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HEBREW UNION COLLEGE-JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION

New York School

Report on the Rabbinic Dissertation Submitted by

Tom Gutherz

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Ordination

Chaos and Disorder:

Tohu VaVohu in Rabbinic Thought

This thesis is a collection and close textual and thematic analysis of a wide range of rabbinic traditions utilizing and interpreting the concept of Tohu VaVohu. The author's intent was to try to uncover the various categories by which the rabbis grappled with the concept of creation and order, and to describe the nature of their universe.

The first step in his investigation was a brief survey of the major cosmological beliefs in the Ancient Near East as a way to better understand the meaning of Tohu in the Bible. He analyzed Mesopotamian and Egyptian creation myths with an eye towards how the world emerged and notions of chaos in these mythological systems (PART ONE, chapter I). He then looked to see if any of these earlier mythological notions were carried over into the Bible, and discovered that they appear in Psalms, Job and Isaiah. In analyzing Psalm 74 and Isaiah 51, he found notions of creation in terms of a kaoskampf, in which Yahweh had to defeat primeval forces, while Psalm 104 and Job 38 emphasize the ongoing existence of forces of chaos and destruction which God must suppress. These are presented in chapter II.

The author then turned to the usages of the term Tohu itself in the Bible, which seem part of a wide constellation of meanings and images all very amorphously related. He analyzed the twenty passages in which the term appears and differentiated two major rubrics in which it is used: (a) Tohu regarded as an actual substance, like a wasteland or a place of disorder; and (b) Tohu as a state of nothingness, a void or emptiness. The subcategories of usage include total desolation (Jeremiah 4), a measurement for nothingness (Isaiah 34 and 28), the desert (Deuteronomy 32, Psalm 107, Job 12) primordial emptiness (Isaiah 14, 41, 49) and falsehood (Isaiah 29). All of these and more are presented in Chapter III, which in its fullness shows the multiplicity of meanings associated with the word Tohu. The effect is that the reader of the Bible carries an entire constellation of associations which inform how he is to understand Genesis 1:2: "the earth was Tohu VaVohu."

The obvious ambiguity surrounding the term provided the rabbis with ample opportunities to address a host of issues related to the nature of our world and the role of the Jewish people and the covenant. In order to locate the relevant rabbinic traditions, the author utilized the available verse indices and topical anthologies, focussing on the biblical verses which contain the word Tohu. The traditions included date as late as the medieval midrashic anthologies and cover a wide range of compilations. Although it is always difficult to gain a clear understanding of such a wide-ranging collection of material, the author has handled it in a highly competent and often very creative manner. He not only presents the reader with many insights regarding specific midrashic or talmudic texts and how they are structured and function, but has been able to divide the material into five major functional categories (presented as PART TWO of the thesis).

The first is the function of Tohu in the creation story, whether it be preexistent matter or nothingness (Chapter IV) This is followed in Chapter V with the treatment of Tohu VaVohu (and the entire creation story) as historical allegory, in which the unfolding destiny of the Jewish people is described. Here Tohu is a metaphor for the world in which the rabbis live, one still full of chaos and violence. The third category described in Chapter VI is made up of two themes which the rabbis associate with Tohu--barrenness and impurity. Since Tohu was understood as inferior matter, the association of Tohu with these themes is logical, i.e., Tohu represents lifelessness and imperfection. Tohu is also associated with various motifs such as God's threat of returning the world to Tohu VaVohu and Tohu as a green line circumventing the entire world (chapter VII). Finally, the author adds in chapter VII analysis of a few passages in which the rabbis associate Tohu with limitations on knowledge and inquiry.

As a kind of addendum to the thesis (designated as PART III), the author shows how the understanding of Tohu undergoes radical change in Jewish philosophy and mysticism. Analyzing material from Philo as well as Nahmonides and Geronides, the author demonstrates how Jewish philosophers almost exclusively understood Tohu in terms of the process of creation and Greek philosophic concepts of matter, form and change. In Kabbalah, Tohu becomes a reference to the domain of evil, which is a part of our world.

Mr. Gutherz is to be highly commended for his sharp analysis and creative insights into the rabbinic traditions as well as the biblical material which he considered. He has clearly demonstrated his ability to analyze texts creatively and to integrate and organize diverse material. In addition, he writes with clarity and presents his ideas as well. He himself indicates several areas in which much more work must be done both to buttress his conclusions and fill out his analysis. More extensive work must be done on Greek philosophical notions of

creation in general, which would provide a backdrop against which to frame both the rabbinic notions of Tohu as well as medieval philosophic and Kabbalistic meanings. In addition, only a smattering of philosophic and Kabbalistic sources were analyzed. More research needs to be done in these areas. Nevertheless, this thesis provides us with an excellent prism through which to view how the rabbis attempt to understand, shape and extend a biblical notion like Tohu to support their own changing contextual agendas. In addition, the author demonstrates how one term can have a multiplicity of meanings, all of which must be understood if we are to appreciate how the rabbis think and what they believe.

Respectfully submitted,



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March 28, 1993

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TOHU VAVOHU in RABBINIC THOUGHT

by  
Tom Gutherz

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of  
Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion  
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And to my teachers, too many to name, who have given me so much nourishment and direction.

### DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to Carmi, for her support through the writing of this work and far beyond it; and for being my most tenacious and loving teacher.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	p. iii
-------------------	--------

## PART ONE: BACKGROUND

Chapter I: Chaos and Creation in the Ancient Near East..	p. 1
A. Mesopotamia.....	p. 3
B. Egypt.....	p. 5
Chapter II: Variant Creation Motifs in the Bible.....	p. 9
A. Psalm 74 and Isaiah 51: Original and Final Kaoskampf.....	p.11
B. Psalm 104: Conditional Creation.....	p. 13
Chapter III: TOHU in the Bible.....	p. 16
A. In the Beginning.....	p. 17
B. Total Desolation and Chaos.....	p. 18
C. A Measurement for Nothing and Desolation.....	p. 19
D. A Desert Place Without Blessing or Guidance.....	p. 21
E. Primordial Emptiness and Nothingness.....	p. 24
F. Against Life, Against Meaning.....	p. 26
G. TOHU as Falsehood.....	p. 28
H. The Hillock of TOHU.....	p. 28

## PART TWO: TOHU IN TALMUD AND MIDRASH

Chapter IV: TOHU and Creation in Talmud and Midrash.....	p. 31
A. Introduction.....	p. 32
B. TOHU VaVOHU as Pre-existing Creation.....	p. 34
C. Creatio ex Nihilo.....	p. 42
Chapter V: TOHU as Historical Allegory.....	p. 51
A. Bereshit Rabba Chapter Two.....	p. 52
B. The Human Condition is TOHU VaVOHU.....	p. 54

C. A World Without Torah is TOHU VaVOHU.....p.	59
D. The Deeds of the Wicked .....p.	63
E. The Dominion of the Nations is like TOHU VaVOHU.p.	65
F. Redemption.....p.	66
Chapter VI: TOHU as Impurity and Barrenness.....p.	74
A. Introduction.....p.	75
B. TOHU as Impurity.....p.	76
C. TOHU as Barrenness.....p.	80
Chapter VII: Mythological Motifs.....p.	85
A. Introduction.....p.	86
B. A Cosmic and Redemptive Power in God's Service..p.	86
C. Returning the World to TOHU and BOHU.....p.	89
D. TOHU is a Green Line Which Encompasses the Whole World.....p.	97
Chapter VIII: Epistemological Considerations.....p.	99
A. Introduction.....p.	100
B. He Made Darkness His Hiding Place.....p.	100
C. TOHU: An Intellectual Danger Zone.....p.	102
D. Why Is Torah Called <u>Tushiya</u> ? TOHU is the Foundation.....p.	105

### PART THREE: NEW DIRECTIONS

Chapter IX: TOHU and BOHU in Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah.....p.	109
A. Introduction.....p.	110
B. Philo of Alexandria.....p.	111
C. Nahmanides.....p.	115
D. Gersonides.....p.	118



iii (a)

E. Kabbalah.....	p. 120
Chapter X: Conclusion.....	p. 129
Notes:.....	p.138
Bibliography:.....	p.142

INTRODUCTION

In his book, The Soul of the Night, astronomer and naturalist Chet Raymo writes:

Not long ago physicists and astronomers despaired of ever knowing what came before the instant of the Big Flash. At that singular moment in the universe's history, their equations shot off into infinity like skyrockets. The numbers for density and temperature of the universe increased without limit, mathematical mountains that could not be climbed or seen over. Space and time collapse into a dread singularity, a numerical bottomless pit until it was a thread of calculation too long and too thin to follow.

There is a street in my town like that... The street becomes an unpaved road, then a track, then a path, then a squirrel trail that runs up a tree. Tracing the universe mathematically back to the Beginning is like following that street until you find yourself up a tree with no place to go...<sup>1</sup>

From ancient times to our own, the human mind has searched for an understanding of the world's beginnings. This search cannot be based on definitive evidence or even on authentic records, but only on a careful process of reasoning backwards. We begin with the world as we understand it today, and work backwards, step by step, to a version of beginnings which conforms with the deepest understanding of our hearts and minds. We seek in stories of beginnings models which will organize our understanding of our place in the universe and which affirm the truths and meanings which we cherish. Even in our day, when scientific knowledge has multiplied a hundred-fold our certainty about the nature of our universe, a perception of the very beginning still presents a nearly insurmountable boundary. Yet it is a boundary which human

curiosity is incapable of ignoring, and every branch of science, philosophy and theology must offer what is ultimately no more than its best conjecture.

And so it is that, no matter how many times we have heard it before, the heart skips a small beat when we re-encounter the opening words of the book of Genesis:

When God began to create heaven and earth  
The earth being TOHU and VOHU  
with darkness over the surface of the deep  
and a wind from God sweeping over the water--  
God said: Let there be light!  
And there was light.

The Biblical author employs simple, commonplace Hebrew words which describe the broad outlines of the primordial scene in which the Creator God begins to act: heaven and earth, darkness and light, wind, water and deep. But he also uses two words which are as uncommon as they are enigmatic: TOHU and BOHU.

These words have been translated in many ways. The new JPS translation renders them as "unformed and void." <sup>2</sup> E.A. Speiser offers "a formless waste," while Umberto Cassuto suggests "without form or life." <sup>4</sup> The Revised English Bible gives its version as "a vast waste." <sup>5</sup>

The term "unformed" calls to mind the clay or raw material of the craftsman, a substance which contains in potentia all the ingredients necessary for a finished work, but which awaits the forming hands of the artisan to give it shape. "Void," on the other hand, is an abstract concept which expresses the contents of the empty set, a set which contains

absolutely nothing. "Without form or life" has the same sense as "formless waste," the emphasis being on lack of distinct shape and the inability to sustain or generate life; the raw material being present, but the life-force being absent. The words "a vast waste" suggest dimension, but also a place without life and possibly order.

This difficulty in rendering a good translation of TOHU and BOHU is not unlike the problem which must have faced the Biblical author, who also finds himself, linguistically, "up a tree with no place to go." What word can describe the state which the mind cannot quite fathom with any precision? In Genesis the word TOHU is used either as an adjective or a noun, and it might have corresponded to any of the above definitions. But whatever object or quality is intended by the use of the term TOHU, perhaps a secondary meaning is also indicated. In Mishnaic Hebrew one finds that the root of TOHU (t/h/h) has entered common usage as a verb: tohe. The meaning of tohe is "to be confounded" or "to be perplexed," which accurately expresses, on some level, the emotions of the one who hears the Biblical text, and perhaps of its author as well.

I was drawn to this subject by some readings in a field normally not related to rabbinics: modern physics. Recent decades have seen the emergence in physics of what is referred to as chaos theory, which attempts to account for the way in which stable systems suddenly become turbulent and

chaotic; for example what happens to water flowing in a river in the few hundred feet just before they plunge over a waterfall. Weather systems also proceed from order into turbulence and then back into some sort of orderly pattern. Physicists have searched for the answer in mechanical and quantitative terms, which are beyond my ability to evaluate, but the general result of their work is the growing sense that, indeed, there is order even in chaos.

Surely the search to find an order in the seeming chaos of the physical universe is the oldest of human pursuits. We undergo the same process, on a small scale, when we seek to impose order on our own personal lives, which can be a puzzling set of interactions between physical data, emotions, impressions, memories, mental categories, and actions. We are so attracted by the myth of order, so desperate to believe that order is possible, that we constantly arrange and rearrange our life's experience in cognitive categories (any categories!) which will reveal some sort of pattern, some direction, some meaning.

Our rabbis understood that in a universe where God is present, the assertion of order is a logical necessity. But their experience of the world told them that this assertion was largely an article of faith. They applied exegetical and hermeneutical tools to the text of the Torah in order to find a secure grounding for that faith. I felt that an examination of rabbinic attitudes towards the term TOHU VAVOHU

would reveal some of the categories in which they thought order was possible. I also wondered if one could find in rabbinic literature any sense of TOHU as a positive, creative category. I wondered if there were any rabbinic views which regarded TOHU not only as the antithesis of order, but also as a nourishing domain, like the rancid and decomposing humus which lies covered by the winter's snow, but from which the seed is already drawing form and life.

I opened my investigation of TOHU VaVOHU by a brief survey of cosmological beliefs in the ancient Mediterranean world, with an eye towards sorting out the way various creation motifs found their way into the Bible. This material comprises Chapters I and II. Chapter III considers the usage of the word TOHU in the Hebrew Bible itself, where one does not find any single meaning for the word TOHU, but rather a loose constellation of images and meanings which are related and yet somehow amorphous. I wanted to clarify all the nuances available to the word TOHU in order to get a sense of the full range of associations which are present in the statement in Genesis 1:2, "AND THE EARTH WAS TOHU VaVOHU."

The very ambiguity of this word, at such a critical moment in the cosmic drama presented in Genesis, provided a fertile ground for generations of rabbis, commentators and philosophers who sought out the meaning of TOHU. By making sense out of TOHU VaVOHU, they attempted to bring order and meaning to their own experiences as Jews in a world which

sometimes seemed to be all mixed up.

I found that the rabbinic understanding of TOHU could be divided into four general rubrics. Chapter IV considers the development of rabbinic thinking about creation, and describes how their understanding of TOHU VaVOHU changed as the Jewish God emerged as a Creator ex Nihilo. A very different way of reading the story of Creation emerges in Chapter V, where the emergence of a world of life and order out of the turbulence of TOHU is seen as an allegory for the as-yet-incomplete unfolding of the destiny of the Jewish people in history. Chapter VI considers two concepts which the rabbis identified with TOHU, things which interfered with the proper ordering of life: barrenness and impurity. One may find the oppositions of perfected/unperfected and lifeless/lifegiving in other chapters, but I felt these two ideas belong in a category of their own.

Rabbinic thought also contains elements which I have called mythological, such as images of God as a World-Creator-and-Destroyer. Speculation about the relationship of TOHU to created and destroyed worlds which preceeded our own, or of its role at the cataclysmic end of days, are treated in Chapter VII. A final section on early rabbinic thought treats TOHU as a problem of knowledge. I found several passages in which TOHU emerges as a category of knowing. It often represents a kind of impassable boundary which seems to separate our own limited awareness from the infinite wisdom



we ascribe to God. I have called these related themes "epistemological" and they are found in Chapter VIII.

The understanding of TOHU undergoes a radical change in the Jewish philosophical tradition, where one finds TOHU largely in the context of philosophical proofs which seek to demonstrate that the creation doctrines of a particular philosophical school can be found expressed in the Torah. Sometimes this is accomplished by using splendid midrashic liberties with the plain text of the Torah, as will be shown in Chapter IX.

In the Kabbalah, TOHU comes to be identified with the domain of evil, which originates in the Godhead but has become opposed to Him. In Lurianic Kabbalah, the world of the shattered vessels, the remnants of an original creation which failed, came to be known as the World of TOHU. This World of TOHU, however, remains dynamic and active, an everpresent counterpart to our own world.

My investigation of TOHU began with a look at the cosmologies of the ancient Near East, where a particular type of geography and cultural makeup combined to generate some of the oldest stories known to humankind. The early creation myths deal with the moments "when the luminous figure of time penetrated absolutely formless being, differentiating it and breaking it up into separate pieces." ' Though the details will differ in important ways, every culture has felt the need to have an account of the world's beginnings.

CHAPTER ONE: CHAOS AND CREATION IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

The Biblical authors were certainly familiar with the world-views of the Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilizations with which they had extensive contact for a thousand or so years. Therefore, in seeking to uncover the meaning which TOHU had for the Biblical author, it is reasonable to look for parallel intellectual conceptions in the literature and traditions of Israel's neighbors. Biblical scholarship is divided as to the nature of the relationship between the Hebrew version of creation and those of its neighbors. Citing linguistic and thematic similarities, some consider the Biblical text to be a reformulation of essentially borrowed material. Other scholars prefer to look beyond the written (and presumably later) texts to an earlier, oral tradition which was common to both the Biblical and other Near Eastern versions. Still others regard the Hebrew version as having an original and independent origin, and the case has also been made for understanding it as a self-conscious polemic against the versions of neighboring, pagan societies.

The Mesopotamian and Egyptian traditions, like the Jewish Bible, reflect a process of layering, the incorporation and reconciliation of successive theological ideas over time. Nevertheless in their final form they offer a basis for comparison, and some clues as to what the term TOHU may have meant in its original context: the state of being which preceeded, or coincided with, the emergence of the ordered cosmos in which we live.

#### A. MESOPOTAMIA

Mesopotamia has no single epic of creation, but numerous references to details of the creation appearing in various works may be considered. <sup>1</sup> In the literature available to us, the creation of the universe is associated with the creation of the gods. The cosmology put forward in the Enuma Elish is one in which "world origins are essentially accidental; gods were born out of a mingling of the primeval waters, and they engendered other gods." <sup>2</sup> The salt waters of the sea (Tiamat) and the fresh waters (Apsu) are the pair of world-parents, whose union gives birth to the silt, or land, which in turn gives birth to the horizon, the circular rims of the earth and of heaven. The powers unleashed by the gods embodied in these entities create a tumult, and their raucous interplay disturbs the peace and rest of the original world-parents, who resolve to destroy them. The remainder of the epic poem describes the struggle between the younger and older gods, culminating in the emergence of Marduk as first among them. Marduk defeats Tiamat in mortal combat, and orders the world out of her body.

In the Enuma Elish there is little attention to the very beginnings of the universe, and it seems as if the matter represented by the primeval gods Apsu and Tiamat was eternal. The Babylonians apparently could not conceive of a time in which there was nothing except a transcendental deity. <sup>3</sup> In a different, Neo-Babylonian bilingual account of creation, Marduk, the hero of the Enuma Elish, is credited with the

creation of certain plants and animals , but it is not clear whether "creation" means anything more than "causing them to reproduce." ' The primordial elements themselves seem to come from a kind of spontaneous generation:

Heaven was born of its own accord,  
earth was born of its own accord.  
Heaven was abyss, earth was abyss     '

Both Genesis 1 and the Enuma Elish describe the primordial elements as a waters, but this image is also common to many other cultural traditions. Its roots may lie in the biological truth that human life emerges from water, or the fact that water is perceived as both the source of life and as a boundless element which surrounds the earth above and below. The linguistic similarity between the Hebrew tehom and the goddess Tiamat have been duly noted, although tehom never appears as a mythological character like Rahab or Leviathan. The separating and formation of a heavenly and earthly entity takes place on the second day of the Genesis story. But beyond this, the two accounts are fundamentally dissimilar. The notion of distinctly masculine and feminine "world parents" is foreign to Genesis, and the emergence of the created world out of primordial combat is strictly excluded there, although this theme does find expression in other Biblical writings, such as the Psalms, Job and Isaiah. The primeval, watery chaos in the Babylonian myth is itself capable of generating all life, whereas in Genesis it is the word of the Creator which transforms TOHU and BOHU, water and deep into a living cosmos.

## B. EGYPT

Egyptian cosmology offers a greater similarity to fundamental notions in the Hebraic epic. Egyptian theology is a synthesis of rival theologies, in which accounts from Memphis, Hermopolis and Heliopolis compete with each other. All these creation stories, however, describe the emergence of the creator God from an eternal entity called Nun.

Nun (Chaos) was the primeval ocean, which had no surface, but completely filled the universe. It was motionless and stagnant, and has been described as a kind of "eventless existence prior to creation. Chaos is therefore thought of not only as confused but as monotonous." <sup>6</sup> At some point ("the first time," but not necessarily "in the beginning") these waters recede and the first hillock appears. In Heliopolitan cosmology it is the god Atum who emerges from Nun--either creating himself, or sometimes perceived as the hillock itself. When Atum becomes identified in Egyptian religion with the sun god Ra, the story of his emergence comes to represent the coming of the light which disperses the darkness of Nun. Being alone in the universe, the God Atum masturbates into his own hand, giving birth to the twins Shu and Tefnut (air and moisture) from his mouth. These in turn engender earth and sky, and the successive generations of beings, such as Osiris and Isis, Seth and Nepthys.

In the Memphite version of the creation story, it is the god Ptah who emerges from Nun. Ptah incorporates the primeval

powers into himself, becoming All, and then issues them forth from himself as the cosmos, first in the heart and then through speech. His is "the mouth which pronounced the name of every thing," from which Shu and Tefnut were created and then all of creation evolved. These creative words originate in "what the heart thought and the tongue commanded" <sup>7</sup> and as such represent the Thought and Will of the Creator God.

