

Parashat Bereishit: The Taming of the Leviathan

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Bereishit 1:21	
<p>וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הַתַּיִנִּים הַגְּדֹלִים וְאֶת כָּל־נֶפֶשׁ הַחַיָּה הָרֹמֶשֶׁת אֲשֶׁר שָׂרָצוּ הַמַּיִם לְמִינֵהֶם וְאֶת כָּל־עוֹף כָּנָף לְמִינֵהוּ וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים כִּי־טוֹב:</p>	<p>God created the great sea monsters, and all the living creatures of every kind that creep, which the waters brought forth in swarms, and all the winged birds of every kind. And God saw that this was good.</p>

1. What is the Leviathan?

Bavli Bava Batra 74b	
<p>תָּנוּ רַבָּנֵי: מַעֲשֵׂה בְּרַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר וְרַבִּי יְהוֹשֻעַ שֶׁהָיוּ בָּאִין בְּסָפִינָה, וְהָיָה רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר יָשֵׁן וְרַבִּי יְהוֹשֻעַ נִזְדַּעַזַע רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻעַ, וְנִנְעַר רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר. אָמַר לוֹ: מָה זֶה יְהוֹשֻעַ, מַפְנִי מֶה נִזְדַּעַזַעְתָּ? אָמַר לוֹ: מְאוּרָה גְדוֹל רָאִיתִי בַּיָּם. אָמַר לוֹ: שָׂמָא עֵינָיו שָׁל לִוְיָתָן רָאִיתָ – דְּכַתִּיב: "עֵינָיו כְּעַפְעָפֵי שָׁחַר".</p>	<p>The Sages taught: There was an incident involving Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua, who were traveling on a ship, and Rabbi Eliezer was sleeping and Rabbi Yehoshua was awake. Rabbi Yehoshua trembled, and Rabbi Eliezer awoke. Rabbi Eliezer said to him: What is this, Yehoshua; for what reason did you tremble? Rabbi Yehoshua said to him: I saw a great light in the sea. Rabbi Eliezer said to him: Perhaps you saw the eyes of the leviathan, as it is written: "And his eyes are like the eyelids of the morning" (Job 41:10).</p>
<p>"וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַתַּיִנִּים הַגְּדֹלִים" – הַכָּא תַּרְגִּימוּ: אֲרִזְיָל דִּימָא. רַבִּי יוֹסֵפִן אָמַר: זֶה לִוְיָתָן נֶחֱשׁ בָּרִים וְלִוְיָתָן נֶחֱשׁ עֶקְלָתוֹן, שְׂנָאֵמַר: "בְּיוֹם הַהוּא יִפְקֹד ה' בְּחַרְבּוֹ הַקָּשָׁה וְגו'".</p>	<p>The verse states: "And God created the great sea monsters" (Genesis 1:21). Here, in Babylonia, they interpreted this as a reference to the sea oryx. Rabbi Yohanan says: This is leviathan the slant serpent, and leviathan the tortuous serpent, as it is stated: "In that day the Lord with His sore and great and strong sword will punish leviathan the slant serpent, and leviathan the tortuous serpent" (Isaiah 27:1).</p>

Rashi on Bereishit 1:21	
<p>הַתַּיִנִּים. דְּגִים גְּדֹלִים שְׂבִיִּים, וּבְדַבְרֵי אַגְדָּה הוּא לִוְיָתָן וְכֵן זִוְגוֹ שֶׁבְּרָאָם זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה וְהָרָג אֶת הַנְּקֵבָה וּמִלְחָה לְצַדִּיקִים לְעֵתִיד לְבָא, שְׂאָם יִפְרוּ וַיִּרְבוּ לֹא יִתְקַיֵּם הָעוֹלָם בְּפִנְיָהֶם:</p>	<p>The huge creatures— the large fishes that are in the sea; and according to the statement of the Agada (Bava Batra 74b) it means here the Leviathan and its consort which He created male and female. He, however, killed the female and preserved it in salt for the benefit of the righteous in the time to come, for had they been permitted to be fruitful and to multiply the world could not have endured because of them.</p>

