

Parashat Bereishit: Creation's Alternative to Chaos

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Bereishit 1:31	
וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וְהִנֵּה טוֹב מְאֹד וַיְהִי-עֶרֶב וַיְהִי-בֹקֶר יוֹם הַשְּׁשִׁי:	And God saw all that had been made, and found it very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

1. What Makes Something Very Good?

Bavli Avodah Zarah 3a	
אומרים לפניו: רבונו של עולם, שמים וארץ נוגעין בעדותן, שנאמר: "אם לא בריתי יומם ולילה חקות שמים וארץ לא שמתי", (דאמר) [ואמר] רבי שמעון בן לקיש: מאי דכתיב: "וַיְהִי עֶרֶב וַיְהִי בֹקֶר יוֹם הַשְּׁשִׁי"? מלמד שהתנה הקדוש ברוך הוא עם מעשה בראשית, ואמר: אם ישראל מקבלין את תורת מוטב, ואם לאו — אני אחזיר אתכם לתוהו ובוהו.	The nations say before Him: Master of the Universe , in this matter the testimony of heaven and earth is tainted by a conflict of interest , as it is stated: "If My covenant be not with day and night, I would not have appointed the ordinances of heaven and earth" (Jeremiah 33:25). And concerning this verse, Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish says: What is the meaning of that which is written: "And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day" (Genesis 1:31)? This teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, established a condition with the acts of Creation, and said: If the Jewish people accept My Torah at the revelation at Sinai, all is well, but if they do not accept it, I will return you to the primordial state of chaos and disorder.

Rashi on Bereishit 1:31	
יום הששי. הוסיף ה' בששי בגמר מעשה בראשית, לומר שהתנה עמם, על מנת שיקבלו עליהם ישראל חמשה חמשי תורה. דבר אחר יום הששי, כלם תלויים ועומדים עד יום הששי, הוא ו' בסיון המוכן למתן תורה:	יום הששי — The letter ה, the numerical value of which is 5, is added to the word ששי when the work of Creation was complete, to imply that He made a stipulation with them that it endures only upon condition that Israel should accept the five books of the Torah (Shabbat 88a). Another interpretation of יום הששי — The whole Creation stood in a state of suspense until the sixth day — that is, the sixth day of Sivan which was destined to be the day when the Torah would be given to Israel (Avodah Zara 3a).

Rabbi Naftali Tzi Yehudah Berlin, <i>Ha'amek Davar</i> , Bereishit 1:31	
וְהִנֵּה טוֹב מְאֹד. לְבַד אֲשֶׁר כָּל פֶּרֶט טוֹב בִּפְנֵי לִפְי רצון הקב"ה עוד המה בכלל בצרוף כל הנבראים	And behold, it was very good: Besides that every detail was good on its own - according to the will of the Holy One, blessed be He - also grouped together with

¹ All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

<p>יחד טוב מאד שְׁכַל א' מַשְׁלִים הַחֲסָרוֹן שֶׁל הַשָּׂנִי וּבְזָה הַלָּשׁוֹן טוֹב מְאֹד. נִכְלָל מֵה שְׂיִישׁ מִזִּיקִים בְּעוֹלָם אֲעִיג שִׁבְפִּי"ע אֵינָם טוֹב מִ"מ הַכֶּרְחִים הֵמָּה לְטוֹבַת כָּל הַבְּרִואִים:</p>	<p>all of the creatures combined, they were very good; in that every [creature] compensated for the lack of the other. And in this expression Very good: was included [the fact] that there are pests in the world, [since] even though they are not good on their own, nonetheless, they are essential for the good of all the creatures.</p>
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2. Creation's Alternative to Chaos