The Egyptians had a notion that this act of creation was not only a one-time event, but one which needed continual repetition. It was manifest in the "sun-god [who] emerges every morning from the primeval ocean Nun and by his daily journey ensures order in the cosmos." <sup>8</sup> Corresponding to this notion was the belief among the Egyptians that "the unordered realms of chaos, which include, as well as Nun, the [condensed] darkness--are not abolished by creation, but that they continue to surround the orderly world on every side." <sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, Egyptian religion, despite its detailed elaboration of the realm of the dead, and the natural striving of the individual for a kind of immortality with the gods, did not view the created world as eternal. In the Book of the Dead, the god Atum declares that

the earth will appear again as the primordial ocean (Nun), as an infinite flood as in the beginning. I am what remains...after I have changed into a snake whom no man knows, whom no god sees. <sup>10</sup>

Even the God who emerged from chaos will one day return to being an "obedient primeval serpent," submerged in the chaos

which alone is infinite, and will one day be All again.

In Babylonian cosmology the universe is created out of the body of the slain goddess. But in Egyptian religion it is only the creator god who "came into being by himself," and who then formed the universe from his own creative thought and speech. The world is not formed out of Nun, but out of the creative word of Ptah, who merely "seizes the powers latent in the primeval material and incorporates them in his own being." <sup>11</sup> Ptah does not create all life, but only the first generations of gods. He performs the work of separating heaven from earth, light from darkness, and land from water. The rest of the natural world is not created, but evolves--animal life from the falcon, hatched from a primeval egg, and plant life from the lotus, which springs to life on the hillock which emerges from Nun. <sup>12</sup>

Though creation has taken place, the chaotic ocean continues to evolve on its own plane; Nun is not diminished. Nun is sometimes represented as the water found in the digging of wells, and also as the floodwaters of the Nile, which both leave life in their wake when they recede, and are expected to return in the future. Despite his implacable power, in general he is perceived as a beneficent god.

The Egyptian story, particularly the Memphite cosmology, shares with the Hebrew Bible the clear portrayal of a single Creator God, although it does not conceive of this God as eternal. The Egyptian deity emerges from chaos, and one day



will be subsumed in it. Nevertheless, the seemingly paradoxical existence of chaos even in a world which has wrested its independence from that chaos is a concept which finds ample expression in the rabbinic, if not the Biblical tradition (see Chapter V). The idea that the world may come to an end and return to chaos also found a place in rabbinic eschatology, and is treated in Chapter VII.

CHAPTER TWO: VARIANT CREATION MOTIFS IN THE BIBLE

Even the most casual reader of the Hebrew Bible is aware of the fact that it contains more than one creation story; the opening chapters of Genesis contain two creation accounts which appear consecutively. A considerable amount of exegetical midrash and biblical commentary has been devoted to a reconciliation of these two stories, which modern critical scholarship considers to be the work of different authors. The first creation story, found in Genesis 1:1-2:4, is generally regarded by these scholars as being the latest in origin, dating from the time of the Exile and ascribed to the Priestly source.<sup>1</sup> This story, in which God creates the world at the beginning of time by the power of His creative word, is devoid of mythological content. The unchallenged unfolding of creation according to a divine plan, portrays a depersonalized and transcendent deity who embodies the principles of cosmic order and divine wisdom. The Creator in this story represents a more abstract and theologically "advanced" conception, a single God of the entire universe, and this also argues for its later placement at the very beginning of the Torah. The case has also been made for seeing it as a polemic against the theologies of the surrounding civilizations, specifically Babylonia.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, earlier Hebrew conceptions about the nature of the deity, and references to other versions of the events accompanying the creation of the world, are not entirely absent from the Bible. These largely mythological motifs

appear in the Psalms, and in the books of Job and Isaiah. It is the nature of the generous heterodoxy of Jewish religious poetry to allow the expression of ideas which may not adhere strictly to doctrine, but which nevertheless are resonant in meaning for the devout hearer. The critical-historical Biblical scholar can appreciate the genuine and enduring religious significance of these ideas while at the same time recognizing in them evidence of earlier strata, a small portion of the repertoire of generations of Hebrew storytellers and poets, whose folkloristic beliefs have been formally superceded by "purer" and more sophisticated theological doctrines.

It would be wrong to consider the importance of these conceptions solely through the selective eyes of the Biblical redactor. For it often happens in Jewish thought that yesterdays "variant" emerges as tomorrow's normative proof-text; creation motifs which appear to be secondary in the Bible are frequently incorporated by rabbis and philosophers as fundamental to the theologies of later generations. These motifs shed light on Biblical notions about the enduring power of evil or chaos, even in a world ruled by a God asserted to be omnipotent by the fundamentally optimistic author of Genesis I. <sup>3</sup>

#### A. PSALM 74 AND ISAIAH 51: ORIGINAL AND FINAL "KAOSKAMPE"

Psalm 74 offers us a version of creation in which all did not proceed in orderly fashion from the mind and will of the

Creator, but in which God does battle against the sea monsters, crushing the heads of the Leviathan, and then setting the sun and moon into place. The idea presented here of Creation as a kaoskampf, an assertion of mastery by Yahweh over primeval forces, is described as similar to the motif of the Ugaritic myth of Baal. In this story, it is Baal who defeats the ocean (Yamm) Judge River, Lotan the seven-headed dragon (who is parallel to the Hebrew Leviatan) and Tannin. Baal then becomes the creator of creatures, and a Temple is built to him. This Ugaritic myth, in turn, has certain parallels with the Babylonian creation epic.

Yehezkel Kaufmann in The Religion of Israel claims that this "mastery of Yahweh" is the basic idea of Israelite religion. And he reads this Psalm as a parallel to this Ugaritic story, even though the Creator Baal is still subservient to EL. In Kaufmann's view the Hebrew God assumed both the qualities of the Supreme Creator El as well as the one who heals the rupture, who renews creation like Baal does in his defeat of the evil monsters.

Isaiah 51 also contains a reference to the same cast of characters. God is described as the one who hacked Rahab in pieces, pierced the Tannin and dried up Yamm, and the Tehom in a time described as mi-gedem. If we read mi-gedem as "the very beginning," we see that this account of cosmic combat is coeval with the very process of creation. Mi-gedem may refer to a time so far back, at the beginning of history or even

a primordial time. In this case the battle against the sea monsters refers to a temporary irruption of the divine order, which God vanquishes. It may be significant that the revival of this notion of creation/foundation emerging from a challenge to God's power is attributed to the prophet who wrote at the time of the Babylonian exile, when it appeared that the permanent order and stability of the cosmos was disrupted by evil forces. It is an entirely understandable religious attitude in which the faithful exhort God to "Awake! Put on your strength!" and restore order as once before. Just as God once vanquished the primeval powers of chaos, he is exhorted to intervene now and reverse the historical forces which have disrupted the sacred order and stable existence of the covenant community.

#### B. PSALM 104: CONDITIONAL CREATION

The triumph of God over the forces of disorder presented in Psalm 74 and Isaiah 51 have about them an element of finality, but there are other texts in the Bible which imply that the forces of destruction and chaos have not been destroyed, but only kept at bay, temporarily neutralized. This creates a highly charged situation, in which human life is conditional, dependent on God's strength and will, His vigilance and covenant.

In Psalm 104, we are told that

the waters fled at your blast  
rushed away at the sound of thunder...  
to the place established for them

You set bounds they may not pass  
so that they never again cover the earth

In Job 38:8-11, God is described as one who says

I made breakers for [the sea]  
And set up its bars and doors,  
And said, "You may come thus far and no further"

In Job 40, God's ancient enemy, the Leviathan, has not been destroyed forever. He has been converted into a plaything, with which God makes sport. In Jewish tradition, however, the Leviathan remains a powerful enemy, who will have to be defeated once again at the commencement of the Messianic era.

All these texts recognize that the primeval powers of chaos and destruction have not been vanquished. What if the sea should burst its doors and bars? Or if the waters should leave their place? Or if the Leviathan should gird its strength and emerge as a powerful enemy again? Certainly this could happen as a result of God's absent-mindedness. While this goes against the theology of the omnipotent and ever-vigilant Creator, it certainly lays claim to a place in the religious mind-set in hours of deep pessimism.

Destruction might also come about if God, finally disgusted with human faithlessness and iniquity, should so will it. The ancient story of the Flood proves that God is capable of such an action, and that the universe can be totally destroyed. He has promised never to do so again, yet we are aware that the strength of this promise depends on God's faithfulness, not ours. We trust that God will never become so angered at human injustice and arrogance that He

will consider this agreement to be abrogated, and the "waters of Noah" shall return again. Who does not fear that "in a slight moment of anger, [God will] hide [His] face from you" yet again ?

These anxious motifs survive in stark contrast to the buoyant optimism of the opening chapter of Genesis, where the Creator, unchallenged, directs the universe in an orderly fashion. They imply a certain distance between the human and the divine realm, which the religious person seeks to understand and bridge. There is even an implied criticism of God's order: if this is a universe of order, than what could be the meaning of chaos? If this is the world about which God pronounced "It was good," then what was TOHU like?



CHAPTER THREE: TOHU IN THE BIBLE

The term TOHU appears 20 times in the Hebrew Bible. It is used once in the books of Genesis, Deuteronomy, Psalms and Jeremiah. In Second Samuel the word appears twice, and in Job three times. The prophet Isaiah employs TOHU eleven times. In some cases the precise meaning of the word is difficult to ascertain. Generally, though, TOHU finds its usage in a constellation of images which is fairly consistent even though used in varying contexts.

#### A. IN THE BEGINNING

The first encounter with TOHU is in the Biblical account of creation, where following the declaration that "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," we are told that "The earth was TOHU vaVOHU." At the outset this is difficult to translate. But based on subsequent Biblical references, there are two general ways of understanding this state of being which existed before God spoke and commenced with the creation of light. The first regards TOHU as an actual substance, a substance which is like a wasteland, a place of disorder; something like a desert in which no life exists, until God spoke and organized the world. The second considers TOHU as a state of nothingness, a void, an empty set, out of which God formed the substance of existence and the world.

These are the two major rubrics in which the word TOHU is used in the other books of the bible. Often we shall see

that these two usages are connected. Since this opening chapter may have been composed after most of the Bible was in place,<sup>1</sup> the words TOHU VaVOHU in the creation story may have been chosen to resonate with the full range of meanings which are outlined below.

#### B. TOTAL DESOLATION AND CHAOS

In Jeremiah 4:23 the prophet describes the scene which he envisions concerning the impending destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

I saw the earth and it was TOHU vaVOHU,  
at the skies, their light is gone...  
I look at the mountains, they are quaking  
and all the hills are rocking.  
I look: No man is left,  
and all the birds of the sky have fled  
I look: the farmland is desert.  
and all its towns are in ruin--  
Because of the Lord, because of His blazing anger.

This passage clearly portrays the destruction of Jerusalem as reducing the land to waste, to desert, to a place of no life. Jeremiah's description of the heavens as "without light" refers us back to the original state of TOHU, before God brought the light into being. The prophet is using TOHU VaVOHU in a concrete sense, as a metaphor for desolation as well as destruction. This is the only time in which the compound phrase TOHU VaVOHU is used in the entire Bible, with the exception of the opening verses of Genesis. If Jeremiah was composed with Genesis in mind, then this usage implies the idea that the world can indeed go backwards and revert to an

almost primordial chaos.

If, on the other hand, the author of the opening chapter of Genesis had Jeremiah's words in mind, then another meaning is implied: that the world which was created by God with an outward physical order is related to and perhaps dependent on a commitment to a moral order on the part of Israel. Sinfulness, the rejection of God, may bring about a nullification of God's creative plan as well.

The return of TOHU VaVOHU at the time of the Temples' destruction will prove to be fertile ground for the rabbis, who will later imply that the re-emergence of TOHU VaVOHU signifies, metaphorically, the onset of a second cycle of creation . A world in which God's sanctuary and God's holy city have been destroyed, is one in which the moral order is in chaos and disorder again, and which looks forward to a second "creation." This second creation will find its fulfillment in redemption--which may be regarded as the completion of God's work, not on the cosmos, but on human destiny. This theme is treated extensively in Chapter V.

#### C. A MEASUREMENT FOR NOTHING AND DESOLATION

The two terms are paired once again in Isaiah 34:11 in a description of the way in which God shall judge the nations on His day of retribution. In this context it is stated that Edom shall be totally destroyed, its streams turned to pitch, a place where fires and smoke will burn for eternity. Isaiah

prophecies that this destruction will turn this fertile land into a wasteland, a place where jackdaws, owls and ravens live. In this context, Isaiah says that God will

measure it with a line of CHAOS (gav tohu)  
and with weights of EMPTINESS (avnei bohu)  
It shall be called "No kingdom is there" ('yn sham malukha)  
Its nobles and all its lords shall be nothing  
('efes)

The JPS translation indicates that this means God will use the weights and measures of the architect to plan total chaos for this enemy of Israel. The architect represents an enhancement of the image of the builder/former/creator of Genesis. A builder transforms reality through crude physical manipulation, whereas an architect innovates through the power of pure thought. This is more in line with a conception of God who is more than powerful; he also possesses or embodies the qualities of intelligence and wisdom which are eternal.

In this passage both possible nuances of TOHU are brought into play, as Edom shall be reduced both to wasteland and to nothingness.

There is a parallel usage of this image of the lines and weights in Isaiah 28:17. There God speaks to the leaders of Jerusalem, who imagine that they are safe from punishment; those who have made a "covenant with Death" and a "pact with Sheol". Using the metaphor of the builder, God says He will "establish in Zion, stone by stone, a tower of precious cornerstones" for the trusting. But God will also condemn the wicked:

I will use justice as a line (santi mishpat legav)  
and righteousness as a weight (usedaga lemishgelet)

In Second Kings 21:13, God speaks about the judgement to come upon Israel because of the wickedness of Manasseh, using the expression

I will apply to Jerusalem the line of Samaria  
and the weights of the house of Ahab  
(gav shomron, mishgolet beit ahav)  
I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish  
and turns it upside down

In Lamentations 2:8 the drawing of a line is also used for planning destruction. There it is said that God

resolved to destroy/ the wall of fair Zion  
He measured with a line, did not refrain  
from bringing destruction.

The gay can also be used for building and establishing, as in Jer 31:39 and Zech 1:16, where Jerusalem is to be rebuilt. It is also used for laying the foundation for the entire world, as in Job 38:5.

#### D. A DESERT PLACE WITHOUT BLESSING OR GUIDANCE

In Deuteronomy 32:10 TOHU is used to describe the essential character of a very real wasteland or desert.

He found him (Jacob) in a desert land (eres midbar)  
In an empty howling place (tohu veleil yesimon)

In this passage yesimon is the parallel term to midbar; TOHU refers to its awesome quality of emptiness--or perhaps barrenness. The text here does not give a further parallel on which to make a more certain guess at the intended meaning.

In Psalm 107:40 and Job 12:46 we have TOHU used as an image for a place where people lose their way. It is described

as a place without roads or guideposts. Job is acknowledging that God is the source of all wisdom, and that when He chooses He can withdraw wisdom and leave a man floundering: He is the one who "causes judges to go mad " and "deprives the trusty men of speech." The one who "draws mysteries out of the darkness, and brings obscurities to light" can also reverse this process:

He exalts nations, then destroys them;  
 He expands nations, then leads them away.  
 He deranges the leaders of the people,  
 And makes them wander in a trackless waste (tohu lo derekh)  
 They grope without light in the darkness;  
 He makes them wander as if drunk." (Job 12:23-25)

Here tohu lo derekh is a place without guidance, a place without wisdom, where people wander as if drunk, without sense. The implication may also be to Torah, which represents God's revealed wisdom. Israel is repeatedly exhorted to follow the Torah -- to walk in its paths (lalechet bekhoh derakhav, as in Deut 10:12). The one who wanders in tohu is the one who has no derekh, no Torah.

Job also refers us back to the primordial act with his reference to a place "without light, in the darkness" reminding us that TOHU is the state before light was created, or where light does not penetrate. This verse sets up TOHU as a place, but the metaphor clearly points to it as a state of being in which wisdom is absent.

In Psalm 107 we hear about the different destinies stored up for the wicked and proud, against the poor and long-

suffering. For the wicked God turns

rivers	to	wilderness
springs of water	to	thirsty land
fruitful land	to	salty marsh

While for the righteous the God will turn the

wilderness ( <u>midbar</u> )	to	pools ( <u>agam may'm</u> )
parched land ( <u>eres siya</u> )	to	springs of water

The righteous shall be settled there, where they shall sow fields, plant vineyards and yield a fruitful harvest. They are blessed, they increase greatly, even their cattle. In summary, the Psalmist tells us that

He pours contempt upon great men,  
and makes them lose their way in trackless deserts  
(tohu lo derekh)  
While the needy he secures from suffering,  
and increases their families like flocks

The trackless waste is set against the settled land; the place where nothing grows, a cursed land, is contrasted with the place where there is increase and blessing. The persistent water metaphors also call to mind Torah, which is often compared to the "waters of life." So that the wicked live in a place without water/Torah, and tohu lo derekh is a place without blessing and fruitfulness. This image is repeated in Isaiah.

Job uses TOHU to refer to the sudden disappearance of his friends, who have deserted him in his troubles. In Job 16:18 he compares them to water which has dried up, like a wadi on which streams once ran. Once they were dark, obscured by snow, but



when they thaw, they vanish  
 In the heat they disappear where they are.  
 Their course twists and turns  
 They run into the desert and vanish (yaalu  
betohu veyoveidu)

Like the Psalmist, Job uses the imagery of water which has dried up like a desert. Here it actually vanishes into nothing and disappears. In a secondary way, it also refers to Job's mental state, a total loss of understanding of his predicament and without guidance of his friends. This sense captures the associations noted above in the usage of tohu lo derekh.

#### E. PRIMORDIAL EMPTINESS AND NOTHINGNESS

Job describes God's power, calling him the One who

stretched out the Heavens (safon) over TOHU  
 who suspended the earth over emptiness (belima)

Job is using safon as a term for Heaven, as it is used in  
 Isaiah 14:13 :

You thought in your heart, I will climb to the sky,  
 Higher than the stars of God I will set my  
 assembly.  
 I will sit in the mount of assembly, on the summit  
 of safon.

TOHU here is parallel to belima, meaning "without substance " and the verse describes the way the heavens were suspended over the great primordial emptiness as in the beginning God created the Heavens and the earth. According to Job, the heavens and earth were established over a great emptiness, an absolute nothing.

In several instances we find TOHU used as a synonym for

naught, for a thing which has no substance or significance.  
Comparing the might of God with the supposed importance of  
mighty nations, Isaiah 40:17 asks:

Who measured the waters with the hollow of his hand?  
And meted the earth's dust with a measure?  
And weighed the mountains with a scale  
And the hills with a balance?....  
[ compared to Him...]  
The nations are but a drop in the bucket,  
reckoned as dust on a balance.  
The very coastlands He lifts like notes....  
All the nations are as naught in his sight  
He accounts them as less than nothing  
(kol hagoyim ke'ayin negdo  
me'efes vetohu nehshevu lo)

In this case TOHU is parallel to 'ayin and to 'efes--two terms  
referring to absolute nothing.

In Chapter 49:4, Isaiah expresses the frustration of  
one who has been promised something, but despite his efforts  
the promise has not yet been fulfilled:

And I thought, "I have labored in vain (lerig  
yag'ati)  
For empty wind (letohu vehevel I have spent my  
strength"

Parallel to rig -- emptiness -- TOHU is used here in the  
context of striving "for nothing" as well as "to no effect."

Further on in this same chapter, Isaiah again parallels  
tohu to 'ayin, declaring in 40:23 that

He brings potentates to naught (notein roznim  
le'ayin)  
Makes rulers of the earth as nothing (ketohu asa)

In this context it means that those who are used to issuing  
orders and to have their will obeyed will be rendered  
ineffective, incapable of acting. Their actions will come to

naught. TOHU does not mean that they will cease to exist, but that their power will disappear.

In Chapter 41: 29 the prophet develops this theme more explicitly, declaring how none of those who foretold prophecies could match God's true foreknowledge, and none can stand up to God's scrutiny:

See, they are all nothingness (hen kulam 'aven  
'efes)  
Their actions are like wind (ma'aseihem ruah)  
Their statutes are null (vato hu niskeihem)

Here TOHU means either that their actions are no-actions, or that they have no effect at all. In this sense they have been rendered "like nothing." The idea that the state of TOHU is one in which something has no ability to act is made explicit in Isaiah 44:9. Referring to idolators, the prophet declares that

The makers of idols all work to no purpose  
(yosrei pesel kulam tohu)  
And the goods they treasure are useless  
(hamudeihem bal yo'ilu)"

The idolators are all working for nothing, for their work can come to nothing.

#### F. AGAINST LIFE, AGAINST MEANING

There is one passage in Isaiah where TOHU is used in a way which draws on all the meanings cited above. Identifying himself as the "Creator of heaven (boreh shamay'm) who alone is God, who formed the earth and made it (yoser ha'ares v'osah)" God informs us that

Lo tohu vra'ah  
Lashevet yesarah

He did not create it as a TOHU  
 But he formed it to be inhabited

We can understand TOHU here to be the opposite of inhabited, just as a wasteland is the opposite of the settled land. In this sense God is telling us that the universe He created was made to sustain life. We can also read TOHU here as meaning "for nothing," understanding lashevet to have the sense of "to make something out of it" or to "make it habitable." A fine distinction, perhaps, but this could imply that the world which was created is a place where not only life, but also meaning, can be found. TOHU is therefore the antithesis of life, as well as of meaning.

