# THE DEPTHS OF *TEHOM*: AN EXPLORATION OF *TEHOM* IN HEBREW BIBLE, RABBINIC LITERATURE, AND CONTEMPORARY THOUGHT

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**Abstract**

In the second verse of Torah, we learn that the world is built upon "*tehom*." This word appears several times throughout the Hebrew Bible, and it typically appears in relationship to water. At first sight, it is unclear what *tehom* is. The Hebrew word is often translated as "abyss" or "the deep." Once one reads carefully about *tehom* in its many biblical contexts, it becomes clear that these translations of *tehom* provide shallow understandings of the fullness of *tehom*. *Tehom* seems to be an unstoppable raw energy which God can contain and then unleash for the purposes of destroying or creating, harming or nourishing. This thesis attempts to explore the many facets of *tehom*.

Through the analysis of biblical, rabbinic, and contemporary texts, this thesis examines questions of theology and meaning making as understood through the term *tehom*. The thesis moves chronologically. It begins by looking at the many ways *tehom* is used throughout the Hebrew Bible. It then moves to *tehom*'s usage in classical rabbinic sources and in *parshanut*, rabbinic commentary on Torah. The final part of the thesis explores contemporary conceptions of *tehom*. This includes 19th century academic scholarship on the relationship between *tehom* and Tiamat, the chaos monster in *Enuma Elish,* and 21st century scholarship which examines *tehom* through the lens of theology and psychology. This last chapter also includes an informal online survey used to gather information about how people today relate to *tehom*.

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**Acknowledgments**

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## Introduction

The word "*tehom*" is the fifteenth word in the Torah. It makes its appearance for the very first time in Genesis, chapter one, verse two. *Tehom* is part of the founding elements of the earth, and maybe the whole universe. Beyond these facts, it is difficult to say exactly what *tehom* is because it appears to mean different things based on the contexts in which it is used throughout the Hebrew Bible and throughout rabbinic literature.

The 1985 edition of the Jewish Publication Society's translation of verses one through three of Genesis chapter one reads: "When God began to create heaven and earth – the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep [*tehom*] and a wind from God sweeping over the water, God said, 'Let there be light;' and there was light."[1]

Several questions arise from these first few verses in relation to *tehom*: Did God create *tehom* or did it exist before God began creating? Does God have control over *tehom*? If God created *tehom*, what was it created for? What is humanity's relationship with *tehom*? And even more simply, what is *tehom*?

The first chapter explores the many ways *tehom* is used throughout the Hebrew Bible. *Tehom* is frequently translated into English as the "deep," or the "abyss." By studying the many contexts that *tehom* appears in throughout the Hebrew Bible, this thesis attempts to provide explanations for *tehom* without constraining it to one singular definition.

The second chapter explores the ways that rabbinic texts describe *tehom*, *tehom*'s role in the world, and *tehom*'s role in Jewish ritual. The chapter is organized chronologically as it moves from earlier Mishnaic writings to Talmudic and Midrashic texts. The third chapter is

[1]Jewish Publication Society, *Tanakh : A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text*. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

also organized chronologically, focuses on commentary about *tehom* made by individual rabbinic commentators. Chapters two and three explore the different questions the rabbis attempted to answer in their descriptions of *tehom* and in their understandings of the ways in which *tehom* works in the world.

The fourth and final chapter explores contemporary understandings of *tehom*. It begins with academic scholarship from the turn of the 20th century which focused on historical connections between the chaos monster Tiamat in the Babylonian creation story *Enuma Elish* and *tehom* in the creation story in Genesis. The chapter then explores 21st century scholarship which expands the definition of *tehom* through the lens of theology and psychology. The chapter ends by looking at the possible depths of meaning that can come from exploring *tehom* today, both by individuals and by Jewish communities.

Very little has been written about *tehom* in academic scholarship. *Tehom* tends to only come up when discussed in relationship to other academic subjects. This thesis aims to do the opposite as *tehom* is the focal point of this work. This thesis attempts to explore the many facets of *tehom* that exist throughout the Hebrew Bible, rabbinic literature, and contemporary thought. The goal of this thesis is to provide a window into several aspects of *tehom* so we can see the complexities and possibilities that lie inside it. This thesis aims to provide context for *tehom* so that it can be added to the dictionary of common Jewish vocabulary employed in Jewish spaces.

## CHAPTER 1

## Forms of *Tehom* in the Hebrew Bible

How can we define *tehom*?

We can intuit many answers to this last question based on the usage of *tehom* throughout the Hebrew Bible. Some primary answers include: water, the water cycle, deeps (deepest depths of the world), and a powerful force of energy. *Tehom* is frequently used in the singular form (*tehom*) and is also used in the plural form (*tehomot*). The use of the singular and the plural is not consistent. It is unclear whether the two forms indicate a difference in form or in meaning.

### A force of energy, and a port which contains that energy

In the Noah's Ark flood narrative, the flooding comes from springs of *tehom* breaking open at the same time that the heavens break open. We read in Genesis 7:11 that "on that day, all the fountains of the great *tehom* broke open, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened."[2] Then in Genesis 8:2, the flooding ends when the springs of *tehom* and the heavens are stopped up. The verse says, "The fountains of *tehom* and the floodgates of the heavens were stopped up, and the rains of the heavens were held back." It is unclear if the waters from *tehom* are directly connected to the waters from the heavens, but it seems they work in concert with each other to create a flood and to end the flooding.

