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# PARASHAS BEREISHIS

## *In the Beginning...*

In the beginning, God created (*bara*) the heavens and the earth.

(*Bereishis* 1:1)

*Throughout his writings, Abarbanel posits the fundamental principle that God brought the universe into existence from a state of absolute nothingness: creatio ex nihilo. Using his original, incisive grammatical analysis, Abarbanel proves this principle from a number of sources. Even though other commentators point out that the word "bara" is also used in the context of creation from preexisting substance, Abarbanel posits that it's always fundamentally rooted in the concept of creatio ex nihilo.*

### THE MEANING OF BEREISHIS

According to Rambam (*Moreh Nevuchim* 2:30), the word *bereishis* can't be understood as a reference to chronology. The first verse of the Torah isn't part of a sequence in time, since what we call "time" didn't yet exist; time was a new creation. Abarbanel disagrees, citing several instances where the word *bereishis* does signify something that came first chronologically, for instance, in the verse "In the beginning (*Bereishis*) of Yehoyakim's rule" (*Yirmeyahu* 27:1).

Understanding the word *bereishis* as a reference to time doesn't mean that the universe came into existence within an already-existing time frame. That would mean that time already existed when Hashem created the universe. The Torah's fundamental principle of creation is that everything, including time, came into being from a total void. However, we could still say that *bereishis* means, "In the beginning of God's creation of time, God created the universe."

Even though this verse says only “in the beginning,” not “in the beginning of time,” the omission of these two words isn’t a problem. After all, the concept of the creation of time out of nothing is abstract and fundamentally incomprehensible. Essentially, Abarbanel is saying that a timeless instant was actually the beginning of time itself. We call it “timeless” since there was no previous time frame to associate it with.

## THE LETTER BEIS

The letter beis before the word *reishis* gives rise to a number of interpretations of this first word in the Torah. It can mean “by way of,” and therefore the *Targum Yerushalmi* (1:1) explains that *bereishis* means that “by way of *reishis*,” God created the heavens and the earth. The word *reishis* is also translated to mean “wisdom.” This wisdom was the tool through which Hashem created the heavens and the earth.

The letter beis can also mean “with,” as when a craftsman creates something “with gold” or “with silver.” We could then read this opening sentence as “With one beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” This means that the basic substances of heaven and earth were created at the same time. This is a refutation of Plato’s opinion that matter is timeless and wasn’t part of a Divine creation.

Finally, the letter beis can mean “for the sake of.” In this context, the verse would read “For the sake of *reishis*,” meaning, “For the sake of Israel, God created the heavens and the earth.”

## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BARA

Rambam explains that the word *bara* (created) refers to the creation of something from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*). However, Ibn Ezra and others point out that the same word is used to describe the creation of sea monsters and man, creatures that were evidently formed out of preexisting substances. It seems, then, that *bara* can mean both types of creation.

According to Radak (Rav Dovid Kimchi), *bara* can have four different meanings. However, it’s Abarbanel’s view, based on Rambam, that the fundamental meaning of *bara* is creating something from absolute nothingness. The mechanism of this creation was Hashem’s will alone.

The use of the word *bara* to signify creating something from nothing is also evident in the following verses: “These are the products of the heaven and the earth when they were *created*” (*Bereishis* 2:4), “Praise Him, the most exalted of the heavens and the waters that are above the heavens. Let them praise the Name of God, for He commanded and they were *created*” (*Tehillim* 148:4–5), “Hashem is the eternal God, the *Creator* of the ends of the earth” (*Yeshayahu* 40:28), and, “Thus said the God, Hashem, the *Creator* of the heavens and the One Who stretched them forth” (*Yeshayahu* 42:5).

The verse “And God *created* man in His own image” (*Bereishis* 1:27) is also a reference to creation from nothing, as this refers to man’s mind, which was created from “nothing,” and not his body, which was formed from the dust of the earth.

The word *bara* also can refer to miraculous occurrences that are beyond nature. These miracles are also purely a product of Hashem’s will. An example is the verse “Before all of your people I will perform miracles, which have not been *created* in all the world” (*Shemos* 34:10).

*Bara* also connotes the creation of something unbelievably fantastic, such as the giant sea monsters. They could only have been brought into existence by Hashem’s will, which transcends nature. Also, it reflects something marvelous and unexpected, as if it came out of nowhere, as in, “God *created* a pure heart in me” (*Tehillim* 51:12).

## “CREATED” VS. “MADE”

According to Rebbe Avraham ben Rebbe Chiya (*Megillas HaMegillah*, *shaar* 2, pp. 1–18), Hashem first created an amorphous potential substance, which He then changed into something identifiably physical. This first substance was called *bara*, and the second physical object was called *asah*, “made,” or *yatzar*, “formed.”

