

וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ
וְחָשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם
וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים
מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם:
וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהי אוֹר
וַיְהי־אוֹר:

2 And the earth was desolate and void
and darkness on the face of the deep;
and the wind of God
hovered upon the face of the waters.
3 And God said, "There shall be light";
and there was light.

*The primeval
state of creation*

*The creation
of light*

2) Darkness is an actual creation, as the prophet Isaiah quotes, "I am God... who forms light and creates darkness."¹⁵

Hence the "query without resolution" cited in the Talmud. If darkness is but the absence of light, then light preceded darkness, since the concept "absence of light" has no meaning unless light already exists. On the other hand, if darkness is a created reality, then darkness preceded light, as indicated by the verse, "and it was evening, and it was morning."

In truth, both opinions are correct, for the second opinion is really an insight into the first. From our perspective, darkness is absence. But from the Creator's perspective, everything—including absence and non-existence—was created by the source of all.

-R. DOVBER OF LUBAVITCH

The question is not just theoretical, but relates to our work in this world. If darkness is but the absence of light, then all we can do with the darkness in our lives is to banish it or annihilate it by generating light. But if darkness is a reality, then we are charged not just to overcome it, but to transform it into a force for good.

-R. YOSEF YITZCHAK OF LUBAVITCH

[also see commentaries to 1:4 below]

"Earth... darkness... wind... water"

The "darkness" referred to here is the invisible elemental fire. Thus we have the four primal elements in this verse: earth, fire, air and water.¹⁶

-MAIMONIDES; RAN

"The wind of God hovered"

This is the soul of Moshiach (the messiah).

-REISH LAKISH IN MIDRASH RABBAH

this approach, the verse from Isaiah describing God as "creating darkness" refers to his limiting of light so as to allow for a state of darkness to prevail.

¹⁵ This is the view expressed by Rav Yehudah in Talmud (see footnote 16), Midrash Rabbah, Lekach Tov, Chizkuni, Maharsha, R. Menachem Azariah da Fano, R. Yaakov Emden and Gra.

¹⁶ Rav Yehudah in Talmud identifies ten primal elements in verses 1-5, listing them as the ten creations of the first day: heavens, earth, *tohu*, *vohu*, light, darkness, wind, water, daytime, and nighttime.

NOTES

1:2

DESOLATE AND VOID (וְהָיְתָה תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ) ~ *tohu va'vohu* also • **empty** -Onkelos; *Ibn Ezra* • **astoundingly empty** -Rashi • **uninhabited and lifeless** -Targum Yerushalmi • **filled and covered with water** -Saadia Gaon • **primal matter and primal form** -Nachmanides; *Ralbag* • "tohu" is a **green line that encompasses the world** and "vohu" are **wet stones sunk in the deep** -Talmud • the primordial **world of tohu** (see discussion on pages 12-15) -Ari • the ten generations from Adam to Noah, and the ten generations from Noah to Abraham -R. Yitzchak Alfual

WIND OF GOD (וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים) ~ *ruach elokim* also **breath** and **spirit**; denotes • the **divine throne of glory** -Rashi • the **soul of Moshiach** -Reish Lakish in *Midrash Rabbah*

HOVERED (מְרַחֶפֶת) ~ *merachefeth*

• an allusion to the 288 (רפח) sparks of holiness embedded in the physical world by the "shattering of the vessels" (see discussion on pages 12-15) -Ari

WATERS (מַיִם) ~ *mayim* • this Hebrew noun always comes in the plural form; see commentary from *Ibn Caspi* to 23:1

1:3

SAID (וַיֹּאמֶר) ~ *va'yomer* also • **desired** -Zohar; Maimonides; Nachmanides • **expressed, actualized** -Nachmanides • implies effortlessness -*Ibn Ezra*

What this means is that at all times and under all circumstances, the messianic world of divine wisdom, goodness and peace described by the prophets is within our grasp. For the soul of Moshiach stands ready and prepared from the very beginning of creation, "hovering upon the waters," awaiting only our actions to be immediately revealed and actualized.

-R. YAAKOV SCILI

1:3

"And God said..."

The world was created with ten divine utterances.¹⁷

-ETHICS OF THE FATHERS

The Ten Utterances with which God spoke the world into being—these very words and letters are continually being invested within every creation to give it life and existence. This is the meaning of what the Ari taught, that within every created entity, including supposedly inanimate things such as stones and dust and water, there exists a soul and spiritual vitality—namely, the letters of divine speech invested within it. -BAAL SHEM TOV

Although the word אֶבֶן ("stone"), for example, does not appear in the Ten Utterances, the letters of these utterances, through the many formulae and permutations described in *Sefer Yetzirah*, combine with each other to compose the names of every created entity. Thus the name of a thing in the Holy Tongue constitutes its soul—the particular formulation of the divine speech that imparts existence and life to it.¹⁸ If the human eye were

¹⁷ There are actually nine statements preceded by "And God said..." in the Torah's account of creation: "There shall be light" (1:3), "There shall be a firmament" (1:6), "The waters... shall pool" (1:9), "The earth shall sprout" (1:11), "There shall be luminaries" (1:14), "The waters shall swarm" (1:20), "The earth shall bring out living creatures" (1:24), "Let us make man" (1:26) and "I will make him a helpmate" (2:18). The Talmud explains that "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" is also an "utterance." According to R. Dov Ber of Mezeritch, this first utterance is an utterance of divine "thought" rather than "speech," which is why it is not introduced by "And God said" as the others are; and it is this primal thought-utterance (corresponding to the primal *sefirah* of "wisdom") that generates the twenty-two letters of divine speech of which the other nine utterances are composed (see notes to 1:1, s.v. נח).