In the very next verse, Isaiah will use TOHU yet again, this time as a direct reference to a particular place. Referring to the years when Israel wandered in the wilderness of Sinai, he says

I did not speak in secret, (beseter)  
 At a site in a land of darkness (meqom eres  
hoshekh)  
 I did not say to the stock of Jacob  
 Seek me out in a wasteland (tohu bagshuni)

TOHU is characterized here as a place where things are concealed, as well as a place of darkness. Concealment stands directly opposite to revelation, just as darkness is in opposition to light. So TOHU refers to the place where there is no light ("For the commandment is a lamp and the Torah is light") and where there is no revelation! Just as the world

was a place of darkness before God's presence was felt in it and gave it meaning and order, so TOHU is that place where Torah does not give meaning and order to life.

We can now see how this constellation of meanings around the word TOHU can be set against its antithesis:

TOHU	vs
darkness	light
wasteland, not inhabitable	hospitable to life
nothing, emptiness	substance, reality
concealed	revealed
impotent, infertile	fertile, effective

#### G. TOHU AS FALSEHOOD

In Isaiah 29: 21 the prophet is declaiming the injustices of the world, and proclaiming the day when

The tyrant shall be no more, the scoffer shall  
cease to be  
And those diligent for evil shall be wiped out  
Who cause men to lose their lawsuits  
Laying a snare for the arbiter at the gate  
And deceiving with TOHU (vayatu betohu)  
He who was right (sadiq)

The JPS Tanakh renders this as "deceiving in falsehood he who was right." The picture is painted of the one who subverts justice by laying a snare for the judge, and who twists with lies the case of the righteous one. The verb N/T/E has the meaning of to falsify, to cause to deviate, to err. Here the grammar seems to imply that TOHU is the tool with which the deceiver deceives.

#### H. THE HILLOCK OF TOHU

The final biblical reference is an enigmatic one. In the

course of describing the desolation which will come upon the earth on account of forsaking the covenant, the prophet declares (Is 24:10)

nishbera giryat tohu  
sugar kol bayit mibo

which JPS renders as

Towns are broken, empty  
Every house is shut, none enters.

I cannot discern the basis for this translation of the Hebrew, which literally would read "the hill of tohu has been broken." The reference is intriguing because of its similarity to the Memphite Egyptian cosmology, in which the earth comes into being with the emergence of a small hillock out of the waters of Chaos. But it seems to be divorced from any such cosmological reference in Isaiah's vision.

The use of TOHU in the Bible demonstrates the multiple layers of meaning which are contained in this single word. TOHU is a nullity, as an abstract concept and as a physical description; it is a place without dimension. But it is also a state where there is no direction, neither spatial nor ethical. TOHU is the lack of life-force, which is the original sense of "blessing." It signifies the absence of potency, the inability to effect any action whatsoever. It is a physical wasteland, compared to a wilderness or a desert, a place without nourishing water. And it is a place where the guidance and meaning which God's presence and God's Torah brings to the

world, remain unrevealed.

The author who wrote in Genesis 1:2 that "the earth was TOHU VaVOHU", managed to include this entire constellation of meanings and associations, which are diverse and yet fundamentally related. This single term sums up an entire world of opposition, which God overcomes by setting in motion the dynamic of creation, revelation and ultimately redemption.

CHAPTER FOUR: TOHU AND CREATION IN TALMUD AND MIDRASH



#### A. INTRODUCTION

The rabbinic treatment of TOHU can be grouped into four major categories: Creation-oriented, historical allegory, mythological and epistemological. The first is concerned with the creative process by which the world came into being, and considers TOHU as part of an exegesis of the account of creation which appears in the first chapter of Genesis. The rabbis read the Biblical account of creation, as they read the Torah in general, on at least two levels. They found in it evidence of the physical structure of the universe, in the way that we might read a physics textbook. But the physical structure of the universe, for the rabbis and for all ancient philosophers, pointed to truths about the nature of the creator, the divine realm, and towards the ultimate nature of reality. In their competition with neighboring and competing metaphysical systems, the prominent and unelaborated existence of the earth as TOHU and BOHU was a description whose difficulty needed to be explicated in order to establish the Jewish view of God in His aspect of Creator.

A second approach is to read the story of creation as a historical allegory, which provides a framework for interpreting the overall direction in which human history is moving, and for identifying the role of Israel in the divine plan. Since the rabbis identified the Torah with Wisdom, in the fullest sense of this word, they looked upon the words of Torah as being able to contain many levels of meaning

simultaneously. They certainly understand a single verse of Torah in its plain meaning and in its specific context. But they also believed that the Torah, which was eternal and given for all time, contained references to their own historical experience and that of future generations. By allowing disparate verses from different parts of the Torah to "talk to each other," the rabbis sought to unravel the hints and the allegories which were embedded in the Torah's accounts of tribal history and legislation. These could be applied towards resolving difficulties which arose in the application of Jewish law, as well as to explaining the nature of Israel's role in the world. These two subjects, after all, are the major themes of the Torah.

The rabbis experienced the world they lived in as being incomplete and evolving. For them, "creation" had not yet reached its fulfillment, at least not on the human plane. Redemption was still in the future, though the world was moving towards it inexorably. This allowed them to understand the concept of TOHU as it appears in the opening chapter of Genesis as a metaphor for their own world. It was a world which was still full of chaos and disorder, and yet was waiting to receive the full complement of God's ordering and creative power.

In the third category, TOHU becomes a reified entity, an actor which participates in a cosmic drama directed by God. In this category, one finds apocalyptic visions of the end and

mythological speculation about created and destroyed worlds.

The fourth category may be called epistemological. Here, the rabbis reflect on the mystery of knowledge, and TOHU is envisioned as a kind of screen or barrier, which the limited human mind cannot quite penetrate in order to enter the hidden realm of divine knowledge.

#### B. TOHU VaVOHU AS PRE-EXISTING CREATION

A major theme in the rabbinic exegesis of the term TOHU owes its origin to the peculiar positioning of the verse (Gen 1:2) in which TOHU is mentioned. The statement that "The earth was TOHU AND VOHU" is sandwiched in between the announcement that God created the heavens and the earth, and the actual description of the first creative act, God's first words; "Let there be light!"

A simple reading of the text might imply that TOHU was descriptive of a first creation which did not turn out so well, so that God had to create a second time. Or it might be read as an indication that the earth, in some unformed and incomplete form, was around before God began to create. This would mean that matter of some kind was pre-existent, and shared of God's eternity.

Neither of these interpretations were acceptable to the rabbis. And because of the difficult nature of this and other verses in the Biblical account, they adopted the attitude that ordinary people ought not to "expound the mysteries of

Creation," and villified those who did. They saw the opening lines of Genesis as creating an opening, using the Torah's own words, for foreign theological concepts. Bereshit Rabbah 1:5 expresses this well:

Rabbi Huna in the name of Bar Kappara  
[quotes Psalm 31:19]:

"Let lying lips be stilled  
that speak haughtily against the righteous  
with arrogance and contempt"

[Yet] "How abundant is the good  
that you have in store (tzafanta)  
for those who fear you"

This is illustrated by a parable:

Just as in this world, a flesh and blood king  
builds a palace on a place [where there were]  
sewers, refuse and offensive odors;  
And one who comes and says  
"This palace is built on a place of  
sewers, refuse and offensive odors"  
does not damage [his reputation],

so anyone who comes to say that  
this world was created from TOHU and VOHU  
does not damage His reputation.

The opening quote from Psalms is cited as an imprecation against those who "speak about the things which God has hidden." These people are charged with being proud of their own ability to expound the mysteries of creation, but who do so by disgracing the honor of God.

In contrast to them, the rabbis bring the continuation of the same verse from Psalms. The abundant good which is hidden away is understood by the rabbis in this midrash to be the world to come. This abundant good, like the secrets of creation, are tzefunim, hidden. The midrash claims that those

who attempt to reveal what is hidden (the secrets of creation) will have no part of what is hidden away (the good, the World-to-Come).

The message is clear: One ought not put forth any explanations of the creation of the world. God has hidden this knowledge from us and it should remain that way. Nevertheless, the rabbis do attempt to refute the arguments of the "lying lips," through the presentation of a parable.

The parable takes issue with the argument that the origins of the earth as TOHU VaVOHU is proof of the fundamentally flawed, inferior nature of the world in which we live. The parable's intent is to prove that an ignoble origin for a noble palace does not insult the honor of the builder. To the contrary, it is a reflection on the ability and magnificence of the builder to overcome the crudeness of the raw materials and to produce a beautiful and elegant structure. And it reflects badly upon the "lying lips" who choose to ignore the beauty of the finished product, and who point to the "place of sewers and refuse." Instead of derogating the God who made a world out of TOHU and BOHU, one ought to see the beauty of the world which arose from them as proof of God's transformative power.

It is a nice parable, but not without its problems. It only partially answers the objection raised by the "lying lips." A flesh and blood king does indeed fashion things out of matter which already exists. But God is said to be a

creator. If God can create anything He wills, then why produce a "place of sewers" to begin with? Torah acknowledges that the TOHU VaVOHU existed before Creation, and this might imply that the universe as we know it IS actually built on something which God could not or did not create. This would be an excellent proof for the claim of certain schools of Greek philosophy that it was from eternal and uncreated matter that God fashioned the world. This would certainly "disgrace" God's honor, by depriving him of the power of creatio ex nihilo. The midrash tacitly acknowledges this difficulty, for it continues:

ETMAHA: OH REALLY?

Rav Huna in the name of Bar Kappara  
[gives the final word]:

If it were not specifically written  
we would never be permitted to say it:  
" In the beginning God created"  
And from whence?  
" The earth was TOHU and VOHU "

"If it were not specifically written, we would never be permitted to say it" is a common expression in midrashic literature. Sometimes it means that ordinarily this point of view is audacious and doesn't conform with our general world-view, but we find some scriptural support for it, and it is worth considering. The rabbis often use this expression when they are bringing forth a teaching which may be theologically unorthodox, but which nevertheless has some homiletical import.

But in this case the meaning of the expression would be

better translated as: "This is an exceedingly problematical verse which is better left unexplicated, at least not in public or to the uninitiated. We can't ignore it because it is written in the Torah, but is it best left alone."

In this midrash, the rabbis do not offer a different understanding of the plain meaning of this verse. As far as this midrash is concerned, TOHU and BOHU are primordial elements out of which God fashioned the earth. The parable of the king who builds a palace will do as a partial solution, but because of its inherent flaws it is even more desirable to refrain altogether from elaboration on this question.

The characterization of the earth as a "place of refuse" may be a reference to the gnostic claim that this world is inherently an ugly place, a gross reality and a prison for the soul, which was alienated from the beauty and truth of the Good God by a malevolent demi-urge. Gnosticism is a term which describes a set of doctrines and beliefs which were widespread in late antiquity, and which had adherents both among Jews and early Christians. It was opposed openly by the Church Fathers, who lumped together a number of heresies and assigned them the term "gnostic." In rabbinic writing one does not find this term used explicitly, but from the content of many rabbinic midrashim directed against the beliefs of the minim (literally "sectarians") it is clear that some of the beliefs held by these minim are like those which were termed "gnostic."

The following passage gives a sense of how one gnostic (Marcion) viewed the creation of the world and the creator. Marcion wrote a book called Antitheses, and these refer to

"...the attributes of the two gods. One is "the craftsman" (demiurgos), the "God of creation" (or generation), the "ruler of this aeon," "known," and "predictable." The other is "the hidden" God, "unknown," "unperceivable," [and] "unpredicable" . Known is the creator god from his creation, in which his nature lies revealed. The world betrays not only his existence but also his character, and this one of pettiness. One need only look at his pitiable product: "turning up their noses, the utterly shameful Marcionites take to tearing down the work of the Creator: Indeed,' they say, a grand production, and worthy of its God, is this world!' " ' "

"The earth was TOHU VaVOHU" might be a good prooftext to confirm their belief that though a Good God was the source of all reality in the universe, a heavenly power known as the demi-urge had created a prison for mankind, which was ultimately emptiness and devoid of meaning, a chaotic place of woe.

Similarly early Christian thought, which viewed the human being as being "in slavery to sin" and which disparaged earthly existence in favor of the "eternal life in Christ," might be able to use this verse to support their position. Christian doctrine is heavily reliant on a fundamental dichotomy between the earthly and the heavenly, between the "life of the flesh vs. life of the spirit." Consider a text like I Corinthians 15:40-50:

There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies;  
and the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one



thing, and of the earthly, another... So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown in the earth as a perishable thing is raised imperishable. Sown in humiliation, it is raised in glory; sown in weakness, it is raised in power; sown as an animal body, it is raised as a spiritual body. If there is such a thing as an animal body, then there is such a thing as a spiritual body. It is in this sense that Scripture says, "The first man, Adam, became an animate being," whereas the last Adam has become a life-giving spirit. Observe, the spiritual does not come first; the animal body comes first, then the spiritual. The first man was made "of the dust of the earth": the second man is from heaven.

Pharisaic Judaism also cherished a belief in the resurrection of the dead and the World-to-Come; but this belief did not extend to a denigration of the value of life in this world. It therefore becomes a concern of the rabbis to establish that, with all its obvious drawbacks, the world as we know it is an inherently good place, embodying the spirit of the one God, who is Good. So one finds the rabbis asking (rhetorically) in Bereshit Rabbah 1:10:

Why was the world created with the letter BET?  
In order to deny the apikorsim an opportunity  
to say "the world was created with an ALEF  
for a'rira (cursed)."  
Instead it was created with a BET to indicate  
bracha (blessing).

In this passage apikorsim (Epicureans) are specifically named. But this term had come to include other sectarians as well, specifically those who "deny the existence of (the Jewish idea of) God."

The Talmud records another instance in which the rabbis indicate their discomfort with the verse "and the earth was

TOHU VaVOHU." In BT Tamid 32a it is related that when Alexander the Great conquered Palestine, he put a number of questions to the sages who came to greet him. Alexander was tutored as a youth by the philosopher Aristotle, and therefore was well-versed in the philosophical questions of his day. In rabbinic midrash he is generally portrayed as an intellectually demanding person, who exercised good judgement and was curious about the world he encountered on his conquests.

Alexander asked them: Which was created first, heaven or earth?  
 They answered: The heavens, as it is said  
 " In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1).  
 Alexander asked: Which was created first, darkness or light?  
 The sages answered: We cannot know.

The Talmud then comments on their answer: why did they not say that the darkness was created first, quoting the next verses from Genesis: " And the earth was TOHU VaVOHU" and after that " Let there be light?" The answer given is that "they feared that he would continue this line of questioning and ask them "what was above and what was below below, what is before and what is after." This is the phrase employed elsewhere in the Talmud where Jews are enjoined against expounding the acts of creation:

"from one end of heaven unto the other you may inquire, but you may not enquire what is above, what is below, what before, what after." (BT Hagigah 11b)

The comment of the Talmud gives only a partial

explanation for the reticence of the sages to answer the question. Actually, their answer--"we cannot know" is a straightforward admission of the fact that the text of the Torah describes the creation of the light, as well as the separation of light from darkness; but it does not describe the creation of the darkness. It is this silence, not the opening letter of the Torah, which "gave the apikorsim an opening" for doctrines antithetical to the Jewish one of creatio ex nihilo. The passage from BT Tamid 32a demonstrates that Genesis 1:2 was among the most problematical of the verses describing Creation, one which they refrained from discussing among themselves, and certainly not with an outsider. The problem is also reflected in other rabbinic passages where they try to resolve the question of "what came first, the darkness or the light?" Various interpretations are put forth, but there is a clear discomfort with the text.

Bereshit Rabbah 1:5 and BT Tamid 32a merely acknowledge the difficulty of a universe arising out of TOHU vaVOHU, but offer no solutions of their own. One way of resolving the difficulty will be to prove that TOHU vaVOHU are themselves created by God.

### C. CREATIO EX NIHILQ

The rabbis were wont to refer to God the Creator as "He Who Spoke and the World Came into Being." This description is a straightforward description of the creation account as

found in chapter one of Genesis, where the structured universe comes into being as a consequence of God's speech. But this appellation also contains the idea that it is God's speech (read: words/Torah) which is the creative and sustaining element in creation. The creation of light must be the first creative act-light being both the most primary of elements, as well as a persistent metaphor for Torah.

In Aristotelian metaphysics, the physical universe is eternal and uncreated. This philosophical viewpoint, which allows for a First Cause but not a Creator, is in direct opposition to the Jewish point of view, and would naturally be opposed by the rabbis. Therefore, the rabbis needed to interpret the primordial elements which are described in Genesis 1:2 in a way which affirms the principle of creatio ex nihilo. We see this theme pass through several stages in midrashic and Talmudic literature.

Bereshit Rabbah I:9 records the dispute between Rabban Gamliel and a philosopher over the meaning of Genesis 1:2.

A certain philosopher asked Rabban Gamliel:  
 "Your God was indeed a great artist, but  
 surely he found good materials which  
 assisted him? TOHU, BOHU, Darkness,  
 water, wind and the deep!"  
 [Gamliel] said: " Woe to that man! About  
 all these things it is written that they  
 were created: as concerns TOHU and BOHU [and  
 darkness] it is written (Is 45:7)  
 "who fashions light and creates darkness  
 maker of peace and creator of evil"

Gamliel continues to cite a Biblical text for each of the

elements mentioned by the philosopher, which "proves" that they, too, were created.

In citing the prooftext from Isaiah, Gamliel identifies TOHU and BOHU with ra (evil): opposed to shalom (peace) and parallel to darkness. Translating the verse in this way has the merit of emphasizing the stark dualism between light/darkness and peace/evil. Light and peace, symbolic of the good and the good life, are set against darkness and evil; but God is the source of them all.

In its original context, the prophet Isaiah is proclaiming to King Cyrus how God has strengthened his hand and made him victorious "for the sake of my servant Jacob, Israel my chosen one," whom Cyrus is about to permit to return from their exile. The prophet enumerates the things for which God is responsible. JPS gives a different rendering of this verse, which addresses the seeming incongruous pairing of "peace" and "evil," which are not antonyms like light and dark. Instead JPS renders the verse:

I form light and create darkness,  
I make peace and create woe!

According to this version, God is telling the monarch that just as He is master of the physical realm, He also influences the destiny of matters of state, promoting good fortune or causing misfortune.

There is no way to be sure how Gamliel would have understood Isaiah, although the meaning of the Hebrew word ra (evil) by itself is unambiguous. In the midrash Gamliel does

not explore the nature of TOHU. His concern is with establishing its createdness, and the proof-text from Isaiah clearly says that God created ra. The identification of TOHU as evil/woe will serve as the foundation for rabbinic exegesis in future generations.

Nevertheless, despite Gamliel's strenuous proof, the rabbis do have a notion of "things which preceded creation." In a different midrash (Bereshit Rabbah 1:4) it is stated (anonymously) that six things preceded creation, "some which were created" (Torah and the Throne of Glory) and "some which only arose in thought in God's mind" (the patriarchs, Israel, the Temple and the name of the Messiah). This midrash is based on breaking down the word bereshit into two parts: bara/shit, which means "He created six." The intent of the midrash is not to match these six things with the Biblical text, but to assert that the world, from the very beginning, was created for the sake of Israel. It does not contend with the problems presented by the verse "And the earth was TOHU VaVOHU." But it does establish the somewhat awkward principle that there were things which were created/arose in thought before the actual creation of the world commenced.

Pirke d' Rebbe Eliezer is a work which was redacted in the eighth or ninth century, ' but which contains material originating much earlier. Chapter 3 takes up the problem of the creation of the world, but adds a degree of sophistication and clarity to the argumentation. The darshan in this work

begins by asserting that "Before the world was created, God was alone with his name." We may understand this as an affirmation that the world was created from a place and time in which there was nothing except God. He continues:

When he wanted to create the world, he traced out the world, but it did not stand until he made Teshuvah. Like a flesh-and-blood king, until he traces it out on the ground and shows its foundations, entrances and exits, he does not begin to build.

In this midrash God is first the architect, and then the builder. The locus of activity for the architect is conceptual; it exists in the mind. Only after conceiving of a plan (tracing out the world) does the architect begin to build. This image of God as the architect is already found in the first chapter of Bereshit Rabba where it is stated:

A flesh and blood king who builds a palace, does not build it on his own, but consults an architect. And the architect doesn't build it alone, but he has notebooks and plans according to which he knows where to place rooms and where to place corridors. In the same way the Holy One, Blessed be He, consulted the Torah and created the world.

God is the architect, and Torah is the blueprint. And even so, the darshan now asserts that teshuvah (repentance) needed to be created before the plans could come to fruition. This reflects the rabbis view that teshuvah is the secret knowledge, the fundamental truth about about the universe and humankind's role in it. Teshuvah is viewed as the "entrances and the exits;" it is the key which will unlock every gate.

"The gates of teshuva are always open," say the rabbis, and it is through teshuva that a person will find his way through this transitory world to salvation and life in the presence of God. Teshuva implies the possibility for growth and fulfillment, for humankind to play a role in completing creation. The act of "tracing the foundations" represents God's beneficence and care for the creatures who will inhabit his "palace."

The innovation of this midrash is the way in which it reconciles "things which existed before creation" with creatio ex nihilo. This is done by dividing the creative process into two distinct stages: seven things which were created before the world was created, and eight things which were created on the first day.