We can thus interpret the verse “These are the products of the heaven and the earth when they were *created* on the day that Hashem, God *made* earth and heaven” (*Bereishis* 2:4) as follows: The first part of the verse refers to the potential substance, and the second part refers to the actual physical creations themselves. The same principle applies to the verse “This is the account of the descendants of Adam — on the day that God *created* man, he *made* him in the likeness of God” (*Bereishis* 5:1). Both verses describe the movement from the stage of the potential to the final stage of a finished product.

The Gemara states, “Ten things were *created* Friday at twilight” (*Pesachim* 54a) — not “made” — meaning that Hashem created the potential for those things to come into existence, each in its appropriate time. Similarly, the verse in *Yeshayahu* (45:7) states, “I am the One Who *makes* light and *creates* darkness; Who *makes* peace and *creates* evil. I am God, *Maker* of all these.” Light is physical, while darkness is considered potential light. Light benefits the world, but darkness, which has no tangible form, brings harm.

Another verse similarly states, “I *made* the earth and *created* mankind upon it” (*Yeshayahu* 45:12). The earth was physically made on the first day whereas man only existed potentially until the sixth day.

Rebbe Avraham ben Rebbe Chiya also states that “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” means that on the first day of Creation, Hashem created two primordial potentials, one celestial and the other terrestrial. All the other things in the Creation narrative were made from these two potentials. Ramban also espoused this view that *bara* refers only to the creation of potential.

However, as we stated above, *bara* signifies the creation of something from nothing, yet it also signifies the creation of actual matter, not just the potential for matter. The word *bara*, “created,” in the verse “God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it because on it He abstained from all of His work that God *created* to make” (*Bereishis* 2:3) clearly refers to an actual physical world, not a potential one. Similarly, the next verse, “These are the products of the heaven and the earth when they were *created*” (*Bereishis* 2:4), refers to actual generations that could only be perpetuated from an existing heaven and earth.

Other examples are, “I will wipe out man, whom I *created*” (*Bereishis* 6:7) and, “You have *created* all the sons of man” (*Tehillim* 89:48). These verses and others reinforce the idea that the basic meaning of the word *bara* is the creation of something real from total nothingness. It doesn’t mean the creation of potential.

# The Seventh Day of Creation

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their array. On the seventh day, God completed His work that He had done, and He abstained on the seventh day from all of His work that He had done. God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it because on it He abstained from all of His work that God created to make.

(Bereishis 2:1-3)

*Abarbanel's exhaustive analysis of these few verses illustrates his emphasis on the importance of grammatical and etymological understanding of the Hebrew language and the need to dispel any notion of superfluous repetition in the text. These two principles underlie almost all of his Torah commentary. These verses also illustrate Abarbanel's unique approach to the concept of nature and the interplay between nature and the independent Divine will.*

Abarbanel points out nine difficulties with this enigmatic passage:

1. It's clear from the Torah that Creation was completed after six days; nothing further was created on the seventh. This passage, however, indicates clearly that Hashem "completed" Creation on the seventh day.
2. Once we're told that Hashem completed His work on the seventh day, the words "He abstained on the seventh day from all of his work" are superfluous.
3. What's the difference between "completing" and "abstaining"? Both terms imply that Hashem's work was completed on the seventh day.
4. What's the difference between "completed His work" and "abstained from all of His work"?
5. What were the blessing and the sanctification that were imparted to the seventh day?

6. Why were the blessing and the sanctification reserved solely for the seventh day? It seems to be more fitting for the first day to receive blessing and sanctification, as that was the day of *creatio ex nihilo*. Also, it appears that blessing and sanctification are more fitting for an act of creation than for an act of completion.
7. Why does the end of the passage refer to the work that Hashem “created” rather than the work He had “done,” which was the expression use earlier in the passage?
8. The last phrase in the passage, “to make,” appears to refer to something that will occur in the future. This contradicts the rest of the passage, which discusses something that happened in the past.
9. Why doesn’t the Torah state “And it was evening, and it was morning” regarding the seventh day as it does for the first six days of Creation?

### VAYECHULU AND VAYECHAL

Before answering his questions, Abarbanel offers an introduction to understanding the Hebrew words *vayechulu* and *vayechal*, which are translated as “completed” at the beginning of this passage. Etymologically, these words are related to the word *tachlis*, which means “purpose.” Something that’s finished or completed has reached the apex of what it was intended to be.

Abarbanel illustrates this idea by quoting several verses throughout Tanach, such as “Shlomo built the Temple and *finished* it” (*Melachim I* 6:14). This seemingly redundant expression indicates that the purpose of the building was fulfilled completely.

Abarbanel explains that in the first six days, Hashem created everything with a specific, unique form. Each unique form had its own natural constitution, but the creation of this natural constitution wasn’t Hashem’s ultimate goal; His intention was that every element of creation should act upon the latent potential inherent in its natural constitution. This fulfills the ultimate purpose of acting independently according to the laws of nature. In effect, the laws of nature were created on the first six days but only began expressing themselves independently on the seventh day.