¹⁸ Zohar sees the ten utterances as corresponding to the ten divine attributes (*sefirot*) which God emanated to define his relationship with and involvement in creation (see discussion on pages 11-12); and as vehicles for the Ten Commandments spoken at Sinai, which constitute the "blueprint" and *raison d'être* for creation (see commentaries to 1:1).

¹⁸ See commentaries to 2:19.

וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאֹר כִּי־טוֹב
וַיַּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים
בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ:
וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לְאֹר יוֹם
וְלַחֹשֶׁךְ קָרָא לַיְלָה
וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר
יוֹם אֶחָד: פ

4 And God saw the light that it is good;
and God separated
between the light and the darkness.
5 And God called the light "day"
and the darkness he called "night";
and it was evening and it was morning
one day.

*The separation
of light & darkness*

allowed to see the spiritual vitality flowing from the utterance of God's mouth into every creation, we would not perceive the physicality or substantiality of any created thing. We would see only its divine life-force, in relation to which it is completely nullified, since without that life-force it is utter nothingness.

-R. SCHNEUR ZALMAN OF LIADI

In the human psyche, the faculty of speech is the capacity to transcend our own boundaries and make our perceptions, thoughts and feelings heard within someone other than ourselves. Without speech, all that exists is our own world of sensations, emotions and cognitions. With speech, an entire world of others comes into being.

This is why the Torah describes God's creation of the world as divine "speech." Creation is the actualization of God's desire for an "other": for an entity that is perceived as outside of God's own all-encompassing reality, and as such, is the recipient of God's self-communication and a partner in a relationship with him.

-R. SHALOM DOVBER OF LUBAVITCH

"There shall be light"

The light which God created on the first day—one could see with it from one end of the world to the other. God saw that it is not proper that the wicked should have use of it, so he hid it away for the righteous in the World to Come.

-R. ELAZAR IN TALMUD
-RASHI

Where did he hide it? In the Torah. -ZOHAR

The primary function of light is that it reveals the relationship between things. At first God created a dark world—a world in which each entity is separate unto itself. Only then did he create a "rectified" world, in which each part is connected with all others and combines with them to serve one exalted purpose. In this world there is light: the force that unites all creations toward a single goal. -R. KOOK

1:4

"God saw the light that it is good"

I have seen that there is an advantage to wisdom over folly, as the advantage of light over darkness.

-ECCLESIASTES

In the beginning of creation, God beheld the deeds of the wicked, and he beheld the deeds of the righteous. But I still do not know which he desires. When it says, "God saw the light, that it is good," I know that God desires the deeds of the righteous, and does not desire the deeds of the wicked.¹⁹

-R. ABABU IN MIDRASH RABBAH

Darkness has no actual substance, and automatically disappears when light appears. This is why good and evil are referred to as "light" and "darkness": evil possesses no true substance or reality, so that when good asserts itself, evil dissipates to the nullity it essentially is.

-R. SCHNEUR ZALMAN OF LIADI

One can battle darkness, or one can generate light. Our task is to generate light.

-TZEMACH TZEDEK

"And God separated between the light and the darkness"

Know that in the beginning, a simple divine light filled the entirety of existence. When there arose in his simple will the desire to create the worlds, God contracted his light, withdrawing it to the sides and leaving a void and an empty space in its very center, to allow

¹⁹ *Menachem* that there is a pre-creation reality in which God equally transcends both good and evil. From this perspective, God does not desire good because it is good, but rather the converse: good is desired because God chooses to desire it. There is also another level of understanding to this verse, in which "the deeds of the wicked" refers to the transformation of evil into good through *teshuvah* (repentance or "return")—in contrast to "the deeds of the righteous" who never stray from the path of good. The righteous fulfill the divine desire in creation, while those who err and then return reach higher yet, surpassing even the divine desire and "plan" for creation. See *The Snake in the Garden* on pages 5-6 and *The Problem of Evil* on page 15.

NOTES

1:4

SAW (וַיֵּרָא ~ va'yar) also • **affirmed, sustained** -*Nachmanides* • **revealed** -*ha-Kethav v'ha-Kabalah*
THAT (כִּי ~ ki) -*Rashi; Rashbam; Radak*
• or **because** -*Saadia Gaon; Sforno*
• see note to 18:15

1:5

CALLED (וַיִּקְרָא ~ kara) • carries connotations of **naming, summoning, calling forth an implicit potential, defining, and imparting a function and task**; see commentaries to 2:19
EVENING (וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב ~ erev) • means **blending**; so called because in the dark, objects are indistinguishable from each other -*Ibn Ezra*
MORNING (וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר ~ boker) • means **to distinguish** (see previous note) -*Ibn Ezra*

for the existence of the worlds. However, this was not an absolute void, as there remained a residue of the divine light within the void. God then drew a single line of his infinite light into the void to emanate the worlds.²⁰

-ARI

1:5

"It was evening and it was morning"

Such is the model of creation: first comes darkness, then light.

-RAV YEHUDAH
IN TALMUD

"Night" is fear, and "day" represents love. In our service of God we begin with fear and awe of his greatness, and this leads us to love of God.

-SHALOH

In the Jewish calendar night precedes day, for the people of Israel know this secret of

²⁰ This is the concept of the divine *tzimtzum* ("contraction") widely discussed in Lurianic Kabbalah. For an explanation of this passage, see *The Tzimtzum* and *The Residue and the Line* on pages 6-8.