The list of things which were created "before the world was created" consists of strictly spiritual entities. Torah represents supernal wisdom, while Heaven and Hell stand for reward and punishment. The Throne of Glory and The Holy Temple represent God's presence above and below. Repentance is the universal mechanism of healing as well as the means by which the Jews can activate or accelerate the redemptive process. The Name of the Messiah stands for the telos--the destination of all of creation. All of the above are vehicles of redemption in Jewish thought, and the midrash is making the statement that creation was conceived by God with a purpose in mind, a direction in which it would be moving.



Apparently Jewish theology could accept the pre-existence of spiritual entities without doing damage to the idea of creation ex nihilo. However, anything which might be seen as corporeal was assigned to the first day of creation: heavens, earth, light and darkness, TOHU and BOHU, wind and water. Perhaps this midrash reflects an incorporation into Judaism of the teachings of the Platonic school of philosophy regarding creation. According to this school there is a world of ideas, which is eternal and exists separate from the created cosmos. "Traces" of these eternal ideas find their expression in a "receptacle," and it is from these traces that the actual substance of creation emerges.

In Pirke d'Rebbe Eliezer Chapter Three, as in Bereshit Rabbah 1:9, TOHU and BOHU are shown to be created. Gamilel, in opposition to the philosopher, identified them with evil/woe. The author of Pirke D'Rebbe Eliezer classified them as actual substances which came into existence on the first day, although he doesn't explain what they are.

The compiler of Midrash Hagadol, writing in the 14th or 15th century, after the wedding between Judaism and Greek philosophy was formally consummated in the Middle Ages, articulates his understanding of TOHU and BOHU in overt philosophical language:

AND THE EARTH WAS TOHU AND VOHU.  
 Since [Torah] opened by announcing  
 the creation of the heavens first,  
 why does it explain the earth first?  
 One from the school of R. Ishmael  
 taught: I will tell you a parable.

It may be compared to a flesh and blood king who said to his servants:  
 "Stand at my portal tomorrow morning."  
 When he arose the next morning he found both men and women standing at his portal. Who did he praise? The one who is not used to getting up early, but who did so nevertheless.

Another thing: Since the heavens are all of a unitary matter (golem) and there is a common form (tzurah) to them all, for this reason there is no reason to explain, only to call them by their name. But the earth was one kind of primary matter but had no form whatsoever and could not be seen. It could only be recognized in the mind's eye, since visual perception only apprehends form and matter. What did God do? He created four forms, and apportioned to each form a part of the matter, until there were created four matters in four forms, with no one like the others. The first form was that of fire--which attached itself to a portion of this matter and from the two of them corporeal fire was produced. The second form was that of wind. It attached itself to a portion of the matter and from the two of them the corporeal wind was produced. [And the same for water and earth]. So you had four materials arranged one above the other and each one surrounds the one below it on all sides like a circle. This is how you must interpret AND THE EARTH WAS TOHU AND BOHU.

According to this exegesis, after having called into existence the heavenly spheres and the Prime matter, God's next act is to impose the diverse Forms on the Prime Matter of the earthly realm, making the basic ingredients out of which all else can be created. TOHU and VOHU correspond respectively to prime matter and form. Their mention in the Torah is no longer problematical; they have been interpreted

as "evidence" of the fact that God created the world ex nihilo.

CHAPTER FIVE: TOHU AS HISTORICAL ALLEGORY

### A. BERESHIT RABBAH CHAPTER TWO

Rabbinic references to TOHU are found scattered throughout rabbinic literature in a wide variety of sources: in exegetical midrashim, embedded in legal discourses in the Talmud, in medieval commentaries on the Torah and even in philosophical tracts. But there is one place where a single redactor has attempted to frame a related group of traditions and has produced a sort of midrashic monograph on the topic of TOHU VaVOHU. This would be the second chapter of the midrash known as Bereshit Rabbah. Bereshit Rabbah is considered to be an early fifth-century compilation, which contains (mostly) attributed teachings of generations of earlier Tannaim and Amoraim. It is arranged as a series of verse-by-verse exegeses, a string of individual comments whose order follows the order of the Biblical text of Genesis on which it is a commentary. From a redactorial point of view, there may be some shaping of the material in the individual chapters. Some of the chapters look like individual units.

Chapter Two of Bereshit Rabba consists of an introduction (petihta) followed by four paragraphs, each of which presents a different interpretation of TOHU as it appears in Genesis 1:2. Taken together, they present a complete discourse, which takes into account the nature of human existence, the role of Israel, the significance of Torah, and the destiny of Jewish history.

The rabbis felt the need to reckon with the alleged

discrepancy between the perfection of the heavenly realm and the imprefection of the earthly one. This question can be further broken down into two separate issues. The general problem was to account for the fact that a world about which "God saw all that he had made, and found it very good" (Gen 1:31) could be filled with such woe for mankind. Apart from general existential questions, the backdrop for this might also have been the gnostic heresies, mentioned earlier, which saw this as proof that it was not the same hand who made the heavens and the earth.

The specific problem will be to explain why Israel, which inherited promises of cosmic blessing and redemption, was still languishing in subjugation and exile. These issues find their resolution by reading TOHU and VOHU as descriptive, not of things which existed before creation, but metaphorically of those things which will take place in human history. This is the general message of the petihta which introduces the entire section:

NOW THE EARTH WAS TOHU AND BOHU, AND  
DARKNESS WAS ON THE FACE OF THE DEEP;  
AND THE SPIRIT OF GOD HOVERED OVER THE  
FACE OF THE WATERS

Rabbi Berekiah quoted Proverbs 20:11:  
"Even a child is known by his doings,  
whether his work be pure, and whether  
it be right."

Said Rabbi Berekiah: While she [the earth]  
was still as yet immature, she already  
produced thorns; and so the prophet was  
one day to prophesy about her:  
I SAW THE EARTH, AND IT WAS TOHU VaVOHU"  
(Jer 4:23)

(Bereshit Rabba 2:1)

The verse from Jeremiah describes the destruction and desolation which the prophet witnessed in the period when the First Temple was destroyed. The argument of the petihta is that Torah, which was a "blueprint for creation," was also a blueprint for all of human history, and the verse describing the TOHU VaVOHU preceedibng creation could be read as predictive of events which were to take place only much later. The passage raises a number of questions for the reader. What could make a beautiful world go back to TOHU VaVOHU? Does this mean that the creative plan is destined to return to TOHU VaVOHU? Or is the second TOHU VaVOHU merely the prelude for another creation? Meanwhile all we know for certain is that the words which apply to the earth while she is yet immature (in Genesis 1:2) and producing "thorns" will also apply to the future, if we can understand how to interpret them. The answers to the questions themselves are to be found in the the paragraphs which follow.

#### B. THE HUMAN CONDITION IS TOHU VaVOHU

Bereshit Rabbah 2:2 presents two parables which sharply outline the dimensions of the problem, along with a third parable which proposes an explanation/solution:

AND THE EARTH WAS TOHU VaVOHU  
 Rabbi Abbahu taught:  
 The thing may be compared to a king  
 who had two servants; both of the  
 same worth, both for the same wage.  
 For one he decreed that he should be  
 fed from the treasury.  
 For the other he decreed that he must  
 work in order to eat.

This one sat in confusion and perplexity,  
(tohe u'bohe) Saying: "We are worth the  
same, we have the same value; but this one  
is fed from the treasury, and I, if I don't  
work, I do not eat!"

In the same fashion, the earth sits  
confounded and says: "The upper [realm]  
and the lower [realm] were created at  
the same moment; but the upper realm is  
nourished from the light of the Shekhinah,  
and the lower ones, if they do not work,  
they do not eat!"

Rabbi Yehuda Bar Simon taught:  
The thing may be compared to a king  
who purchased two maidservants; both of  
the same value, both for the same wage.  
He decreed that one should remain in the  
palace and the other he decreed that she  
should wander homeless.

This one sat confounded and perplexed,  
(toha u'boha) saying: "We are worth the  
same, we have the same value: This one  
doesn't move from the palace, while I  
am destined to wander homeless."

In the same fashion, the earth sat  
confounded and said: " The upper [realm]  
and the lower [realm] were created in the  
same moment. The upper realm is living,  
and the lower realm is dying." Therefore,  
it says: THE EARTH WAS TOHU AND VOHU.

The principle that heaven and earth are equal in value  
is expressed in the parable by the expression "b'oni ehad  
ub'timi ehad/both of the same value, both for the same wage."  
Furthermore we are told that they are both created at the same  
moment. The word gana , which designates "purchased" in the  
parable, also has the meaning of "created." This element of  
the parable argues against the notion that God's domain is in  
heaven, but He is not present in the earth. Or against the  
idea that the heavens are in some way made of a different



substance, or by a different "creator," or are inherently better than the earth. Not so, says the midrash. Both heaven and earth are "servants" of God, and both have the same value to Him. Precisely because of this truth, the earth is confounded at the discrepancy between their relative destinies, between the state in which each finds itself.

If we set up the terms of the earth's argument, we will see clearly to what this parable refers.

## HEAVEN

nourished from the light of Shekhina  
fed from the "King's treasury"  
living in the palace  
living

## EARTH

work in order to eat  
work in order to eat  
banished, homeless  
dying

This language echoes the story of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Before the first couple's sin, they abode with God (they hear "the sound of the Lord God moving about in the Garden in Gen 3:8) and they ate of all the bounty in that Garden. This may be considered "eating from the King's treasury." Furthermore, until they sinned we have no indication that they were ever destined to die. But as a punishment for sin Adam was commanded that

by the sweat of your brow shall you bring  
forth bread until you return to the ground-  
For from it you were taken.  
For dust you are, and to dust you shall  
return." (Gen 3:19)

Eve was assigned the duty of bearing children with pain. Their banishment from Eden is considered to be the origin of death for the human race.

The Garden of Eden stands for "the heavenly realm" at

this point in rabbinic thinking. According to the original plan, says the Torah and the midrash, the human pair might have been destined to live in a heavenly kind of existence. But on account of their sin it was decreed that they must live in a more earthly domain. Life on earth is difficult, not by accident or through any imperfection on the part of the Creator, but on account of human sinfulness and God's explicit decree.

TOHU VaVOHU thus becomes a metaphor for the human condition with all its difficulties. According to the midrash, it is not due to a flaw in the original plan of creation, or to an imperfect or less-than-omnipotent creator (as the gnostics might claim). Rather, it is a direct result of the flawed human character. This is made explicit by the third parable, which follows:

Rabbi Tanhuma said: [The thing may be compared to] a king's son who is sleeping in a cradle.

His nursemaid is confounded and perplexed. And why so? Because she knows that she is destined to receive her treatment from the king's son.

In the same way, the earth saw that she was fated to receive punishment on account of the human being, as it is said: "The earth is cursed on your account" (Gen 3:17). Therefore we understand why THE EARTH WAS TOHU AND VOHU.

The portrayal of the earth as nursemaid, source of nurturing to the human being is appropriate, since the human being is called Adam because "from it [the earth: adama] you were taken" (Gen 3:19). The parable places us at that moment

in the creative plan, where the earth has fulfilled its role in nurturing human life, at the same time that it foresees that the same human being will bring about its cursedness. By a play on words, using the roots t/h/h and b/h/h as verbs, the rabbis read Genesis 1:2 as referring both the feelings of the earth (tohe and bohe: confounded, confused) as well as to its ultimate destiny (tohu and bohu: confusion and desolation).

This parable also contains other themes, which operate at different levels, and which influence the rabbis' understanding of TOHU and VOHU. If we understand these parables as referring, not to the whole of humanity, but particularly to the Jewish people, then other readings become apparent. The state of homelessness or banishment may be read as referring, not only to the past expulsion from Eden, but also to the state of Jewish life in its various exiles from the land of Israel. While this parable affords no correction for this state, it lays the foundation for other rabbinical midrashim which will interpret TOHU as a metaphor for the state of Exile. This theme can be found in a subsequent passage in Chapter Two of Bereshit Rabbah, which is discussed in section E (below).

TOHU has been identified with death, or more properly for the transitory nature of human, earthly life. Describing TOHU as a state in which all things come to naught bears a close similarity to the usage of this term in Biblical, especially prophetic writings. As opposed to this, the parable posits

another realm where there is only life. In this way the earth/heaven dichotomy is an allegory for "This World/The World to Come." There, according to BT Berakhot 17a, the righteous "sit with crowns on their heads and are nourished by the light of the Shekhinah." So, one may infer, even if this world at times seems like a dark TOHU VAVOHU, there is a promise that the next world will be all light and rest.

### C. A WORLD WITHOUT TORAH IS A TOHU VAVOHU

Even though humankind earned its mortality, according to the Biblical text, the human race was not to be abandoned or rejected by God, who has the attributes of justice and mercy. According to the rabbis, the sinfulness of the early generations of mankind was something which God's infinite knowledge could take into account, and for which He had envisioned a remedy. And so Bereshit RabbaH 2:3 tells us that

R. Judah ben R. Simon interpreted the texts as referring to the generations.  
 NOW THE EARTH WAS TOHU: This refers to Adam, who was reduced to complete nothingness.  
 AND BOHU: refers to Cain, who desired to return the world to TOHU and BOHU.  
 AND DARKNESS: symbolises the generations of Enosh: "And their works are in darkness" (Is 29:15)  
 UPON THE FACE OF THE DEEP: the generation of the flood; "On the same day were all the foundations of the great deep broken up" (Gen 7:2)  
 AND THE SPIRIT OF GOD HOVERED OVER THE FACE OF THE WATERS: corresponds to "And God made a wind to pass over the earth." (Gen 8:1) The Holy One, Blessed be He, said:

"How long shall the universe go on  
in darkness? Let the light come!"  
AND GOD SAID "LET THERE BE LIGHT: This  
refers to Abraham as it says:  
"Who has raised one up from the East"  
(Is 41:2)  
AND GOD CALLED THE LIGHT DAY: This is  
Jacob  
AND THE DARKNESS HE CALLED NIGHT: This  
is Esau  
AND THERE WAS EVENING: Esau  
AND THERE WAS MORNING: Jacob  
ONE DAY: This teaches that the Holy One,  
blessed be He, gave him one unique day.  
And which is that? The Day of Atonement.

The darkness of TOHU and VOHU, which represents the  
spiritual degeneracy of the early generations of humanity, is  
left behind when the light, represented by Abraham and his  
progeny, appear on the scene. Perhaps this midrash can be  
seen as a comment on the previous one. A world where there is  
recognition and covenant with God would be inappropriate to  
describe as a TOHU VaVOHU.

The description of Cain as one who "sought to return the  
world to TOHU and BOHU" is a sweeping affirmation that by  
introducing murder and violence into human relationships, Cain  
denied the moral imperatives which were intended for human  
life in this creation. One may also hear in this description  
an echo of Judaism's emphasis on the supreme importance of  
even a single human life, as expressed in the Mishnah:

Therefore only a single human being (Adam)  
was created, in order to teach you that  
anyone who takes a human life, Scripture  
imputes it to him as if he had destroyed  
an entire world.

(M. Sanhedrin 4:5)

Neither Cain nor the sinful generations which followed him succeeded in reversing the inertia and direction of the divine plan, which ultimately finds the beginning of its fulfillment in Abraham. God calls Abraham to accomplish in human society what God has done with the whole universe--to introduce light.

Abraham is only the beginning, but he stands for the children of Israel who will spring from him and who will be the bearers of the Torah (which is often compared to light) in the darkness of the TOHU VavOHU of the world.

However, in the time of Judah Bar Simon, a fourth generation Palestinian Amora, the children of Israel are still in exile, Jerusalem is in ruins, and Rome, though weakened, still rules the Mediterranean world. There is a gap between the promise and the fulfillment which the midrash also takes into account.

The alternation of night and day, both in the world of nature as well as figuratively in historical time, may be seen as a necessary if unpleasant consequence of living in the light of creation. Perhaps the darshan wishes to indicate that even the temporary setbacks of exile and subjugation are less significant compared to the reality of life in the presence of Torah. God's wisdom ultimately gives meaning to those who follow Torah and to the whole world.

In rabbinic literature, Esau stands for Rome, and later on for Christianity. The midrash expresses confidence that its

rule will soon come to an end. As surely as (in Jewish time) the day always follows, so, too, the night of Esau will be followed by the day of Jacob. Israel must remain on proper terms with God who, in the words of the evening prayer, "rolls away the light from the dark, and the dark from the light." And this may be accomplished through atonement, through teshuva. If Israel is currently in the night on account of their sins, then it is in their power to change things by coming back to the light, which is symbolized here by Abraham and later by Torah.

One may also take the historically pessimistic point of view, and to assume that Esau's dominion will never come to an end in this world. If this were the opinion of the darshan, then one would read "night and day" as referring to "this world and the World-to-Come."

There is a statement in the Talmud which echoes the sense of the above midrashim in describing TOHU as a stage in human history, which also confirms that even the well-conceived divine plan is influenced by Israel's actions:

It was taught in the school of Elijah:  
The world exists for six thousand years.  
Two thousand of TOHU, two thousand of  
Torah and two thousand the days of the  
Messiah. Yet on account of our sins which  
are so great, look what has come of them!  
( BT Sanhedrin 97b)

Ultimately it is Torah which has banished the darkness, succeeded the TOHU. By giving a guideline for behavior, by outlining the redemptive potential of Israel, the giving of

Torah has ushered in a new stage in human history.

This idea is presented in a straightforward way in a later midrash, Bamidbar Rabbah 2:6. There, the midrash cites the verse from Deuteronomy 32:10 that

I found him in a desert land  
In a howling waste (tohu y'lel  
y'simon)

I FOUND HIM IN A DESERT LAND  
The world was a desert until Israel  
went forth from Egypt.  
IN A TOHU, A HOWLING WASTE  
The world was night and TOHU until  
Israel went forth from Egypt and  
accepted the Torah.

This interpretation is bright and fundamentally optimistic. The night of exile may be long, and the coming of the day may be far off. But a world without Torah would truly be a TOHU VaVOHU.

#### D. THE DEEDS OF THE WICKED MAKE THE WORLD A TOHU VaVOHU

Before being exiled from the garden of Eden, humanity managed to snatch a bite from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Every human being inherited an awareness of sin and righteousness. In a world in which there is Torah, humanity has clear guidelines for choosing the right way of life. And so each individual can make that choice: to affirm the light of Torah or to make his, and our, world a TOHU VaVOHU. In Bereshit Rabbah 3:8 we read:

Rabbi Yannai said: From the very  
beginning of God's creating the world,  
he foresaw the deeds of the righteous  
and the deeds of the wicked.



AND THE EARTH WAS TOHU AND BOHU:  
 These are the deeds of the wicked.  
 AND GOD SAID, "LET THERE BE LIGHT":  
 These are the deeds of the righteous.  
 AND GOD DISTINGUISHED BETWEEN THE LIGHT  
 AND THE DARKNESS: Between the deeds of  
 the righteous and the deeds of the wicked.  
 AND THERE WAS EVENING: The deeds of the  
 wicked.  
 AND THERE WAS MORNING: The deeds  
 of the righteous.  
 ONE DAY: Which the Holy One, Blessed be He,  
 gave to them.  
 And which day was that? YOM HaKIPPURIM

In this midrash the rabbis put forth the idea that TOHU and BOHU did not disappear when the Torah was given. Rather, they are a state of being which is still present in the world, represented by the deeds of the wicked. If Adam introduced TOHU and BOHU to the human condition, it has been amply retained in this world by the wickedness and sinfulness of subsequent human generations. TOHU and BOHU/wickedness are in competition with LIGHT/righteousness for dominion within each individual. Each person may have some TOHU and BOHU in himself, which he or she needs to recognize and demarcate, imitating God's actions in distinguishing the light from the darkness.

The means for doing so are also identified in the midrash; the process of teshuva which culminates in Yom Kippur is the human being's weapon against TOHU and BOHU: this is the "day which the Holy One, Blessed be He, gave to them." Through proper repentance a person can effect atonement, and can claim his share of the light.

E. THE DOMINION OF THE NATIONS IS LIKE A TOHU VaVOHU

The rabbis believed that there was reward and punishment for each individual. And they also interpreted the rise and fall of communal Israel's national fortunes as recompense for abandoning God's laws. The continuing domination of Israel by other nations was the consequence of sin, and this too forms a part of the rabbinic understanding of TOHU and BOHU.

AND THE EARTH WAS TOHU VaVOHU  
 Resh Lakish explained it as referring to the foreign powers.  
 AND THE EARTH WAS TOHU: refers to Babylonia, as Jeremiah (4:23) says, "I saw the earth, and it was TOHU VaVOHU"  
 AND BOHU: this is Media, as it says "And they hastened (vayavhilu) to bring Haman" (Esther 6:14)  
 AND DARKNESS: This is Greece, which "darkened the eyes of Israel" with its decrees, ordering them to "write on the horn of an ox that you have no portion in the God of Israel"  
 UPON THE FACE OF THE DEEP: This is the evil empire Rome, which knows no bounds like the deep. For just as the deep has no limit, their wickedness has no limits.  
 AND THE SPIRIT OF GOD HOVERED: this refers to the spirit of the Messiah, as Isaiah says (11:2) "and the spirit of God shall rest upon him"  
 And by what merit is it "hovering in the wings," this [spirit] "hovering over the face of the deep?"  
 By the merit of teshuva, which is compared to water, as it says (Lam 2:19) "Pour out your heart like water."

(Bereshit Rabba 2:4)

This midrash has expanded the purview of the exegesis, including both "darkness" and "the deep" as those things which came before the original light. In a literal reading TOHU and BOHU stand for the first two empires (or exiles)

only, the Babylonian and the Persian. But the sense of the midrash is to indicate that foreign rule as a condition of life for Israel, may be likened to a TOHU and BOHU, a terrible state of disarray and disorder.