Maimonides, <i>Guide for the Perplexed</i> , Book 3, 10:3	
<p>אַחֲרֵי הַקִּדְמָה זוֹ עָלִיךְ לִזְכֹּר אֶת מֵה שֶׁהוֹכַח: שֶׁהָרְעוּת אֵינָן אֵלָּא רְעוּת בִּיחֹס לְדַבֵּר מֵה; וְשֶׁכָּל מֵה שֶׁהוּא רְעָה לְגַבִּי אֶחָד מִן הַמְצוּיִים – אוֹתָהּ רְעָה הִיא הָעֶדְרָה שֶׁל אוֹתוֹ דָּבָר, אוֹ הָעֶדְרָה שֶׁל אֶחָד מִמְצָבָיו הַתִּקְיָנִים. לִכֵּן קוֹבְעִים כָּללִית מִשְׁפָּט הָאוֹמֵר שֶׁכָּל הָרְעוּת הֵן הָעֶדְרִים. דְּגָמָה לָכֵן בְּאָדָם: מוֹתוֹ הוּא רַע, וְהוּא הָעֶדְרָה; וְכֵן חֲלִיו אוֹ עִנִּי אוֹ בּוֹרוּתוֹ – רְעוּת לְגַבִּי, וְכָלֵם הָעֶדְרִי תְכוּנוֹת. אִם תִּתְחַקֵּה אַחֵר פְּרִטִי אוֹתוֹ מִשְׁפָּט כָּלְלִי, תִּמְצָא שֶׁאֵין בּוֹ כָּל חֲרִיגָה אֵלָּא לְמִי שֶׁאֵינוֹ מְבַדִּיל בֵּין הָעֶדְרָה וְתִכּוּנָהּ וּבֵין שְׁנֵי הַפְּכִים, אוֹ מִי שֶׁאֵינוֹ יוֹדֵעַ אֶת טְבַעֲיָהֶם שֶׁל כָּל הַדְּבָרִים. כְּמוֹ מִי שֶׁאֵינוֹ יוֹדֵעַ שֶׁכָּכֵל, בְּרִיאוֹת הִיא אֲזוֹן מְסִים וְהִיא שִׁיכָת לְקִטְגוּרִית הַיִּחֹס, וְשֶׁכָּכֵל, הָעֶדְרָה אוֹתוֹ יֵחֹס הוּא הַחֲלִי. וְהַמָּוֶת הוּא הָעֶדְרָה הַצּוֹרָה עֲבוּר כָּל חִי. וְכֵן כָּל אֶחָד מִשְׁאָר הַמְצוּיִים שִׁיכָלָה, כְּלִיוָנוֹ הוּא הָעֶדְרָה צוּרָתוֹ.</p>	<p>After this explanation you must recall to memory that, as has been proved, the [so-called] evils are evils only in relation to a certain thing, and that which is evil in reference to a certain existing thing, either includes the nonexistence of that thing or the non-existence of some of its good conditions. The proposition has therefore been laid down in the most general terms, "All evils are negations." Thus for man death is evil: death is his non-existence. Illness, poverty, and ignorance are evils for man: all these are privations of properties. If you examine all single cases to which this general proposition applies, you will find that there is not one case in which the proposition is wrong except in the opinion of those who do not make any distinction between negative and positive properties, or between two opposites, or do not know the nature of things,—who, e.g., do not know that health in general denotes a certain equilibrium, and is a relative term. The absence of that relation is illness in general, and death is the absence of life in the case of any animal. The destruction of other things; is likewise nothing but the absence of their form.</p>

Rebecca Mead, "The Vatican Observatory Looks to the Heavens," <i>The New Yorker</i> , 28 July 2025
<p>According to [Guy] Consolmagno, sometimes known as the "Pope's Astronomer", the arguments put forward by the New Atheists and their ilk invoke what you might call a straw God. "When I say, 'I believe in God,' it means that I believe in <i>one</i> God, which means there are a whole lot of versions of God out there that I <i>don't</i> believe in," he told me. "An atheist, in order to be an atheist, has to have a really clear idea of who the God is they don't believe in. More often than not, they are right—the God they don't believe in I don't believe in, either."</p>
<p>Consolmagno's Catholic faith does not require that he believe the world was literally created in seven days, and he pitied would-be astrophysicists who grew up in fundamentalist Christian traditions. Once, while visiting Oral Roberts University, in Tulsa, he stumbled across a way of expressing his perspective on the Book of Genesis: "I pointed out that the seven days of creation tell us not about creation but about God," he recalled. "If you put that emphasis on it, I think you get closer to what the author of Genesis really wanted to do, which was to talk about God. What's the goal of Genesis? It's the seventh day, the Sabbath. And what's the Sabbath? It's when we start thinking about the universe, and the creator, rather than just worrying about feeding ourselves, and that's what makes us people, rather than animals. God calls us to be astronomers. Not only is it clever—it might even be true."</p>

<p>Big Question: How might our understanding of God's role in creation change if we primarily see this story as one of making order out of disorder?</p>
