them.

Rosh Hashanah is a time of serious contemplation. We stand before God for judgment. Like an athlete training for an important event, we have been preparing ourselves for the entire month of Elul by trying to do good deeds and extra study. As the 13<sup>th</sup> c. Sage Aaron Ha Levi of Barcelona noted, “...it is fit that we celebrate Rosh Ha Shanah as a festive day; but since is a Day of Judgment for all living things, it is also fit that we observe Rosh ha-Shanah with greater fear and awe than all the other festive days.” (Agnon p.15.)

Why? Because “*Hayom harat Olam.*” This is the day of the world’s birth. This is the day God created humanity in the Divine image. This is the day – more than any other that reminds us of the awesome responsibility that accompanies that great honor!

Genesis’ magnificent creation story makes no pretense of being scientific. Rather, it teaches the core values upon which our religious traditions rests. It teaches that God entrusts the earth to our care. It is, though, as the Midrash (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 7:13) reminds us, the only earth we will get. May that knowledge inspire us to care for it lovingly and use the talents with which God has blessed us to hand over a safer, sweeter more ecologically sound world to our children and grandchildren!

Amen