The midrash indicates that the cure for this TOHU VaVOHU is repentance; from this it is apparent that the cause of it is sinfulness. Resh Lakish expresses his confidence that a proper understanding of the verses in Genesis indicate that the foreign domination will come to an end, with the coming of the Messiah. This coming is not, however, in the distant future. The midrash uses the term merahefet uva'ah , an expression which implies something which is "on the wing," imminent, hovering around and very close at hand. This leads directly to the theme of the concluding paragraph of Chapter Two of Bereshit Rabbah.

#### F. REDEMPTION

If one considers the flow of ideas up to this point in the second chapter of Bereshit Rabbah, there is an insistent progression forward in time, a dialectic of despair and hope, which may be set out as follows:

The introduction ("already in its youth the earth put out thorns") confirms the premise of the chapter, that Torah is predictive, and that the early chaotic state of the earth was only a foreshadowing of a long and sustained period of chaos in real history. The next section (the two servants, the earth

sits "dazed and confused") explains the general malaise of humanity as a result of the sin of the first couple. Following this, section 2:3 (the generations of humanity), affirms that because of God's disappointment in the early generations of mankind, He chose Israel (symbolised by Abraham) to bear the light, and offered her the Torah to be a light in the darkness of TOHU VaVOHU. But Israel was not faithful to the Torah, and so in section 2:4 Israel finds herself once again in a kind of TOHU VaVOHU as a punishment for her sins, symbolised by the domination of the foreign powers. The chapter is now prepared to conclude; having begun with Creation, it will end on the theme of Redemption.

And so Bereshit Rabbah 2:5 teaches:

Abbahu taught: From the beginning of the world, the Holy one, Blessed be He saw the deeds of the righteous and the deeds of the wicked, as it is written "For God knows the ways of the righteous" (Psalm 1:6)  
AND THE EARTH WAS TOHU and VOHU:  
these are the deeds of the wicked.  
AND GOD SAID: LET THERE BE LIGHT:  
these are the deeds of the righteous.  
But perhaps you don't know which He prefers--the deeds of the righteous or the deeds of the wicked?  
Therefore it is written: AND GOD SAW THAT THE LIGHT WAS GOOD. Therefore you know he prefers the deeds of the righteous, and does not prefer the deeds of the wicked.

What can the rabbis mean when they ask "perhaps you don't know which he prefers?" God created both TOHU and LIGHT, day as well as night, and both seem to have their role in the cosmic order. It is not unthinkable that just as there is

"a time to be born, a time to die, a time to plant and a time to reap," so wickedness also participates as an equal and favored partner in God's unfathomable plan for this world. Against this possibility, the rabbis affirm that God indeed prefers one over the other; only in reference to the light does God proclaim "ki tov; it was good."

The issue is even more acute than mere theological speculation, since the experience of Israel as a powerless and subject people to stronger and more wicked nations might be construed as incontrovertible evidence, no doubt brought by the early Church, that God had revoked His covenant with Israel and has consigned her to punishment. It may also be directed at those still within Judaism who were experiencing a crisis of faith, those who were prepared to abandon the covenant because it appears that the God who acts in history seems to favor the wicked at the expense of the good. Therefore the midrash continues, offering an interpretation which resolves these problems:

Rabbi Hiya Rabba taught: From the beginning of the world, the Holy One, Blessed be He, foresaw the Temple built and destroyed.

IN THE BEGINNING GOD CREATED: This is the Temple built, as Scripture says  
I, WHO SPREAD OUT THE HEAVENS AND  
ESTABLISHED THE EARTH HAVE SAID TO ZION;  
YOU ARE MY PEOPLE (Is 51:16).

AND THE EARTH WAS TOHU AND VOHU: This is the Temple destroyed, as it is written  
I SAW THE EARTH, AND IT WAS TOHU AND VOHU.  
(Jer 4:23)

AND GOD SAID LET THERE BE LIGHT:  
 This is [the Temple] rebuilt and  
 completed in the future, as it is says  
 ARISE, SHINE FOR YOUR LIGHT HAS COME  
 THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD HAS SHONE UPON YOU  
 BEHOLD, DARKNESS SHALL COVER THE EARTH  
 AND THICK CLOUDS THE PEOPLES (Is 60:1)

The rabbis introduce the idea that, just as the TORAH moves forward in its account of creation, so history is moving forward towards some kind of resolution. TOHU and BOHU represent that moment in time when what has been established (the Temple) is temporarily in eclipse. The 3rd generation Amoraim in whose name this midrash is brought lived only a few hundred years after the Second Temple had been destroyed by the Romans. They express the faith that, just as Genesis moves forward from foundation through chaos to light, history was ultimately moving towards redemption. Formally they are speaking about restoration, about the Temple being rebuilt, but the prooftext they have cited from Isaiah is explicitly messianic, even apocalyptic. This redemption would be a kind of second creation, with "a new heavens and a new earth." The light which will come into being in this second creation is of a different quality than the light which was created at the beginning. In the continuation of Isaiah 60, the prophet proclaims that

No longer will you need the sun for  
 the light of day  
 Nor the shining of the moon for radiance;  
 For the Lord shall be your light everlasting.

TOHU and BOHU becomes a metaphor for a world which is

waiting for God's redemptive act, like a person who sits in darkness but who looks forward with certainty to the coming of the light.

This theme was so powerful and meaningful to the rabbis and those of their generation, that the message of the imminent messianic redemption was projected retroactively to the very moment of Creation, embedded in the verse which describes the very first appearance of the creating and omniscient God. And apparently later generations felt the need to give this messianic promise another opportunity to be revealed expressed. In Pesikta Rabbati 34:6 one finds a synthesis of the last two sections of Bereshit Rabbah Chapter 2, but in another, highly charged setting. This midrash comes as a comment on the first word of the first of the Ten Commandments of Exodus 20:20.

Another thing: I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD  
About this the Psalm 71:20 says

"You who have made me undergo many  
troubles and misfortunes will revive  
me again, and raise me up from the  
depths of the earth."

You find that from the beginning of the  
creation of the world, the King Messiah  
was born, and came into thought before  
the world was created..This is

"And a shoot sprouted from the stock  
of Jesse" (Isaiah 11:1)

It does not say "will sprout;" but  
already you find in the account of creation  
God mentions the oppression of the nations  
and the redeemer the King Messiah.

IN THE BEGINNING

AND THE EARTH WAS TOHU : This is the  
Babylonians, as Jeremiah writes: "I saw  
the earth and it was TOHU"

AND BOHU: This is Greece, whose decrees  
were severe, who wrote on the ox's horn

"You have no part of the God of Israel."  
 OVER THE FACE OF THE DEEP: This is the  
 kingdom of wicked Edom. David saw all  
 four of them, how they came with force  
 and enslaved Israel...

And from where do you know that from  
 the beginning there was the King Messiah?  
 AND THE SPIRIT OF GOD HOVERED: What is  
 the spirit of God? This is the Messiah  
 about whom Isaiah writes:

"I shall pour out my spirit upon him"  
 (Is 11:2)

And when shall he come ?

HOVERING ABOVE THE WATERS: When you shall

"pour out your hearts like water"

(Lam 2:19) before God, then

"ANOKHI, ANOKHI MENACHEMCHAM: I, even I  
 will comfort you" (Is 51:12).

The innovation of this midrash is that it puts the  
 interpretation of Genesis 1:2, prophesying the long night of  
 foreign domination followed by the Messianic age, in the mouth  
 of God Himself. The beginning of God's revelation at Sinai--  
 the word ANOKHI--is an eternal moment which contains in itself  
 both the creation of the past and the redemption of the  
 future. The darshan "proves" this by pairing the ANOKHI of  
 Sinai with the ANOKHI which appears in Chapter 51 of Isaiah,  
 where we read that

it was you who hacked Rahab in pieces  
 That pierced the dragon  
 It was you that dried up the sea  
 the waters of the great deep. (51:9)

The prophet then declares:

Let the ransomed of the Lord return  
 and come with shouting to Zion  
 Crowned with joy everlasting  
 let them attain joy and gladness  
 While sorrow and sighing flee  
 ANOKHI, ANOKHI: I, I am He who comforts  
 you. (51:11-12)



The framing of the earlier midrash by the two ANOKHI's and the quote from the Psalms heightens the tragic resignation expressed above. It is at the very moment that God makes Himself known as the one who brought up Israel "from Egypt, from the house of bondage" that Israel is informed of the bondage and exile which awaits it in the future. God's inscrutable ways require this; it is part of a pre-ordained plan. At the very moment He reveals Himself, and reveals the first words of the Torah, this plan is revealed as being in place from the very beginning to the very end. But there is a great TOHU vaVOHU through which they will have to pass and which they will have to endure. And in this TOHU we may fully expect to

shed tears like a torrent, day and night.  
Give yourself no respite, your eyes no rest.  
Arise, cry out in the night  
At the beginning of the watches  
Pour out your heart like water  
In the presence of the Lord. (Lam 2:18-19)

When we shall do so, when the lamentation shall lead to a true teshuva, we may hope to once again be reconciled with ANOKHI, and to enjoy the promise which was implied at creation and confirmed at Sinai.

#### G. SUMMARY

The midrashim cited in this chapter all have in common a reading of TOHU VaVOHU as a historical allegory, descriptive of the nature of life in this world. Our world is a place in which the radiance of God's creation, providence and Torah

is present, but where TOHU VaVOHU is also in evidence. Where idolatry intrudes, where Torah is abandoned, the individual may find himself in the chaotic grip of a spiritual and existential TOHU VaVOHU. And while the nations rule and the wicked prosper, the world is still only partially in the light, awaiting a fuller illumination. A world of TOHU VaVOHU which is inexorably moving towards a new creation becomes a paradigm for Jewish history.

CHAPTER SIX: TOHU AS IMPURITY AND BARRENNESS

#### A. INTRODUCTION

In Chapter IV the question of the primordial substance which formed the raw material for creation was discussed in relation to the claims of the Gnostics or other sectarians. The reputed low and filthy origins of this world were cited as proof that the world in which mankind was domiciled was somehow impure, of an inferior quality, and far removed from the perfection of the superior, unknown and hidden God. It was characterized in one midrash as "a place of refuse, a place of sewers." Even if one does not subscribe to Gnostic ideas, the second verse of Genesis implies that before the creation of the world we live in, there existed an inferior, grosser matter, which is the object of the description that "the earth was TOHU VaVOHU." Therefore it is not surprising that at some stage in rabbinic thought TOHU became associated with impurity and defilement.

It was noted that the concept of a pre-existing chaos is common to other Near Eastern cosmologies. Before these religions evolved the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo, the existence of such a chaotic state was not seen as detracting from the glory of the Creator God. This chaotic state may have existed forever backwards in time, but it was incapable of producing anything from itself. It is only the creative will of the Creator God which can bring life into existence out of this monotonous and infertile void, and this life-giving power is in fact the very attribute which makes God the

supreme deity for humankind.

It was also noted that TOHU in the Bible is often a synonym for "wasteland" or "desert:" places incapable of sustaining life. The rabbis embrace this understanding of TOHU by placing it in direct opposition to procreation and fertility.

#### B. TOHU AS IMPURITY

According to the Biblical story, the sin of the first couple in the Garden of Eden introduced both mortality and hardship, which an early midrash (Bereshit Rabbah 2:2) considered the TOHU VaVOHU of the human condition. Theologians may debate whether Adam's sin brought about, or was the result of, a fundamental "spiritual impurity" in the human character. In the following midrash, the compiler of the Bereshit Rabbati suggests that the expression TOHU VaVOHU is indicative of that impurity. Alternatively, the midrash may be suggesting that Adam's sin accounts for the general TOHU VaVOHU of our earthly life, while Eve's sin brought about her own punishment; her state of menstrual impurity, which is called a TOHU VaVOHU.

The passage from Bereshit Rabbati makes use of a midrashic method whereby the numerical value of certain words, or even the number of words in a particular verse, can reveal some significance. On the verse "AND THE EARTH WAS TOHU AND BOHU," the Bereshit Rabbati comments:

There are 14 words in [the Hebrew of] this verse . These correspond to the 14 days of impurity which the woman is impure after giving birth to a female. In order to tell you that even before the world was created, God saw how mankind would sin, and with all that, still created the world. The woman separates from her husband when she gives birth to a male for 7 days (like the days of her menstruation), since the man believed Eve's words and disobeyed God's command. But she separates from her husband for 14 days after giving birth to a female, because she both sinned and caused the man to sin and therefore received double, in order to fulfill the words of Isaiah:

Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and declare to her  
That her term of service is over,  
that her iniquity is expiated  
For she has received at the hand  
of the Lord  
Double for all her sins (Is 40:2)

The male causes his mother seven days of impurity, and the female who made the world and brought death unto herself, causes 14 days of impurity, double the male.

The midrash accounts for the origin of menstrual impurity in general as well as for the particular period of impurity which follows childbirth. Both are seen to be a consequence of the sin which Eve committed, by eating from the fruit and by causing Adam to eat.

But there is an antidote to this TOHU/impurity, and that is Torah. Even though God saw that the first couple would sin, He saw also that Israel was destined to come into the world, to be the bearers of the Torah and a cure for the impurity of human nature. The predestined history of Israel, from the acceptance of the Torah, to the establishment of the house of

David and the eventual coming of the Messiah have the power to offset the inherent sinfulness of the human race. Bereshit Rabbati continues:

And if a man should say afterwards,  
 "Why did God create the human being?"  
 It is because He looked into the future  
 and saw that one nation would come  
 forth from them and would receive the  
 Torah and God would find comfort in them.  
 This is indicated by the fact that the  
 next verse contains six words: "AND GOD  
 SAID LET THERE BE LIGHT AND THERE WAS LIGHT."  
 He made it a verse of six words,  
 corresponding to the six tractates of  
 the Mishna.

And the next verse: "AND GOD SAW THE LIGHT,  
 AND IT WAS GOOD," consists of 12 letters,  
 corresponding to the words of the written  
 Torah which were engraved on the tablets  
 which were 12 hand-breadths.

And since the words of the scribes are  
 more pleasing than the words of Torah  
 themselves, as it is written:  
 "Your breasts (dodavikh/ friends; i.e.,  
 scholars) are more pleasant than wine  
 (i.e., words of Torah)" (Song 1:2)  
 therefore the Mishna comes before the  
 Torah [in the placement of the verses/  
 numbers].

And there it is indicated:  
 Which is the people who is to receive  
 His Torah? This is Israel.  
 Therefore "GOD CALLED THE LIGHT DAY,  
 AND THE DARKNESS HE CALLED NIGHT"  
 consists of thirteen words,  
 corresponding to thirteen tribes.  
 And also He says:

"He issued his commands to Jacob  
 His statutes and rules to Israel  
 He did not do so for any other nation;  
 of such rules they know nothing"  
 (Ps 147:19-20)

This is to teach you that the whole  
 world and its fullness as only created  
 for the merit of Israel to receive  
 Torah.

And similarly the number of letters in "IN THE BEGINNING GOD CREATED THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH" were given in order to be understood: Twenty-eight in the first verse, corresponding to the twenty-eight days which the moon travels in the Zodiac, therefore the number of letters of each verse were given to be interpreted.

"AND THE EARTH WAS TOHU VAVOHU:"

This verse has fifty-two letters, corresponding to the fifty-two generations from the time the world was created until the destruction of the Temple, about which it is written:

"I saw the earth, and it was TOHU and BOHU" (Jer 4:23)

Which are these?

Ten generations from Adam to Noah;

Ten generation from Noah to Abraham;

Twelve generations from Abraham to

David gives you thirty-two.

And twenty kings who reigned from David to the destruction of the Temple:

Solomon, Rehoboam, Abijah, Asa, Jehoshafat,

Yehoram, Ahaziah, Jehoash, Amaziah, Uzziah,

Jotham, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Manasseh, Amon,

Josiah, Joahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin--

these are twenty generations.

And why wasn't Zedekiah counted as a generation? Because he reigned in the time of Jehoiachin ...

"AND GOD SAID: LET THERE BE LIGHT:" Twenty-three letters correspond to twenty-three generations from Adam to Judah, from whom the Messiah came, who is called "light," as it says:

"With you is the fountain of life

In your light do we see light" (Ps 36:10)

This is the light of the Messiah.

"AND GOD SAW:" Forty-five letters which

are the forty-five days from the time

God said to Israel, "If you accept my Torah"

(which is light, as it says, "and the

Torah is light") (Prov 6:23)

until the tablets were given.

Schematically, the fifty-two letters of [the verse



containing] TOHU and BOHU represent a first, failed stage of human history. This stage starts with Adam, includes the establishment of the Davidic line and it's eventual demise. But history does not end here, says the midrash. It begins again with a new promise: AND GOD SAID LET THERE BE LIGHT, which refers to the commencement of the age which will lead up to the Messiah, who according to one rabbinic comment "was born on the day that the Temple was destroyed."

The midrash presents the idea that Torah, and specifically the Oral Law, is the cure for the impurity of humanity; it is the means of removing the impediment which causes a human being to be alienated from God. And what Torah can do for an individual, the Messiah will do for the community of Israel--he will remove the impurity of the Exile and restore Israel to its rightful place, 'at home' with her 'husband.'

#### C. TOHU AS BARRENNESS

A woman's menstrual impurity represents the time when she must be separate from her husband, and when they are forbidden sexual relations. But for the rabbis this is not to the normative relationship between men and women. The contrary is true. The Jewish tradition has always put the strongest emphasis on the raising of a family; the sages recognized that this was the very first commandment given to humankind. Already in Genesis 1:28 one reads that "God blessed them and

said to them: Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it." And in the early stories of the patriarchs the greatest personal tragedies and family dramas revolve around the question of barrenness. The perpetuation of the family name, and with it the values and beliefs of the older generation, was the area in which the human being could come closest to imitating, albeit on a small scale, the creative power of the Creator of the Universe.

In the legal literature of the Talmud, the words of Isaiah:

He did not create [the world] to be a TOHU;  
He formed it to be inhabited (Is 45:18)

came to be seen as a classic prooftext for procreation.

This interpretation first appears in M. Gittin 4:5

One who is half bondman and half free labors for his master one day and for himself one day. This is the opinion of the School of Hillel.  
The School of Shammai said to them: "You have done right by his master, but by [the bondman] himself you have not done right. It is impossible for him to wed a bondwoman since he is already half freeman, it is impossible for him to marry a free woman for he is half bondman.  
And was not the world created only for reproduction and increase, as it is said:

"He did not create it a TOHU,  
He formed it to be inhabited?"  
For the proper ordering of society (tigun ha'olam) they should compel his master to grant him his freedom.

This same prooftext is used in numerous other places in the Babylonian Talmud where questions relating to the duty of

marriage and procreation are being disputed: Pesahim 88b, Megillah 27a, Hagigah 2b, Yebamot 62b, and Baba Batra 13a. The rabbis consistently interpret the verse to mean that a life without marriage and procreation is a TOHU VaVOHU. As a barren lifeless desert is to the fertile settled land, so is life without a family a TOHU compared to the state which God specifically desires and which society requires for its proper ordering, its tikun.

The expression tigun ha'olam implies the maintenance of order in the society, but also its correction and even improvement. So the interpretation of this verse goes beyond the simple requirements of propagation and the desire for fertility in progeny. The human being is adjured to imitate the creator: Just as God transformed a TOHU into a CREATION, so the human being is required to move from the TOHU of a single life to the CREATION of a family. A single life comes to naught and nothingness, ending with its own demise. But the Jewish family is seen as the place where God's Torah is transmitted from generation to generation, where Jewish values, which give meaning to Creation, are inculcated.

The identification of TOHU with barrenness is also found in a fragment from Midrash Yelamdenu.<sup>1</sup> The darshan proves it from the life of Abraham and Sarah, using a proof-text from Deuteronomy instead of the one from Isaiah.

10. Come and see how Sarah was barren, as it says: SARAI, ABRAHAM'S WIFE, HAD BORNE HIM NO CHILDREN (Gen 16:1).

But she did not say to him that she was barren. She said: THE LORD HAS KEPT ME FROM BEARING (Gen 16:2). And why did Abraham listen to her (by taking Hagar as a wife)? Because he wanted to find out if it was he who was barren or if it was Sarah who was barren.....

12. HE FOUND HIM IN A DESERT LAND  
This is Abraham. Just as a desert produces no fruit, such was the home of Abraham's father without mitzvot.  
AND IN A HOWLING WASTE (tohu y'leil y'simon)

In his father's house there were images which were worthless and could produce nothing, as in Jer 10:15:

— "Every goldsmith is put to shame  
because of the idol  
For his molten image is a deceit--  
there is no breath in him.  
They are a delusion, a work of mockery"

This passage appears in an extended narrative about the life of Abraham, and is given as an explanation of Sarah's inability to have children in her early years of marriage with Abraham. The "proof" leaves itself open to many challenges, not least from the Biblical text which places the "first family" in Canaan for a good number of years during which Sarah is still infertile. But it makes a clear identification of TOHU as a place where no life can be sustained, a place opposed to fertility. At the same time the midrash adds a second nuance, identifying TOHU with idolatry.

The Isaiah prooftext also appears in Bereshit Rabbah 19:5, where perhaps an auxiliary teaching can be discerned:

SHE TOOK FROM THE FRUIT AND SHE ATE  
R. Aybe said: She pressed grapes and gave them to him.

R. Simlai said: She tried to persuade him, saying:

"What do you think? That I will die, and another Eve will be created for you? 'There is nothing new under the sun! (Eccl 1:9)' Or do you think that I will die and you will sit around in the public places (with no cares)? 'He did not create it a waste, but to be inhabited!' "

The rabbis say: She raised her voice in wailing [and he gave in to her].

