

Parashat Bereishit: Into the Deep We Go

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Bereishit 1:2	
וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תוֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ וְחָשֶׁךְ עַל-פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וָרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל-פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם:	the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water—

1. Formless and Void

Bavli Arakchin 17a	
בִּיקֻשׁ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא לְהַחְזִיר אֶת הָעוֹלָם לְתוֹהוּ וְבֹהוּ בְּשִׁבְלֵי יְהוֹיָכִים, כִּינן שְׁנִסְתַּכַּל בְּדוֹרוֹ נִתְיַשְׁבָּה דַּעְתּוֹ. בִּיקֻשׁ הַקָּדוֹשׁ בָּרוּךְ הוּא לְהַחְזִיר אֶת הָעוֹלָם לְתוֹהוּ וְבֹהוּ מִפְּנֵי דוֹרוֹ שֶׁל צִדְקִיָּהוּ, כִּינן שְׁנִסְתַּכַּל בְּצִדְקִיָּהוּ נִתְיַשְׁבָּה דַּעְתּוֹ.	This term teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, sought to revert the world to chaos and void, as it was before Creation (Genesis 1:1–2), on account of Jehoiakim, who did evil in the eyes of God. Once He observed the people of his generation, His mind was settled. Likewise, the Holy One, Blessed be He, sought to revert the world to chaos and void, on account of the generation of Zedekiah, but once He observed Zedekiah, His mind was settled.

Sefer HaBahir 1:2	
אָמַר ר' בְּרַכְיָה מַאי דְּכָתִיב (בְּרֵאשִׁית א' ב') וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תוֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ מַאי מְשַׁמַּע הָיְתָה, שְׁכָבֶר הָיְתָה תוֹהוּ, וּמַאי תוֹהוּ דְּבִר הַמִּתְהַא בְּנֵי אָדָם, וּמַאי בֹהוּ, אֵלָּא תוֹהוּ הָיְתָה וְחֲזָרָה לְבֹהוּ, וּמַאי בֹהוּ דְּבִר שֵׁישׁ בּוֹ מִמֶּשׁ דְּכָתִיב בֹהוּ בּוֹ הוּא:	Rabbi Berechiah said, "It is written, ' <i>Now the earth was tohu and bohu</i> ' (Genesis 1:2). What does 'was' mean? That the <i>tohu</i> already was. What is <i>tohu</i> ? Something that confounds [<i>m'taha</i>] people. And what is <i>bohu</i> ? <i>Tohu</i> was, and it returned to <i>bohu</i> . And what is <i>bohu</i> ? A thing that has substance in it, as is written, ' <i>It is inside it [bo hu].</i> '"

Ramban on Bereishit 1:1	
וְעַתָּה שְׁמַע פְּרוּשׁ הַמִּקְרָא עַל פְּשׁוּטוֹ נֶכֶן וּבְרוּר. הַקִּב"ה בָּרָא כָּל הַנִּבְרָאִים מֵאַפְסִיָּה מְחֻלָּטָה. וְאִין אֲצִלּוֹ בְּלִשׁוֹן הַקֹּדֶשׁ בְּהוֹצֵאת הַיֵּשׁ מֵאִין אֵלָּא לִשׁוֹן "בָּרָא"; וְאִין כָּל הַנִּעֲשֶׂה – תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ אוֹ לְמַעַלָּה – הוֹנָה מִן הָאִין הַתְּחִלָּה רֵאשׁוֹנָה. אֲבָל הוֹצִיא מִן הָאֲפֶס הַגָּמוּר הַמְּחֻלָּט יֵסוֹד דֵּק מְאֹד, אִין בּוֹ מִמֶּשׁ, אֲבָל הוּא כֹחַ מְמַצִּיא, מוֹכֵן לְקַבֵּל הַצּוּרָה וְלַצֵּאת מִן הַכֹּחַ אֶל הַפַּעַל.	Now listen to the correct and clear explanation of the verse in its simplicity. The Holy One, blessed be He, created all things from absolute non-existence. Now we have no expression in the sacred language for bringing forth something from nothing other than the word <i>bara</i> (created). Everything that exists under the sun or above was not made from non-existence at the outset. Instead He brought forth from total and absolute nothing a very thin substance devoid of corporeality but having a power of potency, fit to assume form and to proceed from potentiality into reality.

¹ All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

2. Tehom

Devarim 33:13	
וַיֹּסֶף אָמַר מְבֹרָכַת יְהוָה אֲרֶצְוּ מִמֶּגֶד שָׁמַיִם מִטֹּל וּמִתְהוֹם רִבְצָת תַּחַת:	And of Joseph he said: Blessed of GOD be his land with the bounty of dew from heaven, and of the deep that couches below;
Ezekiel 31:4	
מַיִם גָּדְלוּהוּ תְהוֹם רִמְמָתוֹ אֶת־נְהַרְתִּיהָ הִלָּךְ סְבִיבוֹת מִטְעָה וְאֶת־תַּעֲלֵתֶיהָ שָׁלְחָה אֶל כָּל־עֵצֵי הַשָּׂדֶה:	Waters nourished it, the deep made it grow tall, washing with its streams the place where it was planted, making its channels well up to all the trees of the field.
Rashi on Ezekiel 31:4	
מַיִם גָּדְלוּהוּ תְהוֹם רִמְמָתוֹ. וְעַל שֶׁשָּׁמַע לְקוֹל יוֹנָה בֶּן אָמִתַּי, שֶׁיָּרַד לַתְּהוֹם...	"The waters made him great; the deep exalted him." And [he merited this] because he listened to the voice of Jonah son of Amittai, who descended into the deep...
Tehillim 42:78	
תְּהוֹם־אֶל־תְּהוֹם קוֹרָא...	...where deep calls to deep...
Rashi on Tehillim 42:8	
תְּהוֹם אֶל תְּהוֹם קוֹרָא. צָרָה קוֹרָא לַחֲבֵרְתָּהּ:	Deep calls to deep: One trouble calls the next one.
Jonah 2:6	
אֶפְסוּנִי מַיִם עַד־נֶפֶשׁ תְּהוֹם יִסְבְּבֵנִי סוּף חֲבוּשׁ לְרֹאשִׁי:	The waters closed in over me, the deep engulfed me. Weeds twined around my head

3. Into the Deep We Go

Brandon R. Grafius, <i>Scared By the Bible: The Roots of Horror in Scripture</i> , 178-179	
There's a profound truth that apocalyptic movies try to point out, time and time again—we're afraid of chaos, of the lack of order, of our security systems' collapse. We're afraid of uncertainty and not being in control. But when we step back and look at the bigger picture, sometimes the control we think we have—and the systems that help us feel this sense of control—aren't as great as we think they are...	
At first, it seems like the Bible's stance toward chaos and order is much more straightforward. God's always on the side of order; chaos is the monster to be struggled against. But when we start pulling at the loose ends of that narrative, the threads start to unravel pretty quickly.	
The conflict between order and chaos is first presented in the very opening of Genesis 1, where God fashions the world out of the <i>tohu vabohu</i> , the "formless and void" of the pre-creation world. As much as it's a story of creation, it's also a story of ordering—the word divided is repeated throughout Genesis 1. God is taking up all the formless stuff and putting it into its right place so that we have order, so that we have land and water, sea and sky. But over against all of this is the <i>tehom</i> , the deep that darkness covers at the very beginning.	