



**This activity uses material from the topic of challenges from science in Theme 2B.**

## THE IDEA: The creation of the world

It is a basic and traditional Jewish belief that God is the creator of the universe. The Book of Genesis begins with the Hebrew word 'Bereshit', which has been understood as meaning 'in the beginning'. According to Genesis 1:1 'In the beginning God created the Heaven and the Earth' and the centrality of this belief is such that it has influenced the liturgy of the synagogue in many ways. A cosmogony is a theory about the origin of the universe, and Epstein indicates that the Bible's cosmogony rests on two stories at the beginning of Genesis. The Torah opens with the first creation story in Genesis 1:1–2:4: The second story is found in Genesis 2:4–24 in which God forms humans from the dust of the earth. In later times, creation from nothing came to be called creation 'ex nihilo'. Cohn-Sherbok informs us that much speculation about the nature of the creative process is to be found in rabbinic literature, with Genesis Rabbah providing numerous examples of debates and conjecture on the matter. Analysis of Genesis 1:1 appears to present the reader with two different ways of interpreting the act of creation. On the one hand, the text suggests an act that constitutes the first instant of time, and on the other, an act in which God shapes the world from a pre-existent and formless matter. This understanding of the verse thus proposes creation 'de novo' (creation from pre-existing matter). The world was already a formless void, lying in readiness for God to say something and to breathe life into it.

## QUOTES

- Creation ends the unity of the reality that existed before the cosmos. After creation, there is a non-God part of reality. (Epstein)
- According to Midrash Kohen (2:24), God drew three drops of water and three drops of fire from the celestial Torah, and from them made the world.
- In Rashi's words: 'The Spirit of God was hovering on the face of the waters, and Scripture had not yet disclosed when the creation of the waters took place ... consequently you must learn from this that the creation of the waters preceded that of the earth.'
- Said R. Nehemiah: They were like those who gatherings, when each appears in its own time. R. Berekiah observed in confirmation of this view ... and the earth brought forth implies something which is already stored in it. (Gen.\_R.\_12:4)



- Rashi's translation of Genesis 1:1 reads as: 'In the beginning of God's creation of the heavens and the earth, the earth was unformed and void, darkness was on the face of the deep, and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters.'
- 'In the beginning of God's creation of the heavens and the earth, the earth was unformed and void, darkness was on the face of the deep, and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters. God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.'

## REFERENCES, FURTHER EXPLANATIONS AND EXAMPLES

- For example: In the synagogue hymn that comes before the reading from the Psalms, God is depicted as the creator of everything: 'Blessed be He who spoke, and the world existed; Blessed be He; Blessed be He who was the Master of the world in the beginning.'
- For example, the idea of the world as a pattern in the mind of God is expressed in relation to the belief that God looked into the Torah and created the world. Here the Torah is conceived of as a type of architectural blueprint for the creation of the world.
- And a further proof that the heavens and the earth were not the first thing created is that the heavens were created from fire and water, from which it follows that fire and water were in existence before the heavens.
- Epstein notes that there are pre-existing elements in the world; God didn't create the cosmos out of nothing but from the chaos of earth and water.

### Suggested response:

It is a basic and traditional Jewish belief that God is the creator of the universe. The Book of Genesis begins with the Hebrew word 'Bereshit', which has been understood as meaning 'in the beginning'. 'Creation ends the unity of the reality that existed before the cosmos. After creation, there is a non-God part of reality. (Epstein) According to Genesis 1:1 'In the beginning God created the Heaven and the Earth' and the centrality of this belief is such that it has influenced the liturgy of the synagogue in many ways. For example: In the synagogue hymn that comes before the reading from the Psalms, God is depicted as the creator of everything: 'Blessed be He who spoke, and the world existed; Blessed be He; Blessed be He who was the Master of the world in the beginning.'



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were not the first thing created is that the heavens were created from fire and water, from which it follows that fire and water were in existence before the heavens.'



Now do the same with this example.

## THE IDEA: Evolution and the age of the universe in Judaism

One of the most noteworthy contradictions between Torah and science is the age of the universe. According to the accepted Jewish calendar, the universe has been in existence for almost 6,000 years. [\*]. According to the classical rabbinic tradition, the view is that God created the world almost 6,000 years ago. This view has its basis in a chronology that was developed in a midrash named Seder Olam, which is based upon a literal reading of the Book of Genesis. [\*] The 'week' may have lasted for an extremely long period of time, suggesting that the kind of time spoken of is imaginary and conceptual rather than actual.

As far as evolutionary concepts and ideas are concerned, in ancient times they had primarily been based on philosophical arguments rather than on empiric data. The scientific theory of evolution seems to contradict the biblical account of creation.

Many ultra-Orthodox Jews reject the theory of evolution entirely. This is because they accept the Bible as embodying eternal truths. [\*].

Others take a more liberal approach and view the Bible's narrative as aiming to depict a truth concerning a worldview and system of values. [\*].

On the other hand, some Jews reject the biblical account of creation because it contradicts the theory of evolution. [\*].

Another approach is to strive to integrate the biblical account with the findings of modern science. [\*]. Some Orthodox Jewish scientists read evolutionary theory into the Bible, arguing that the Bible and modern scientific theory describe the same process using different language. [\*]. Some kabbalists also embrace many aspects of evolutionary theory as they hold that they corroborate their understanding of the origins of the world and its development. [\*].

## QUOTES

- Professor Ismar Schorsch writes that: 'The Torah's story of creation is not intended as a scientific treatise ... The note it strikes in its sparse and majestic narrative offers us an orientation to the



Torah's entire religious worldview and value system. Creation is taken up first not because the subject has chronological priority but rather to ground basic religious beliefs in the very nature of things. And I would argue that their power is quite independent of the scientific context in which they were first enunciated.'

- Schwab writes, Judaism, as a religion, and certainly Conservative Judaism, sees creation as a purposeful process directed by God; however, each individual defines the Divine. This is clearly in consonance with the theory of Intelligent Design. What Darwin sees as random, we see as the miraculous and natural unfolding of God's subtle and beautiful plan. (Schwab)
- Steinburg claims 'Both are possible with no hard evidence to the contrary, either by science or by Judaism.'
- Rabbi David J. Fine offers a commonly held Conservative view on the subject: 'Many of the people who accept evolution, even many scientists, believe in what is called 'theistic evolution', that is, that behind the billions of years of cosmic and biological evolution, there is room for belief in a creator, God, who set everything into motion, and who stands outside the universe as the cause and reason for life.'

## REFERENCES, FURTHER EXPLANATIONS AND EXAMPLES

- It starts with the year 1 dated from the creation of the universe in the Book of Genesis. This timescale, however, stands in contradiction to scientific data that currently assumes that it was formed many billions of years ago.
- Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, one of the Chief Rabbis of Israel, saw evolutionary theory as support for the Kabbalistic ideas of the unity of life and the progressive unfolding of natural history.
- However, there are also many other Jewish sources that provide evidence to suggest that the universe is older than scripture would have us believe.
- Based upon these examples as well as scientific evidence, most modern rabbis accept that the universe is much older than that suggested by the Jewish calendar.
- It starts with the year 1 dated from the creation of the universe in the Book of Genesis. This timescale, however, stands in contradiction to scientific data that currently assumes that it was formed many billions of years ago.



- They see the Bible as an ancient human document that can no longer provide a meaningful understanding of the beginning of the universe for a person living in the twentieth century. They therefore look to modern science to explain the origin of the world.
- As a result of this, there is an unwillingness to re-interpret scripture in order to bring about a reconciliation with a scientific theory that, in their view, may be overhauled at some time in the future.