The first rabbi is suggesting that Adam was seduced into eating. The anonymous opinion of the sages offers the possibility that the man was browbeaten or worn down by the woman's tears and wailing. But R. Simlai suggests that Eve's logical argumentation is what convinces Adam to eat of the fruit.

The man is convinced that his destiny is to be with the woman even if it brings TOHU and BOHU upon the earth, as is the case in Bereshit Rabbah 2:2. Perhaps the message here is that sexuality and its creative potential is so fundamental to the human nature, and is also ordained by God (thus the Isaiah proof-text in Eve's mouth), that Adam is not choosing between obedience and disobedience, but between obedience to one of God's commands at the expense of another. Seen in this light, the loss of immortality is partially offset by the rewards of a healthy sexual and family life. It represents continuity to the future, and a way to keep alive the spark of life even in a world which has become TOHU and BOHU.

CHAPTER SEVEN: MYTHOLOGICAL MOTIFS

## A. INTRODUCTION

Chapter IV outlined the ways in which the rabbis sought to interpret TOHU VaVOHU an ingredient in the formula which brought about the created world. These interpretations kept TOHU VaVOHU firmly grounded in the pshat, the plain context of Genesis 1:2. The midrashim presented in chapter 5 took a different approach, reading the opening lines of Genesis as a mashal, an allegory, for a long-range plan, conceived by God, which was to find its fulfillment over the course of history. The rabbis also treated TOHU VaVOHU in patently more mythological terms, seeing it as a "living" entity, almost as an actor in the cosmic drama. This mythological mode of thinking also embraced apocalyptic ideas about the end of the created order, as well as visions of a powerful, emotional and human-like God who experiences anger and disappointment, and who may even have a penchant for destruction.

## B. TOHU AS A COSMIC AND REDEMPTIVE POWER IN GOD'S SERVICE

In Pesikta D'Rav Kahana, Piska 7 (And it Came to Pass at Midnight) as well as in Vayikra Rabbah, chapter 6, one finds a remarkably graphic and tangible characterization of TOHU and BOHU. The midrash comes to explain and embellish the awesome revelation of God's power in inflicting the last plague upon the Egyptians. This final plague, which brought about the redemption from Egypt, took place at the darkest moment of the night, at midnight.

Behold, darkness shall cover the earth  
 And thick clouds the peoples  
 But upon you the Lord will shine,  
 And His presence will be seen over you"  
 (Is 60:2-4)

Rabbi Aha bar Kahana said: Darkness and  
 clouds were visited upon Egypt for three  
 days, as it says:

"Thick darkness descended upon Egypt  
 for three days" (Ex 10: 22)

But TOHU and BOHU have not been utilized  
 in this world.

And when will they be used?

Against Rome: "He shall measure it with  
 a line of TOHU and with weights of BOHU"  
 (Is 34:11)

The rabbis say: The nations of the world  
 which did not receive the Torah, which  
 was given in darkness, about them, it says:

"Darkness shall cover the earth"

But Israel, which received [the Torah]  
 from amidst the darkness, about them,  
 it is said: "Upon you the Lord will shine."

TOHU is not being used allegorically in this context. It  
 is a concrete state of physical reality which was vanquished  
 or contained, but not eliminated, when God created the world.  
 TOHU and BOHU, in this apocalyptic vision, become a weapon in  
 God's arsenal, destined for use in the final conflict against  
 the nations. For the duration of this world God made use of  
 the ordinary, created darkness. But for the ushering in of the  
 messianic age an exponentially more powerful darkness will be  
 required. This power which existed at the beginning of time  
 has been stored away, and will return to the world at the end  
 of time as the circle of cosmic history is closed.

In the dramatic and wondrous reversal which is  
 anticipated in the messianic time, Israel, who has endured the  
 allegorical TOHU and BOHU of exile will see a real TOHU and



BOHU brought into battle against its enemies. As reward for having lasted out this darkness of exile by accepting and clinging to the light of Torah, she shall pass unscathed through the TOHU and BOHU of Armageddon to bask in the great light of the messianic age.

The only other instance we have where TOHU is pictured in such concrete mythological terms or as an aspect of the physical universe is the remark in BT Hagigah 12a:

TOHU is a green line that encompasses the whole world, out of which the darkness proceeds, for it is said:  
 " He made darkness His hiding place around him (Ps 18:12)"  
 BOHU, this means the smooth stones that are sunk in the deep, out of which the waters proceed."

Taking the Hagigah citation together with the tradition in Pesikta D'Rav Kahana, it does seem that the rabbis viewed ordinary darkness as a pale reflection, or residue, of a supernal darkness, much the way ordinary light is merely a pale reflection of the supernal light which shone in Eden and which will shine in the Messianic age. Just as the OR HaGANUZ is hidden away and reserved for the righteous in the World-to-Come, there is a "HOSHECH HA-GANUZ" which is reserved for the wicked. This supernal light and darkness are archtypical entities, the dualistic primal elements which pre-existed or were created, and which are stored up with God. This midrash triumphantly proclaims the reality of the Jewish God, He Who Spoke and The World Came into Being, against the dualistic conceptions of the ancient world. Even the primeval darkness

is no longer viewed as a counter-force to God, but rather the most potent weapon in His arsenal.

### C. RETURNING THE WORLD TO TOHU AND BOHU

Apocalyptic speculation about cataclysmic events at the end of time naturally raises certain questions: Just how permanent is the physical universe we recognize as our world? Is creation a reversible process, or is it eternal? And if God can bring destruction upon the world in the end of time, what is to prevent Him from doing so at any time, or from having done so in the past? Is creation conditional? The rabbis suggest some answers to these questions in the Talmud and midrashic literature, where one finds the expression, "returning the world to TOHU VaVOHU."

In BT Avodah Zarah 8a, the rabbis imagine the feelings of the first Adam upon taking note of the fact that the days grow shorter in winter time. Adam cried out:

"Woe is me, perhaps because I have sinned the world is now returning to TOHU VaVOHU! This is the death to which I have been sentenced!"  
So he began keeping an eight day's fast. But as he observed the winter equinox and the days getting longer, he said: "This is the way of the world" and he made a festival of eight days duration. In the following year, he appointed both as festivals.  
Now he fixed them for the sake of heaven, but the heathens appointed them for the sake of idolatry.

In its context this is an etiological teaching, explaining the origin of the winter solstice festivals of Saturnalia and

Kalenda. Perhaps there is even an intimation here of certain winter festivals in the ancient Hebrew life cycle which may have been superseded by or transformed into the celebration of Hanukkah at a later date. Saturnalia was the festival in the Roman calendar where for five days the slaves became masters, generals became slaves, and the rules of society were suspended in an general orgy of licentiousness and revelry.

The rabbis are naturally critical of this pagan festival, and can point to the glaring differences between the pagan world view and their own. The foolish pagans imagined that the world was really in danger of receding into TOHU and BOHU if the deities were not propitiated. And their strategy was to plunge their own world topsy-turvy into even greater sinfulness and darkness.

Compare this with the Hanukkah of the rabbis, which confidently celebrates the appearance of the light even in the darkest time of the year; which celebrates the rededication to worship of God in the purified Temple. The guiding principle of the rabbi's Hanukkah is Hillel's dictum: "Ma'alin begodesh v'ain moridin: One [always] increases holiness, and never takes away from holiness" (BT Shabbat 21b).

No, say the rabbis: This is the way of the world. We are assured that the benevolent creator will not arbitrarily destroy the world on account of our ordinary sins, or on a whim.

But there are certain conditions which might force His

hand.

Resh Lakish said: Why is it written,  
 "There was evening and there was morning,  
 THE sixth day?"  
 What is the purpose of the additional THE?  
 In order to teach you that the Holy One,  
 Blessed be He, made the works of creation  
 conditional, saying: If Israel accepts the  
 Torah, you shall exist; but if not, I will  
 turn you back to TOHU and BOHU.

The homiletical intent of this aggadic statement, found  
 in BT Shabbat 88a, is to confirm that Creation is not  
 accidental but purposeful; and a world in which there is no  
 Torah IS a TOHU VaVOHU in terms of meaning and significance.  
 God's threat of destruction is merely reactive. Should Israel  
 fail to accept the Torah and affirm the purpose which God  
 has for the world, then He he will simply re-order the  
 physical universe to correspond to the state of lack of  
 meaning and lack of purpose which would result; a TOHU VaVOHU.

The compiler of Yalkut Shimoni presents us with a  
 variation on this theme, but with a different referent. Here  
 it is Joseph who may cause the destruction of the world if he  
 does not act as a tzaddik, and yields to the lures of  
 Potiphar's wife.

Rabbi Shamoah bar Nahman said in the  
 name of R. Johanan:  
 When one does a single mitzvah in this  
 world, it goes before him to the World-to-  
 Come, as it is written: "And your  
 righteousness shall go before you"  
 And when one commits a transgression  
 in this world, it clings to him and  
 goes before him on the Day of Judgement,  
 as it is written:  
 Their course twists and turns  
 They run into the desert and perish

(velaftu orkhot darkam/  
ya'alu vatohu v'y'oveidu)  
 Caravans from Tema look to them,  
 Processions from Sheba count on them.  
 (Job 6:18)

Rabbi Eleazar said: She was attached to him like a dog, and he did not LIE WITH HER: LIE--in this world, WITH HER--in order not to be with her--in the World-to-Come.

The choice of the Job prooftext is rich in associations with Joseph. It is a caravan of Ishmaelites which brings Joseph down to Egypt in Genesis 37, corresponding to the "caravans from Tema" in the verse from Job. And perhaps there is also a humorous pun intended, based on the verb L/F/T, which is in the verse from Job.. This is the verb of choice for another near-seduction scene, as recorded in Ruth 3:8. When Boaz awakes on the threshing floor to find Ruth at his feet, it says "in the middle of the night, the man gave a start (vayilafet).\" The Targum to Ruth translates the verb employed there as "Na'asah bsaro k'roshei lefet: His flesh became as soft as boiled turnips."

According to this first section (which is taken from BT Sotah 3b) if Joseph does not reject the advances of Potiphar's wife, his sin will lead him into perdition. TOHU is identified with the destination of the wicked in the World-to-Come.<sup>1</sup>

But the midrash continues. It seems that Joseph, despite all that was said above, is indeed tempted, and is on the verge of giving in to his urges. And God must intervene to prevent this.

AND HE DID NOT HEED HER (Gen 39:10)  
 Our rabbis said: He did heed her,  
 except that the Holy One showed him  
 an image of his father, and he was  
 ashamed and ran off.

The second time he went in to her,  
 God took hold of the even shetiya  
 and said to him: "If you touch her,  
 I'll cast this down and destroy the  
 world," as it is written:

"Yet his bow stayed taut,  
 and his arms were made firm  
 By the hands of the Mighty One  
 of Jacob  
 There, the Shepherd, the Rock  
 of Israel" (Gen<sup>49</sup>:24)

The even shetiya is the foundation stone on which the Temple was built. According to legend, this stone caps the floodwaters of the deep, which otherwise would submerge the earth in water. God threatens that if Joseph will not refrain, He will destroy the world. Here we should read between the lines the rabbinic dictum (found in BT Yoma 38b and based on Proverbs 10:25) that "Tzadik yesod 'olam: the righteous individual is the foundation of the world." The midrash draws a parallel between Joseph's accepting his role as a tzaddik and Israel's accepting the Torah. If either of them refuse, they will destroy the meaning and purpose in the world, and God will respond by destroying the physical universe.

The image of the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem sitting on the very rock which caps the destructive power which can return the world to TOHU VaVOHU, is a powerful one. It is a vivid representation of the belief that adherence to the covenant and faithful service to God

(symbolized by the Temple) is literally the force which maintains the created order and holds TOHU VaVOHU in abeyance.

Properly speaking, the idea that God will destroy the world if Israel (or the tzaddik) do not help Him fulfill His plan, is related to an aspect of rabbinic cosmology which saw God as a creator and destroyer of worlds. Bereshit Rabbah 3:7 tells that

Rabbi Abbahu taught that [God] created worlds and destroyed them before He created these [heavens and earth].  
He said: "Those did not please me!"  
Rabbi Pinhas explained Abbahu's statement:  
AND GOD SAW EVERYTHING HE HAD MADE  
(both this world and the ones which came before) AND IT (this one) WAS  
VERY GOOD (Gen 1:31).  
God said: "These please me, the others did not please me"

Following the Flood in the time of Noah, "The Lord said to Himself: "never again will I doom the earth because of man, since the devisings of a person's heart are evil from youth" (Gen 8:21). But the rabbis were willing to consider the possibility that there were certain circumstances which might prompt God to change his mind.

There is no certainty regarding what the rabbis mean when they use the phrase "return the world to TOHU and BOHU." It could have the meaning of "utter nothingness," or "primeval chaos." This might mean the end of history, an unleashing of the forces of disorder which allow the world to return to its pre-created and inert state. Or it could have the connotation of "back to the drawing board." TOHU VaVOHU might be the

starting point for another round of creation and history. The rabbis use this powerful mythological idea to indicate the desperate emotional state in which an omnipotent yet transcendent God might find Himself when let down by those with whom he has freely covenanted to actualize his plan on earth.

The last two midrashim have described a God who would be forced to interrupt the plan of creation, if His partners in covenant will not assume responsibility for their share of the "contract." This failure would be more than just another disappointment; it would be an ontological assault on the whole reason for creation. This might be enough reason for God to exercise the "Destroy" option.

Rabbinic speculation takes this idea one step further; to reveal the inner turmoil of a God who acutely experiences the limits on His own power to interfere in human affairs. This can be seen in the account of the martyrdom of Rabbi Ishmael the High Priest at the hands of the Romans.<sup>2</sup>

Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel are taken out to execution together. R. Shimon is killed first, and Rabbi Ishmael cries out in grief: "Where is Torah? Where is its reward?" But the story continues:

While he was weeping, the Caesar's daughter looked out the window and saw the beauty of R. Ishmael...whose face was like those of the heavenly angels. She was filled with mercy for him and sent to her father:



"Grant me but one favor! "

He answered: "My daughter, I'll give you whatever you ask, but not Rabbi Ishmael or his friends."

She responded: "Please, let him live."

He answered: "I have already sworn."

She asked: "If so, then please, command them to remove his scalp in order that I may look upon it in place of a mirror."

He ordered it done and they removed his scalp. When they came to the place where he used to place his tefillin, he let out a bitter wail, such that the heavens and the earth were shaken. He let out a second wail, and the Throne of Glory itself trembled.

The ministering angels said before the Holy One, Blessed be He: "A righteous man such as this, to whom you revealed the secrets of all the worlds and of the great depths--shall he be killed in such a base way? This is Torah and this is its reward?"

The Holy One, Blessed be He said: "What can I do for my son? It has been decreed and there is no one who can cancel it."

A heavenly voice (bat qol) went out and said: "If I hear another shout I shall turn the whole world to TOHU VAVOHU! "

And when Rabbi Ishmael heard the heavenly voice, he was silent.

The emperor said to him: " Do you still trust in your God?"

He answered: "Though he slay me, yet I will trust him" (Job 13:15)

Whereupon his soul departed from him.

In this story even the heavenly throne is shaken by the suffering of the righteous, and yet God is unable to intervene. "It has been decreed, and there is no one who can cancel it" may refer to the fact that Rome has been given temporal dominion over Israel, as part of God's long-term historical plan. Or it may refer to God's own self-imposed restraint, his unwillingness or fundamental inability to use a miraculous intervention even on behalf of

the righteous individual. God has given free will to mankind, to do good as well as evil. The concerned yet abstaining God of the rabbis, constrained by the ground rules He has imposed upon His own role in the world He has created, has only one option available: to destroy the entire world, and (perhaps) to start over again. To return the world to TOHU VaVOHU would be the only cure for a world in which the power relationships between the righteous and the wicked have become so inverted, where the divine image has been so debased by the arrogance of humankind.

Those in our own time who ask why the heavens were silent at Auschwitz may find some paltry comfort in this story; left only with the option of turning the world to TOHU VaVOHU, God covers His ears and retires to His throne, silently nourishing a conviction, conceived at the moment of creation, that humanity will yet find its path to righteousness and redemption, and that what has been planned from the very beginning may yet come to pass.

#### D. TOHU IS A GREEN LINE WHICH ENCOMPASSES THE WHOLE WORLD

The statement that "Tohu is a green line which encompasses the whole world" from BT Hagigah 12a was noted above in section B (page 88). Ephraim Urbach offers another interpretation of this enigmatic formulation, 'attributing it to the Babylonian Amora Rav. Urbach considers it part of Rav's attempt to offer a dynamic account of creation which takes

into account those things which "preceded creation". It has been shown how Gamliel accounted for these elements by finding appropriate Biblical references which "proved" that they were created entities. Rav takes another approach, seeking to show how all these entities were brought into play in the creative process at the very beginning. TOHU (1) and BOHU (2) were created first. TOHU engendered the darkness (3) , and BOHU engendered the deep water (4). Then the light (5) was created, which in the form of fire was mixed with the water to create the heavens (6). The earth (7) was formed from the withdrawal of the water, perhaps through the agency of the wind (8). Add to this the nature of day (9) and the nature of night (10) and you have an alternate version of the "ten utterances with which the world was created."

CHAPTER EIGHT: EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

## A. INTRODUCTION

In the introductory chapter it was suggested that all attempts to get a true conception of what really happened at the beginning of time are bound to flounder at a certain point, beyond which human reason simply cannot operate clearly. We have no categories for understanding a thing which was before there was anything. And the discussion of the various uses of TOHU in the Bible indicated that one of these was "a thing which comes to naught," making the word TOHU a good description, both of the state preceding creation, as well as of the state of mind of the person who seeks to understand that state. The use of the verb TOHE to describe a mental state of confusion, the confounding of "knowledge," or perhaps an intellectual barrier which cannot quite be transcended, are the common themes for the three selections from the Talmud and midrash which are presented in this chapter.

## B. HE MADE DARKNESS HIS HIDING PLACE

In previous chapters two very different interpretations were presented for the enigmatic statement in BT Hagigah 12a:

TOHU is a green line which encompasses the whole world, out of which the darkness proceeds, for it is said, "He made darkness his hiding place around him." (Ps 18:12).

A third interpretation is also possible, which is based on a comment made by Rashi on a vivid image which appears in

Psalm 18:12. In this psalm, David is singing a hymn of thanks to God for rescuing him from the hands of Saul. Although

ropes of death encompassed me,  
 torrents of Belial terrified me,  
 the ropes of Sheol encircled me,  
 snares of Death confronted me

God hears David's cry and effects a miraculous and cataclysmic rescue:

He bent the sky and came down,  
 thick cloud beneath his feet.  
 He mounted a cherub and flew,  
 gliding on wings of the wind.  
 He made darkness His screen;  
 Dark thunderbolts, dense clouds  
 of sky were his pavilion round  
 about Him  
 Out of the brilliance before Him,  
 hail and fiery coals pierced His clouds

The image is of a God suddenly emerges from His hiding place, flashing with thunderbolts and fire and heavenly power, but who yet requires darkness to be a screen, thunderbolts and dense clouds of sky to conceal his appearance. The darkness serves as concealment, a barrier restricting our understanding and ability to perceive the majesty of God. The confusion and chaos, even the desolation and darkness of the world as it appears to us, is only a necessary veil between ourselves, humans who "may not see God and live," and the one who sees and yet remains unseen. Only the heavens themselves are excluded from the scope of this darkness.

Rashi comments on the words "he made darkness his screen" that "you learn that the line of darkness encircles the heavens." Perhaps "TOHU: the green line which surrounds the earth" is like a one-way mirror through which God's "light"

can and does penetrate, but which conceals the radiance and perfection of the heavenly realm from our discernment.

### C. TOHU: AN INTELLECTUAL DANGER ZONE

There is a passage which appears in Bereshit Rabbah 2:4 which seems to be out of place with the general flow of ideas in that chapter. This passage is not original to Bereshit Rabbah, but appears in three other sources: in BT Hagigah 15a, JT Hagigah 77b, and in the Tos. Hagigah 2:6.

The passage concerns an encounter between Rabbi Shimon Ben Zoma and his teacher R. Joshua Ben Hananiah. Ben Zoma was a fourth generation Tanna, whose daring and unorthodox interpretations of scripture, specifically his comments on the Creation story, caused a great stir in rabbinic circles. In Bereshit Rabbah 4:6 one finds that his comment on the verse AND GOD MADE THE FIRMAMENT (Gen 1:7) was "one of the verses with which Ben Zoma set the world into commotion."

It once happened that Ben Zoma was standing, wrapped in speculation (literally: sitting confounded/yoshev vetohe) when Rabbi Joshua passed by. He greeted him once, then twice, but [Ben Zoma] did not reply. When Joshua greeted him the third time, he replied in great excitement.

R. Joshua said to him: "What is the starting point (or: what is the proof) for your speculations?"<sup>1</sup>  
He answered: "It is not a question of starting points!"  
He said: "I call heaven and earth to witness that I will not leave this spot until you tell me what is the starting point (or: what is the proof)"

for your speculations?"

Ben Zoma said: "I was reflecting on the Creation of the world, and there is nothing between the upper waters and the lower waters except two or three fingers. AND THE SPIRIT OF GOD BLEW is not written, but AND THE SPIRIT OF GOD HOVERED! Like a bird that hovers over its nest and flaps with its wings, touching and yet not touching."