¹ All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

2. What Does the Leviathan Represent?

Tehillim 104:6-9	
<p>תהום כלבוש כסיתו על־הרים יעמדו מים: מִן־גַּעְרָתְךָ יִנָּסוּ מִן־קוֹל רַעְמֶךָ יִחַפְּזוּ: יַעֲלוּ הָרִים יִרְדּוּ בִקְעוֹת אֶל־מְקוֹם זֶה יִסְדֹּת לָהֶם: גְּבוּל־שִׁמְתָּ בַּל־יַעֲבְרוּן בַּל־יִשְׁבֹּנוּ לִכְסוֹת הָאָרֶץ:</p>	<p>You made the deep cover it as a garment; the waters stood above the mountains. They fled at Your blast, rushed away at the sound of Your thunder— mountains rising, valleys sinking— to the place You established for them. You set bounds they must not pass so that they never again cover the earth.</p>
Job 38:8-11	
<p>וַיִּסָּךְ בַּדִּלְתַּיִם יָם בְּגִילוֹ מִרְחֹם יָצָא: בְּשׁוּמֵי עֵנָן לְבָשׁוֹ אֶעֱרָפֶל חֲתָלָתוֹ: וְאֶשְׁבֵּר עָלָיו חֲקֵי אֲשֵׁיִם בָּרִיחַ וּדְלָתַיִם: וְאָמַר עַד־פֹּה תָבֹא וְלֹא תִסָּיֵף וּפֹא־יִשְׁתַּיֵּת בְּגֵאוֹן גְּלִיָּה:</p>	<p>Who closed the sea behind doors when it gushed forth out of the womb, when I clothed it in clouds, swaddled it in dense clouds, when I made breakers My limit for it, and set up its bar and doors, and said, "You may come so far and no farther; Here your surging waves will stop?"</p>
Or Ha-Hayyim on Bereishit 1:21	
<p>ובתנינים הגדולים עשה ה' שינוי בבריאתם כמו שאמרנו, ולא אמר בדרך כלל ויברא נפש התנינים ואת כל נפש וגו' בזה גילה הכתוב כי משונים הם מכל מה שבים שמלבד שהוליד בהם נפש גם בכח בריאתם עצמה ברא ה' בהם כח נוסף אשר אין כח בים לעשותו כמו שאמרנו, וזה הוא הדג המופלא לויתן זה, וכבר דבריו מפורשים בדבריהם ז"ל (ב"ב עד:). וטעם שלא אמר בבריאה זו ויהי כן, אין לו מקום כי לא יצטרך לומר ויהי כן אלא כשלא יזכר אלא אמרות ה' לבד תגיד התורה ויהי כן כי אמר ותהי מה שאין כן כשאומר ויברא יש בכללו אמירה יש בכללו היה:</p>	<p>And in the great sea monsters, God made a change in their creation - as we have said - and He didn't state in [a more] general [fashion], "And He created the souls of the sea monsters and all the souls, etc.;" by which the verse revealed that they are different from everything [else] in the waters; since besides that God implanted a soul within them, also in the power of their creation itself, God created an extra power within them; since there is no power within the waters to make it, as we have said. And this is the amazing fish, it is the leviathan, and its matters are explained in [the] words of [the Sages], of blessed memory (Bava Batra 74b). And the reason it did not state about this creation, "and it was so," is that there is no place for it, since it is not needed to say "and it was so" except when only the proclamation of God is stated; [there] the Torah tells "and it was so," since He [had] said, "let there be;" which is not the case when it states, "And He created" - proclamation is included in it, execution is included in it.</p>

3. Who Tames the Leviathan?

Jon D. Levenson, <i>Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence</i> , 15-16	
<p>we have a sense of the Sea as a somewhat sinister force that, left to its own, would submerge the world and forestall the ordered reality we call creation. What prevents this frightening possibility is the mastery of YHWH, whose blast and thunder or whose craftsmanship and commanding word force the Sea into its proper place, apparently without a struggle. These texts share with the combat myth the notion of the challenge of the Sea and its defeat. They share with Genesis I the sense of the creation of the habitable world through the containment of the waters by the efficacious utterance of God. They share with the story of the Flood a conviction that the habitable, life-sustaining world exists now only because of God's continuing commitment to the original command. Absent that command, the sinister forces of chaos would surge forth again. The biblical drama of world order is defined by the persistence of those forces, on the one hand, and the possibility (or is it an inevitability?) that God will exercise his vaunted omnipotence to defeat them, on the other.</p>	