Rabbi Joshua turned to his disciples and said: "Ben Zoma has gone"  
Hardly a few days passed and Ben Zoma died.

This story is odd, and is subject to many differing interpretations. What is certain is that Ben Zoma is so deep (or so lost) in reflection and contemplation about a certain matter, that R. Joshua must greet him several times before he even gets a response. It is said that Ben Zoma is yoshev vetohe: sitting confounded.

One explanation of their conversation is that Ben Zoma is contemplating the Maaseh Bereshit, and has become focused on the verse which indicates that "the spirit of God was hovering (merahefet) above the waters." He is enlightened by comparing the other verse in the Bible where the same verb R/H/F is used, and is led to a novel explication of problems in the creation story. Ben Zoma imagined that the image of a bird hovering over its nest (in Deut. 32) was to be applied to the Genesis story. Perhaps this was dangerously close to the ancient Greek (and other) cosmologies, which describe Creation as being the result of the incubation of a "cosmic egg." Or something about the "touching and yet not touching"



may refer to a doctrine which is suspect by the rabbis.

Another suggestion, made by Saul Lieberman,<sup>2</sup> is that Ben Zoma is engaged in Gnostic or other heretical speculation, which is strengthened by R. Joshua's remarks to his students (in the Talmud and Tosefta versions) that "Ben Zoma mibahutz" Ben Zoma is "outside." This interpretation is strengthened by the other three versions of the story, in which R. Joshua's question to Ben Zoma is "Me'ayin ul'ayin", which literally means "From where and to where?" This is understood as a reminder to Ben Zoma that he is engaged in speculation about "What is before (me'ayin) and what is after (l'ayin)", which is specifically prohibited by the rabbis. Still another suggestion seeks to link Ben Zoma's doctrine to a version of Persian dualism.<sup>3</sup>

Whatever the specific context of their exchange, the end result is that Ben Zoma is declared to be "outside" or "too far gone," and he dies soon after. The redactor of Bereshit Rabbah Chapter 2 included a version in which Ben Zoma is described as yoshev vetohe. These words mean "sitting confounded" or perhaps "sitting in a state of TOHU." These are the very same words which were used in Bereshit Rabbah 2:2, where the ~~earth~~ sits "confounded" about her destiny as compared to that of the heavens. In that midrash, the earth (whose destiny is to be TOHU VaVOHU) is sitting YOSHEV VETOHE (confounded). The verb used to describe the activity is also indicative of the destiny of the subject.

A case could be made for seeing this choice of words in Ben Zoma's case as implying that one who engages in forbidden speculation, like Ben Zoma, will ultimately be drawn into a dangerous and deadly intellectual TOHU, a place where all thought and eventually life as well comes to naught and is destroyed.

It is precisely because they were aware of the dangers (either of heresy or perhaps of madness) which could result from too close a scrutiny of the Work of Creation that this was very carefully circumscribed by the sages. TOHU/TOHE in this passage may very well refer to a problem of human knowledge. It may signify "an avenue of thought which can produce nothing" or "a boundary beyond which thought disintegrates to nonsense."

D. WHY IS TORAH CALLED TUSHIYAH ? TOHU IS THE FOUNDATION!

It is in this contemplative mood that one must consider the statement in BT Sanhedrin 26b:

Why is the Torah called tushiyah (Wisdom)?  
Because it weakens the strength (m'tashet  
koho) of man  
Another interpretation: tushiyah, because  
it was given in secret (b'hashai) on  
account of Satan.  
Another interpretation: tushiyah, things  
of no substance (tohu) and yet the world  
is founded upon them.

The three interpretations given here may be seen as three ways of understanding the same idea. The first expresses the awareness that the Torah is a work of vast complexity, and

that to truly comprehend the deep wisdom contained therein requires constant study and exertion which "weakens the strength." The notion that the Torah had to be given in secret on account of the Satan is motivated by the premise that if Satan knew the Torah was about to be given on Mt. Sinai he would have found a way to prevent it. But even though Torah was given, Satan has not disappeared from the rabbinic consciousness, and he still seeks to find ways of causing trouble for Israel. Satan can confound Israel with the very words of Torah which were meant to be their salvation. Perhaps this is why it was given in a "secret" form--that is, why its true message and meaning are not apparent to the shallow interpretations of a Satan, but are revealed only to the one who "labors in Torah" on behalf of the community of Israel. Or perhaps this refers to sectarians or Christians, who seek to use the words of the written Torah as a weapon against Judaism. These enemies, however, do not possess the Oral Torah, which is only transmitted "in secret," i.e., from master to student in an oral tradition.

The third statement merely confirms the sense of the previous two, by pointing out that the instrument of divine wisdom is after all composed of marks and scratches, words which by themselves have no substance. Rashi comments on the words "things of TOHU:"

Mere speech and reading, and all speech  
has no true substance (geshisha) like  
this TOHU; and even so the world is founded  
on them."

"TORAH is a thing of TOHU" is therefore an epistemological assessment which is not intended to detract from its importance-after all, the world is founded upon it. But it does point to the central problem of Torah and of all religious texts: "When the infinite speaks, what does the finite hear?" The rabbis did not explore or elaborate on the meaning of the statement that Torah consists of worthless things (devarim shel tohu) upon which the world is nevertheless founded. Straightforward philosophical musing was not their style. But I believe that the Hebrew poet Haim Nahman Bialik came very close to expressing in modern language the sense of this pericope of the rabbis. The following excerpt is taken from his 1915 essay "Revelment and Concealment in Language."

It is clear that language with all its associations does not introduce us at all to the inner area, the essence of things, but that, on the contrary, language itself stands as a barrier between them. On the other side of the barrier of language, behind its curtain, stripped of its husk of speech, the spirit of man wanders constantly. "There is no speech and there are no words," but only a perpetual search, an eternal "what?" frozen on man's lips. In truth there is no place even for this "what?", implying as it does the hope of reply...

Who knows? Perhaps the truth is that from the time of Creation, speech has not been cast as a social vessel to pass between two men. It may have always had its source in men sitting alone, speaking to themselves, as a spiritual need, i.e. "speech for its own sake," falling into the class "When my spirit within me is dumb, I shall speak unto my heart..."

The first man was not content until he had spoken himself aloud for himself to hear. For the sound that at the time of creation drew man's self-recognition up from the depths of the void--that very sound suddenly stood as a dividing wall between man and that which is on the other side, as though to say: "Henceforth, o man, thou shalt direct thy face toward that which is 'on this side.' Thou shalt not look behind thee, and if thou shouldst--it shall not avail thee, for man shall not see the 'void' face-to-face and live....

It is that very eternal darkness that is so fearsome--that darkness that from the time of Creation has always secretly drawn man's heart to it, arousing his hidden yearning to gaze on it for a brief moment...With our very lips we construct barriers, words upon words and systems upon systems, and place them in front of the darkness to conceal it; but then our nails immediately begin to dig at those barriers, in an attempt to open the smallest of windows, the tiniest of cracks, through which we may gaze for a moment at that which is on the other side. But alas, vain is the labor of man! At the very moment when a crack is apparently opened--another barrier, in the shape of a new word or system, suddenly stands in the place of the old, shutting off the view again.

CHAPTER NINE: TOHU AND BOHU IN JEWISH  
PHILOSOPHY AND KABBALAH

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## A. INTRODUCTION

The formal encounter of Jewish thought with Hellenistic philosophy began as far back as the conquest of the land of Israel by Alexander the Great in the year 333 BCE. In the following centuries, the strong intellectual currents of Greek philosophy informed the development of Jewish thought. Indeed, many of the disputes of the rabbis, and their dicta in the Talmud and midrash, can only be fully understood against the backdrop of Greek ideas, either in agreement with them or as polemic against them. Similarly, the Septuagint translation of the Torah into Greek (ca. 260 B.C.E.) reflects the influence of Greek philosophical ideas. But in these literary forms (translation, aggadah, case law) the Greek influence is to be found "between the lines." Ideas are couched in the language and method of biblical exegesis and halakhic development, and the Torah (Oral and Written) is regarded as the sole authoritative tradition which can be cited as evidence.

Beginning with Philo of Alexandria, however, and continuing through the intellectual giants of medieval Jewish life, one finds the emergence of a distinctly "philosophical" genre of Jewish writing, in which there is an overt attempt to reconcile the text of the Bible and the teachings of the Oral Torah with the major doctrines of Greek philosophy. The guiding principle in these writings is that Torah is an eternal truth which has anticipated every true doctrine; and



the job of the Jewish philosopher is to elucidate a reinterpretation of Torah which reveals the true form of that doctrine.

The understanding of the concept of TOHU and BOHU undergoes a radical change in the writings of these philosophers. In the thought of the Tannaim and Amoraim TOHU VaVOHU found its way into historical allegory, halakhic discussion, apocalyptic speculation and even a partial theory of knowledge. But in the works of the Jewish philosophers it came to be understood almost exclusively as a description of the process of Creation, which in Greek philosophy revolves around the concepts of matter, form, change and eternity.

The writings of the first-century Philo of Alexandria and the 13th century philosophers Nachmanides and Gersonides offer a brief survey of three interpretations of TOHU, which in no way exhaust the repertoire of the Jewish philosophers on this question.

#### B. PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA

In his writings, Philo cites by name the major doctrines of all the known schools of Greek philosophy; rejecting some, agreeing with others, and re-interpreting or reformulating those doctrines which he believed conformed with his understanding of Scripture.

Philo's understanding of the term TOHU is to be found in his writings on the origin of the world, where he confronts the theories put forth by the Stoic, Aristotelian and Platonic

schools. Briefly stated, the Stoics taught that our world is only the last in a succession of created and destroyed worlds, and is itself destined to be destroyed in turn. This idea found its way, in some form, into rabbinic thought, as evidenced by the midrashim cited above (Chapter VIII) where God threatens to "return the world to TOHU VaVOHU." Philo, however, rejected this view. The Aristotelian view of the universe as originating in matter which was uncreated and eternal was likewise rejected.

Philo outlined his own belief that the entire universe was created instantaneously:

"The Creator gave order to matter immediately by thinking. For God did not begin to think before acting; nor was there ever a time when He was not acting, the species (or ideas) being with him from the beginning. For the will of God is not later [than his thinking], but is always with Him, since the processes of nature never fail Him. So it is that He always creates by thinking, and gives a beginning of existence. So the two things are always found together: God's acting by divine plan and perceptible things receiving a beginning of existence." (On Providence 1:7)

This belief in God's instantaneous creation of both the intelligible universe and of matter was Philo's interpretation (or reformulation) of the Platonic view of creation. Plato's teaching on the origin of the universe are to be found in his Timaeus. Briefly stated, Plato posited that there existed an unlimited void, which is the abode of ideas. Within this unlimited void, there was a limited void, which he called a "receptacle" or "space". It was in this receptacle that the

world was created. This limited void contained copies or traces of the ideas of the four basic elements. The Demiurge or creator transforms the traces of these ideas into the actual four elements, and with these four elements creates the world.

But, as Harry Wolfson has pointed out,<sup>1</sup> the Platonic texts left a number of questions unanswered. The first of these was: Are the ideas in the unlimited void eternal, or were they created by God? Philo answered the first question by asserting that "to speak of or conceive that world which consists of ideas as being in some place is illegitimate." (Origin of the World 4:17) The place where these ideas exist, for Philo, is in "the mind of God." Just as a flesh and blood king, when he wants to build a city,

first sketches in his own mind well nigh all the parts of the city which is to be wrought out, temples, gymnasia, town-halls....Thus having received in his own soul, as it were in wax, the figures of these objects severally, he carries about the image of a city which is the creation of his mind. Then by his innate power of memory, he recalls the images of the various parts of the city, and imprints their types yet more distinctly in it: and like a good craftsmen he begins to build the city of stones and timber, keeping his eye upon the pattern and making the visible and tangible objects correspond in every case to the incorporeal ideas.

Just such must be our thought about God When he was minded to found the one great city, He conceived beforehand the model of its parts, and that out of these He constituted and brought

to completion a world discernible only by the mind, and then, with that for a pattern, the world which our senses can perceive. (Origin of the World 4:18-19)

The image of God as an architect, who possesses an ideal model through which He creates the world, is a familiar one in midrashic literature. God is the architect, and Torah is the blueprint, or as Bereshit Rabbah 1:1 phrased it: "God looked into the Torah and created the world."

Philo's understanding of the "limited void," the place in which the traces of the ideals come to be, was expressed in his by exegesis of the opening verses of Genesis:

First, then, the maker made an incorporeal heaven, and an invisible earth, and the essential form of air and void. To the one he gave the name of "darkness," since the air when left to itself is black. The other he named "abyss," for the void is a region of immensity and vast depths. Next he made the incorporeal essence of water and life-breath and, to crown all, of light." (Origin of the World 5:29)

When one matches the passage above with the text of Genesis, one can see the following correspondences:

IN THE BEGINNING GOD MADE THE HEAVENS: " First the maker made an incorporeal heaven "  
 AND THE EARTH. AND THE EARTH WAS TOHU VAVOHU: " and an invisible earth"  
 AND DARKNESS : "and the essential form of air"  
 ON THE FACE OF THE DEEP: "and [the essential form of] void"  
 AND THE SPIRIT OF GOD: " the incorporeal essence of life-breath  
 HOVERED ABOVE THE WATERS " the incorporeal essence of water"  
 AND GOD SAID: LET THERE BE LIGHT: "and to crown it all, of light."

From this it seems that Philo understands TOHU VaVOHU to be an adjective, modifying the noun "the earth" and indicating that an invisible (i.e., incorporeal) earth is described and not any feature of a real earth. Philo freed the term TOHU VaVOHU from being a unique characteristic of the earth, as it was used in some of the midrashim previously cited. Rather TOHU VaVOHU as an adjective could well be extended to the elements of air, water, and light, since all of them refer, not to the elements themselves after they have been combined with matter and given a corporeal form, but to the state of such elements while they are still invisible, that is, in their ideal form.

Philo's method of understanding of TOHU VaVOHU is in direct opposition to that of the rabbis. Where the rabbis found in the term TOHU a powerful metaphor for the chaos and disorder of human history or even of certain value-systems or thought patterns, Philo conceived of it as a term which denotes the "pure" nature of incorporeal ideas. TOHU VaVOHU was seen as Moses's way of expressing Plato's concept of the "copies of the ideal elements" which combined with matter to form the four basic elements out of which the visible and sensible universe was be created.

#### C. NAHMANIDES

Philosophy emerged as a vital component in Jewish intellectual life in the ninth century, when a large segment

of the Jewish people lived in the Mediterranean world. Its subsequent development was closely tied to the cultural world of Islam, whose philosophers had rediscovered and reinterpreted the classic authors of Hellenistic philosophy. One finds Jewish writers associated with nearly all the significant trends in medieval philosophy; Islamic Kalam, Neoplatonism, and Aristotelianism. In addition to these, certain thinkers in Jewish life were also influenced by early works of Jewish mysticism, such as the Sefer Yetzira and the Sefer Bahir. Rabbi Moses Ben Nahman (Nahmanides) of Gerona (1195-1270) was one of these, and one finds a mix of "philosophical" and "mystical" concepts in his commentary on the Torah.

Nahmanides returns to the philosophic notion of ideas or forms combining with matter in his Torah commentary on Genesis 1:2. In doing so he cites two verses from Isaiah, utilizing them as scriptural proof for his understanding of the meaning of TOHU and VOHU in the Creation story:

The Holy One, Blessed be He, created all things from absolute non-existence. Now we have no expression in the sacred language from bringing forth something from nothing other than the word bara (created). [But] everything which 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. This was the primary matter created by God; it is called by the Greeks hyle (matter). After the hyle, He did not create anything, but he formed and made things with it, and from this hyle he brought everything into existence and clothed

the forms and put them into a finished condition.

Know that the heavens and all that is in them consist of one substance, and the earth and everything that is in it consist of one substance. The Holy One, Blessed be He, created these two substances from nothing; they alone were created, and everything else was constructed from them. This substance, which the Greeks called hyle, is called in the sacred language TOHU, the word being derived from the expression of the sages (BT Kiddushin 40b) "when the wicked bethinks himself (betohai) of his doings in the past."

If a person wants to decide a name for it he may bethink himself, change his mind, and call it by another name since it has taken on no form to which the name should be attached. The form which this substance finally takes on is called in the sacred language BOHU, which is a composite word made up of the two words BO HU (in it [there is substance]).

It is this which Scripture says, "And he shall stretch over it the line of TOHU and the stones of BOHU (Is 34:11)" [This] is the line by which the craftsmen delineates the plan of his structure and that which he "hopes" to make. This is derived from the expression "gavei el adonay: Hope unto God" (Ps 27:14).

The stones are forms in the building. Similarly, it is written:

"All the nations are naught in his sight  
He accounts them as nothing (efes) and  
naught (tohu) (Is 40:17)  
as TOHU comes after nothingness and there  
is nothing yet in it.

Nahmanides clearly identifies TOHU as prime matter, what the Greeks called hyle and BOHU as form. He addresses the difficulty which an individual has in conceptualizing prime matter--since until it receives a particular form, it has no attributes and cannot be described. Nahmanides relies on the verbal form of the word TOHU as it is used in the Talmud ("bewildered: tohei") as support for this interpretation. Only

once form has attached itself to matter can we actually give it a name: BOHU. Nahmanides also finds proof for his teaching by a very creative reading of the words of Isaiah.

In midrashic literature this verse is consistently cited as a classic prooftext for the idea that, despite the misfortunes of their history, God truly cares only for Israel, and nothing for the other nations. Nahmanides departs from this tradition to derive a metaphysical teaching from the expression efes vatohu/nothing and naught. He uses this expression to "prove" that TOHU, the prime matter which does not yet have the form (BOHU), was created from nothing, that is, ex nihilo!

#### D. GERSONIDES

A third example of TOHU in philosophic literature comes from Rabbi Levi Ben Gerson (Gersonides), who lived from 1288-1344. In addition to his commentary on the Torah and Prophets, Gersonides was a renowned astronomer and author of works on geometry and trigonometry. Generally, in his interpretation of Scripture he sought to harmonize the Biblical text with the Aristotelian world-view. His interpretation of TOHU and BOHU utilizes more overtly philosophical concepts than Nahmanides, but he also relies heavily on a creative exposition of prooftexts from the Bible and Talmud.

The following passage, from his Commentary on the Torah (on the verse Gen 1:2) reveals that he takes the exact



opposite position as Nahmanides, identifying TOHU with form and BOHU with matter:

TOHU and BOHU are form and matter which are the principle of things coming into being. As it is described in [Aristotle's Physics], they are the prime matter and the ultimate form. That is to say, the form which the prime matter receives before it receives other forms. You might want to call it the elementary forms."

Our sages stated that "TOHU is a green line which encompasses the world" (BT Hagigah 12a); this is an indicator of form. "And BOHU are the slimy stones (avanim mefulamot (ibid.)); this alludes to matter.

And furthermore you find Scripture ascribes "the line" to TOHU and "the stones" to BOHU, when it says : "He stretched over it the line of TOHU and the stones of BOHU." (Is 34:11)

The nature of these principles in reality is very weak, such that their nature very nearly approaches non-being, as attested by the sages: they called the destruction of this world "returning to TOHU VaVOHU" (BT Shabbat 88a).

And it is known that the placing of the line on a building is the final form for that building. And the stones which are the foundation are its first matter.

And note how it was said that TOHU is a green line which encircles the world, for existence consists of the changing of the object from opposite [form] to opposite [form], as has been explained in [Aristotle's] Physics. And in the mean between the opposite forms one will find the transition to existence. And since the most universally recognized mean between opposites is in the realm of the visible [light], this is the import of "a green line:" for it is the median of the visible spectrum, corresponding to the median of the opposite forms, as indicated in [Aristotle's] Physics.

Gersonides uses the same prooftext from Isaiah about the line of TOHU and the stones of BOHU, but he has harnessed it to a different philosophical doctrine, and so he ends up with the opposite interpretation than the one given by Nahmanides. Gersonides also uses the statement from the Talmud calling TOHU a green line as an illustration of one of the principles of Aristotelian physics: that matter remains imperishable, but continuously takes on different forms. These are sometimes referred to as "opposites" because matter can in potentia take on every possible form between the two extremes (regarding color, between black and white, for example).

From these three examples, one can see how different are the rules of the game for the philosophers in interpreting Torah. The interpretations of TOHU which they generated have their resonance, not so much in the aggadic traditions, but in the doctrines of those medieval philosophical world-views which claimed their adherence.

#### E. KABBALAH

The large body of mystical literature known as the Kabbalah developed over many centuries, but in a much less systematic way than other rabbinic literature. Talmud and midrash have their origin in the academies of the sages, where each generation of scholars passed on the inherited teachings of the previous generation, innovating and modifying in turn.

Philosophy from its inception relies on textual formulations and clear exposition, and each succeeding generation relates to a set of primary texts.

But in Kabbalistic literature themes emerge in a non-systematic way. Ideas are described in allusive or symbolic language, often with multiple or parallel sets of images which do not necessarily exclude one another but nevertheless do not formally relate to each other. Charting the development of a particular concept, such as TOHU, through the writings of the Kabbalah requires a precision and specialization which is beyond the scope of this work. But since it is an important concept in Kabbalistic thought, a brief overview is presented, which relies on the insights of scholars in the field of Jewish mysticism.

The philosophers' understanding of creation was framed by the Greek concepts of matter and form, and developed in close concert with the pure and applied sciences, which provided models for understanding the substance of creation, and by inference the Creator. In Kabbalah, on the other hand, the study of creation is focused on understanding and elucidating the dynamic nature of the Godhead. The manifestation of God in the universe are described in terms of ten sefirot, potencies of divine being. In the words of Gershom Scholem:

God as Creator...manifested himself in ten utterances of His being, ten radiations of his creative nature, ten emanations of His concealed essence...The sefirot, pulsating

with the rhythm of divine life and symbolically representing the life process of the Godhead... reveal different aspects of God's creative activity...

In their harmony, in their constitution by and oneness with divine being, they are the foundation of all created things, which emanate from them and are fashioned by them. '

Evil, however, is a problem in the Kabbalistic scheme. For if the whole universe is a manifestation of potencies of God, then evil, too must have its origin in the Godhead. The Kabbalah found it difficult to accept that good and evil were fundamentally equal aspects of God's nature. Isaiah Tishbi comments that the Zohar

needed to explain the emergence of the sitra ahra, the evil dimension of reality, the enemy of the Godhead, from the Godhead itself, which is all good. One explanation was to fall back on the notion of created and destroyed worlds.... They interpreted this as referring, not to concrete worlds such as the one we live in, but to an earlier creative process which took place in the "upper worlds" and which did not reach its full completion. Before the lower seven sefirot had been "rectified," the emanations from the first sefirah were incapable of sustaining themselves--and therefore they were destroyed. This is the origin of the world of the kelipot, the shells of the vessels, which is the domain of evil. The quality of these 'unrectified emanations' is that they consist only of the attribute of Din--unmediated severity. '

In some Kabbalistic works, this domain of evil, the domain of the shells of the shattered vessels, is referred to as the World of TOHU. But unlike the created and destroyed worlds which preceded ours, the domain of evil is very

present; it is a dimension of reality which is very real and which exists as a kind of counterpart world, which the human being must confront and overcome. Aryeh Kaplan writes that

The drama of the shattering of the vessels and their subsequent rectification as parsufim , which could give as well as receive, thus serves as a spiritual blueprint for man's ability to overcome evil and become a vessel for Godliness in the world. It is only when man overcomes the concealment of the Divine in his own life that he arouses a corresponding influx of life and blessing into the spiritual universes...

All evil comes from the World of Tohu, which existed before the creation of the parsufim (rectified vessels). It was at this stage...that the shattering of the vessels occurred. The purpose of the shattering... was to allow free will to exist. Without a realm of evil it would be impossible to choose between good and evil....

Even from these brief selections, it can be seen that the World of TOHU is not seen as an allegory or as a description of processes which took place in the primordial past. In fact, it is from a very real world of TOHU whence the human being must perform the redemptive actions of "raising the sparks" and effecting a rectification, a tikkun. TOHU has become, in Kabbalistic thought, a part of our interior, spiritual world.

This idea is carried through into Hasidism, which managed to rework esoteric Kabbalistic concepts and give them an immediacy and profoundly psychological dimension. The following excerpt from Adin Steinsaltz's essay "The World of Tohu and the World of Tikkun" summarizes teachings of Rabbi Schneur

Zalman of Liadi as enunciated in Torah Or and Mamre Admor Hazaken. It may serve as an example of how some of the initially disparate themes regarding TOHU, dating back to the beginnings of rabbinic literature, find a kind of eclectic merger and synthesis as a result of generations of accumulated development. In it we find traces of the notion of TOHU as a creation of God, TOHU as barrenness and inability to interact and reproduce, TOHU as a powerful cosmic force, TOHU as the domain of evil, and TOHU as the precondition or corridor to a kind of redemption.

Indeed, what we know of our universe is really the remnants of the broken vessels of the World of Tohu. It is these fragments that constitute the World of Tikun, a shattered world that has to be corrected or reconstituted. Each fragment has its own force and individuality, but it no longer serves its original purpose; it is a broken vessel in every sense of the term. The fragments have become meaningless pieces of substance, of a quality that is destined to become weeds and stumbling blocks.

When a person experiences such a "fall," his light too is shattered, and what remains is a distorted self. He has to try and put together what was broken, for he is now in the world of Tikun and his task is restitution...

The world of Tohu is vast beyond comprehension, and correspondingly powerful, so that even the smallest fragments of its broken vessels have considerable residue of force. The secret of this enormous force is in the intrinsic quality of Tohu as one-dimensional singleness of pure being. The parts cannot combine or make any kind of merger or unity with other parts. The world of Tikun,

however, is characterized by its capacity to make combinations of the most intricate and varied sort...

The creatures of Tohu are splendid in their singleness of function, while man, who is able to combine many factors and reach another kind of wholeness in Tikun, can never be as swift as the deer, strong as the lion, or light as the eagle.... The world of Tohu, then is indeed powerful but is brittle and easily shattered, whereas the world of Tikun is stable, able to build itself up and continue its existence in a variety of forms....

The work of restitution in Tikun comes into its own after the attainment of order and control over life (which takes its own time); its completeness is drawn from the encompassing light and power of TOHU itself. But the Tikkun has to proceed in a certain direction; it has to build a life structure and dwell in it. When the design has been somehow completed, the light of TOHU can enter. Otherwise the Vessel will not be strong enough to hold the light of holiness. This is the essence of the mythical image of the broken vessels. Man has to be a sturdy and well-built vessel to receive the wild power of sanctity. '

The early Kabbalah identified TOHU as the sitra ahra, the domain of the shattered vessels, and the part of the world which is opposed to God. Yet in the above passage TOHU appears a something less than demonic. It has a "wild power of sanctity," and it seems to represent the natural, and even noble, power of raw nature. TOHU is the one-dimensionality of nature: the swiftness of the deer and the strength of the lion. The source of its "evil" is the inability to unite and achieve wholeness, to bring its strength into a structure.

If we read this text "backward," that is, trying to understand the TOHU of Genesis in the light of Hasidism, one finds that the creative process is not fundamentally the triumph of a great light over a great darkness. It is the subtle, even fragile, imposition of order on a surging and powerful "one-dimensional singleness of pure being." This is accomplished less through the sheer power of authority and command, but through the sublime power of integration and wholeness.

A final passage, from the writings of Rav Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935) illustrates how at least one Kabbalist understood the inherently creative and redemptive potential in TOHU. Rav Kook was the first Chief Rabbi of Palestine who, although a devout and observant Jew, had a strong affection for the secular, irreverent and anti-religious halutzim, by whose efforts the Land of Israel was in the process of being resettled and rebuilt. For Kook this activity was a concrete indication of the onset of Messianic times. His essay, "Souls from the World of TOHU" was originally published in 1914.

The conventional pattern of living, based on propriety, on the requisites of good character and conformity to law--this corresponds to the world of order. Every rebellion against this, whether inspired by levity or by the stirring of a higher spirit, reflects the world of TOHU. But there is a vast difference in the particular expressions of the world of TOHU, whether they incline towards the right or the left.



The great idealists seek an order so noble, so firm and pure, beyond what may be found in the world of reality, and thus they destroy what has been fashioned in conformity to the norms of the world. The best among them also know how to rebuild the world that has thus been destroyed, but those of lesser stature, who have been touched only slightly by the inclination to idealism--they are only destroyers, and they are rooted in the realm of TOHU, on its lowest level.

The souls inspired by the world of TOHU are greater than the souls whose affinity is with the established order. They are very great; they seek too much from existence, what is beyond their faculties to assimilate. They seek a very great light. They cannot bear what is limited, whatever is confined within a prescribed measure. They descended from their divine abode in accordance with the nature of existence to generate new life; they soared on high like a flame and were thrust down

Their unrest does not cease--they are represented by the impudent in our generation, wicked men who are dedicated to high principles, those who transgress conventional norms defiantly rather than because of some lust. Their souls are of very high stature; they are illumined by light which shines from the realm of TOHU. They choose destruction and they are engaged in destroying, the world is undermined by them, and they with it. But the essence of their aspirations is a dimension of holiness, that which in souls content with measured progress would yield the vigor of life...

Rav Kook offers a startling insight in this passage. It turns out that TOHU is not only to be defined negatively, as a source of opposition to God, or a place where wisdom and Torah or life and creativity is absent. It turns out that

in TOHU, too there is a "right and a left," to use the terminology of the Kabbalists. There is a side which leads to destruction and chaos, but also a side which is constantly striving for "an order so noble, so firm and so pure, beyond what may be found in the world of reality." So the darkness of TOHU can become a source of great light. And the one who can harness the power to destroy from the world of TOHU can perhaps also find the power to rebuild that which has been destroyed, to effect a new and better creation. Perhaps the crucial struggle in our life is not against the primal forces of evil and chaos, but lies in the still, inner dimension which we call our soul. It is the human being who constitutes the interface between the world of TOHU and the world of Order, and it is only the human being who, with the strength of a deep faith and conviction can perform the necessary correction. TOHU and CREATION are merely two sides of the same coin which is spinning in the air: it can land either way. It all depends on what you believe is possible. In the words of Rebbe Nahman of Bratzlav:

If you believe that you can destroy,  
then you must believe that believe that you can repair.

CHAPTER TEN: CONCLUSION

I found the rabbinic "world of TOHU" to be a highly charged stage on which the most significant issues of meaning are played out through Biblical exegesis and philosophical allegory. Biblical and rabbinic phrases have their entrances and their exits, sometimes in unpredictable places.

Certain Biblical themes found their expression in the rabbinic texts, and others did not. Abstract concepts, such as the characterization of TOHU as a state of nothingness or emptiness, were utilized in midrashim. However, the many images which associated TOHU with a desert, which must have had great meaning for the settled tribes who still lived on the edge of the wilderness, seem to have lost their power in later generations. Jeremiah's verse (4:23) about seeing the world as a TOHU VaVOHU in the aftermath of the Temple's destruction spawned (or at least helped to ground) an entire rabbinic world-view, one which saw the original creation as only an indicator of a more extended process of destruction and reconstruction. Initially vague or enigmatic statements from the Talmud or the Bible were reinterpreted in the Middle Ages as standing for specific doctrines in the philosophical tradition. And ancient mythological themes like "worlds created and destroyed" re-appeared in the Kabbalah to express the separating out of the "evil side" from the Godhead itself.

What I found remarkable about the appearance of TOHU in the Biblical material was the way in which a single context

would employ multiple associations and levels of meaning. This quality carried itself over to the rabbinic material.

I divided the Talmudic and midrashic material into five categories, which reveal the broad range of meanings which the rabbis affixed to the concept of TOHU. However, underlying these divisions is a common "constellation of meaning" in which many of these categories are associated and related. Assigning the interpretations of TOHU to one category or another often involved designating priority to the multiple levels of meaning, whose presence in a text often accounts for the richness of good rabbinic literature. In order to demonstrate the way in which a text operates on many planes simultaneously, I offer the example of the following passage from Bereshit Rabbah 10:2 which proved resistant to simple classification. This text illustrates the fundamental relatedness of many of the categories which I have utilized in my analysis of TOHU.

In Bereshit Rabbah 10:2, the rabbis are interpreting the verse from Genesis 2:1; "THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH WERE FINISHED, AND ALL THEIR ARRAY."

Rabbi Hama opened [by citing Proverbs 25:2-4]  
 "It is the glory of God to conceal a matter  
 And the glory of a king to plumb a matter.  
 Like the heavens in their height, like the  
 earth in its depth,  
 Is the mind of kings -- unfathomable.  
 The dross having been removed from the silver.  
 A vessel (keli) emerged for the smith.  
 Remove the wicked from the king's presence  
 And his throne will be established with  
 justice."

R. Eliezer said in the name of R. Yaakov:  
Like a bathtub which was full of water  
And in it were two beautiful round disks  
(dioskosim).

As long as it was full of water, the crafts-  
manship of the disks could not be seen.  
When the plug was opened, and the water  
shaken out, the craftsman's work could  
be seen.

In the same way, as long as the world  
was TOHU VaVOHU, the work of the heavens  
and the earth could not be seen.  
When TOHU VaVOHU were uprooted from  
the world, the work of heaven and earth  
could be seen, as it says:

"A vessel emerged from the smith" (Prov 25:4)  
They were made into vessels (kelim),  
therefore it says: THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH WERE  
COMPLETED (vayekhulu).

At first glance this midrash belongs in a discussion of creation, like the one which appears above in Chapter IV. It describes the process of creation as the unveiling of a beautiful piece of craftsmanship which is complete but which has been concealed: by the water in the bath, by TOHU VaVOHU in the world. TOHU appears to be a residue, a film which covers an already perfect world, which needs to be removed. The midrash tells us that the world did not emerge in a slow process from TOHU, but that it was conceived with "perfect craftsmanship," and TOHU VaVOHU was somehow inhibiting the beauty of the original work from being seen.

Another way of articulating the metaphor would be in terms of concealment (Chapter VIII). Just as in the Proverbs proof-text "it is the glory of God to conceal a matter," TOHU can be seen as this aspect of concealment, a conceptual

category which the king whose "glory ...is in plumbing a matter" must be able to see through. This interpretation would be strengthened by text of Proverbs, in which the words hago sigim mikasef ("separate the dross from the silver") could also be read as a double-entendre on the root h/g/h. The word hoge means "to meditate upon," and one could understand the verse as "reflect well upon the dross and the silver."

The Proverbs text also refers to "removing the wicked from the king's presence," which speaks to the verb "uproot" in the parable. Uprooting is something which you do with wickedness, but not necessarily with water or confusion. The uprooting of TOHU VaVOHU being parallel to the removing of injustice from before the king's throne would be a good reason to classify this verse alongside those which see the dominion of the wicked as another sign of the TOHU still present in the world, as in Chapter V.

The image of separating out the silver from the dross may be seen as expressing the view that TOHU VaVOHU is a kind of impurity or imperfection, which needs to be removed--this kind of material was considered in Chapter VI. Finally, the process of removing the impurity from the silver before the finished vessel can be created seems to be a direct foreshadowing of the Kabbalistic notion that God, who contains both good and evil, needed to remove the evil from Himself before He could create the world. These early emanations by

which Evil was removed from God took the shape of "vessels," which then shattered and fell to become the world of TOHU. Perhaps this midrash belongs in Chapter IX after all.

This passage demonstrates how closely connected and interpenetrating are the many nuances and meanings of TOHU. This was seen to be true in its Biblical usage, and from the perspective of rabbinic literature it is true as well. One can identify five or six distinct rubrics under which TOHU was understood; but there is an underlying unity to them all, whose very expansiveness accounts in large part for the power of the concept "TOHU VaVOHU."

There are certain questions which this study raised which I would like to clarify in a future work. My division of the rabbinic uses of TOHU into the four categories of Creation, Historical Allegory, Mythological motifs and Epistemology would seem to indicate a forward historical development. A young and expanding rabbinic world is challenged by Greek philosophy and is energized by the encounter, seeking to firmly ground its understanding of the Jewish God as He Who Spoke and the World Came into Being. Interpreters of later generations, worn down by the brutality and permanence of Roman domination, adopted a view in which their own world was a TOHU which was inexorably moving towards a Messianic redemption. Sages who lived in a time which saw even Messianic hopes destroyed, tended towards apocalyptic and



mythological versions of history and meaning. These, too, finally gave way in resignation to a recognition of the limited ability of our human intelligence to penetrate the TOHU which conceals the unfathomable Divine Will.

This model of development would need to be verified by the use of source and form criticism, which might assign dates for the redaction of some of this material, and could confirm or deny the historicity of such an argument.

I would be interesting in finding a closer correspondence between Greek and Persian mytho/philosophical ideas about the structure of the universe and rabbinic writings about TOHU. For example, from the material in this study it can be seen that the Egyptian idea of a world returning to primeval chaos (NUN) finds a direct echo in the rabbinic concept of "returning the world to TOHU VaVOHU." But can the Egyptian tradition be credited as the source for this rabbinic belief, or does it originate from the internal demands of Biblical exegesis or developing theology? Or should one look to the teachings of the Stoics, who also believed in a universe which was cyclically destroyed and reconstituted?

The uses of TOHU in Jewish philosophy seems at first to be disjointed and removed from the general themes and traditions of earlier rabbinic literature. But I suspect that a closer investigation would reveal that the exegesis of the philosophers has an authenticity and grounding in traditions

which were simply overlooked by previous generations whose concerns were of a different nature.

The significance which TOHU acquires in Jewish mystical thought is an area which requires serious analysis. How does the "world of TOHU" relate to other images for the domain of evil, such as "the Kings of Edom," "the serpent," and "the left side?"

Furthermore Gershom Scholem has noted that

underlying the polarity of good and evil is not only the separation of things that are meant to be connected, but also the mingling of those realms which were meant to be separate.<sup>1</sup>

In terms of this study, what is the point of contact between the "world of TOHU" and the "World of Tikkun?" And what are the rules which govern the interaction between the two? I suspect that these questions are directly addressed in certain Kabbalistic and Hasidic texts which I have not yet consulted.

The Kabbalistic texts, especially the later ones, demonstrate a shift away from an older view, in which TOHU is a cosmic power (manifested in nature and history) which God ultimately overcomes. Instead one sees TOHU portrayed as a permanent component of our world which the human being must overcome and which has a certain creative potential. This strikes me as a relatively modern understanding, but I would not be surprised if its original source could be found amongst the heterodox teachings of our sages. I am still looking for the roots of this teaching.

This study of TOHU has revealed to me the dynamic way in which Jewish texts speak to each other across thousands of years. A rabbinic saying or a midrash, which had been lying "dormant" in its original setting, will be roused and awakened by a new context, where it suddenly comes to life, emerging like a small textual "hillock" out of the tradition, on which an entire world of new meaning is constructed. This ongoing rejuvenation of material is made possible by the unbroken chain of transmission and study of text which characterizes our people's relationship to its past, and which contains the truest basis for its continued survival. Despite contradictory and conflicting doctrines, multiple theologies, historical anachronisms, and discarded metaphysical models, the clear light of Torah shines through this edifice of TOHU, illuminating it from within.

NOTES

## NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. Chet Raymo, Soul of the Night (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1985), p. 85.
2. Jewish Publication Society, Tanakh (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), p. 3.
3. E.A. Speiser, Genesis (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), pp. 11-12.
4. Umberto Cassuto, A Commentary on the Book of Genesis (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1964), p. 21.
5. The Revised English Bible (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 1.
6. Ernst Cassirer, The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 114.

CHAPTER I

1. John Walton, Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), p. 19.
2. Thorkild Jacobsen, Treasures of Darkness (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 191.
3. Alexander Heidel, The Babylonian Genesis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), p. 89.
4. Walton, Ancient Israelite Literature, p. 26.
5. W.G. Lambert, "Kosmogonie" Reallexikon der Assyriologie 6:219. Cited in Walton, Ancient Israelite Literature, p. 26.
6. Siegfried Morenz, Egyptian Religion (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), p. 166.
7. Ibid., p. 164.
8. Ibid., p. 167.
9. Ibid., p. 168.
10. Ibid., p. 169.

11. Ibid., p. 172.
12. Ibid., pp. 177-79.

## CHAPTER II

1. Alexander Heidel, The Babylonian Genesis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942), p.95; also Jon Levenson, Creation and the Persistence of Evil (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), p. 68; John Walton, Ancient Israelite Literature (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989) p. 37 and others.
2. Gerhard Hasel, "The Polemic Nature of Genesis Cosmology" Evangelical Quarterly 46 (1974), pp. 81-102.
3. Much of this chapter is based on a very thorough summary of these themes which appears in Jon Levenson, Creation and the Persistence of Evil (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988).

## CHAPTER III

1. Jon Levenson, Creation and the Persistence of Evil (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), p. 68. This is also the sense I get from E. A. Speiser, Genesis (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), pp. xxv-xxvi and p. 10.

## CHAPTER IV

1. Hans Jonas, The Gnostic Religion (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), p. 141.
2. Gerard Friedlander, Pirke d'Rebbe Eliezer (New York: Sepher Hermon Press, 1981), p. liv.

## CHAPTER VI

1. Found in J.D. Eisenstein, Otzar Midrashim Vol I. (New York: Noble Offset, 1915), p. 223.

## CHAPTER VII

1. In another source, Midrash Tanhuma: Vayeshev 8, tohu is explicitly identified with gehinom.
2. Hayim Nahman Bialik and Y. H. Ravnitzky, Sefer ha-Agadah (Jerusalem: Dvir, 1968), p. 184
3. Ephraim Urbach, The Sages (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 195

CHAPTER VIII

1. Deborah F. Middleton, "Whence the Feet?" Journal of Jewish Studies Vol. 36:1 (1985), p. 69.
2. Saul Lieberman, "How Much Greek in Jewish Palestine?" in Biblical and Other Studies (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963) pp. 135-139; cited in Ephraim Urbach, The Sages (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 769.
3. Ephraim Urbach, The Sages, p. 770 (note 22).
4. Thank you to Dr. Michael Chernick for this rendition.
5. Haim Nahman Bialik, "Revelment and Concealment in Language," in Kol Kitvei H.N. Bialik (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1953). Reprinted in English translation in Robert Alter, Modern Hebrew Literature (New York: Behrman House, 1975).

CHAPTER IX

1. Harry Wolfson, Philo (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947), p. 305.
2. Gershom Scholem, On The Mystical Shape of the Godhead (New York: Schocken, 1991), p. 60.
3. Isaiah Tishby and Fishel Lachower, Mishnat ha-Zohar (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1971).
4. Aryeh Kaplan, Innerspace, p. 85.
5. Adin Steinsaltz, In the Beginning (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1992) pp. 6-10.
6. Ben Zion Bokser, editor, Abraham Isaac Kook (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), pp. 256-258.

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