Here it seems that God has control over the openings and closings of *tehom* and of the floodgates in heaven. Proverbs 3:20 affirms God's control over the *tehomot* when they were broken open during the flood. It reads, "Through His [God's] knowledge, the *tehomot* broke

[2]All translations into English of the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic literature, unless otherwise indicated, are translated by the author of this thesis.

through and the clouds trickled dew." This verse also suggests that because the *tehomot* were open, the clouds could open, too. The flow of water from *tehom* may be key to heavy rains which lead to flooding, both in the flood in Genesis and in other parts of the Hebrew Bible.

There are several passages that describe *tehom* as a powerful source of natural water. In Deuteronomy 8:7, we read about a God who will reward the Israelites with "a good land. A land with streams, springs and *tehomot* which flow from a valley and a hill." Here, it is unclear whether *tehomot* are supposed to be a water source differentiated from streams and springs, or if *tehomot* are similar to water but are different from water. What is clear is that because God would reward the Israelites with land that contains *tehomot*, we can interpret *tehomot* to be a source of nourishment and blessing in this context.

We see this idea of *tehom* as associated with flowing water in Psalm 78:15. The psalm reads, "He [God] cleaved rocks in the wilderness and brought forth water like the greatness of *tehomot*." *Tehom* is related to water and lies beneath the surface, just waiting for God to expose it to open air. And it is powerful. Here, we see that God is in control of *tehom's* openings and closings. Once God gives *tehom* the opportunity to interact with water, *tehom* controls the flow of the water.

*Tehom* is closely associated with water in Psalm 42:8. Here, the psalmist is downcast and upset. He cites God as his salvation and protector, proclaiming "*Tehom* calls to *tehom*, to the voice of your cataracts. All of your breakers and waves pass over me." *Tehom* is the call of rushing water, the place from which water originates. God is the one who enables *tehom* to release water into the world.

**A substance related to, but distinct from, water**

In several verses which recount the Exodus from Egypt, *tehom* appears to be a substance in water which can solidify and control the water around it. In Exodus 15:5, we read that the *tehomot* covered the Egyptian soldiers when they entered the Red Sea, causing them to "descend in the depths like a stone." Just three verses later, in Exodus 15:8, the Israelites tell the story of their freedom from bondage in Egypt and exclaim that through the breath of God, walls of water stood like a flowing wall and *tehom* congealed in the heart of the sea. It is unclear what *tehom truly is* in each of these verses. But it might serve as a base for the walls of water. Or perhaps it is a more solid, powerful form of water. It seems to be different from the sea itself but integral to the Israelites' salvation.

The murkiness of *tehom*'s relationship to water is repeated in Job 38:16 when the verse reads that "water hardens like a stone and the face of *tehom* solidifies." *Tehom* is connected to water, but its consistency and form cannot be described with the normal adjectives used for water. Psalm 106:9 hearkens back to Exodus 15:8, saying, "He [God] blasted back the Red Sea and it dried up. And He led them through the *tehomot* like the wilderness." It seems here that *tehom* is connected to water but is separate from the sea. Perhaps, here, *tehom* is the substance of the path that the Israelites walked on between the watery walls of the Red Sea.

Psalm 77:16 draws upon the Exodus to illuminate the power of God. And the power of God is massive and terrifying. The psalm reads, "The waters saw you, God. The waters saw you and writhed. Even the *tehomot* quaked." Here, we can see that the *tehomot* are linked to water, yet they are certainly separate entities from one another. The waters, in contrast to *tehomot*, are less powerful than *tehomot*. The waters writhe because of God's might. But *even tehomot* quake, which implies that the very powerful *tehomot* moved in

fright before God, apparently something one would not normally expect it to do.

Whatever *tehom* is, Psalm 33:7 recognizes that it can be precious and worth protecting. The psalm reads, "He [God] gathers up heaps of ocean waters and keeps *tehomot* in storehouses." The word that is translated as storehouses is אוצרות, which can also mean "treasure houses." The implication here is that *tehomot* is related to water or to the ocean in some way and is a precious element which needs to be set aside for safe keeping.

**A very deep place**

Sometimes *tehom* is used to connote the deepest place in the world. It is sometimes paired with the heavens or a high mountain to demonstrate the contrast between the height of the highest place and the depth of *tehom,* the lowest place. We see this in Genesis 49:25 when Jacob is dying and issues blessings to his children. To Joseph, he says, "Shaddai will bless you with blessings from the heavens and with blessings from *tehom* that stretch below." This wording is mirrored in Deuteronomy 33:13 when Moses recounts Jacob's blessing to Joseph. Moses says, "Blessed by God is His land from the beautiful dew of heaven and from the *tehomot* that stretch below."

In both of these passages, it is clear that blessings abound and are eternal because they go as high as the heavens and as low as *tehom[ot]*. The psalmist in Psalm 36:7 describes God's righteousness in the same way. The verse reads, "You are righteous like the high mountains, your judgment is like the great *tehom*. You deliver person and beast, God." *Tehom* here means the deep below because it is contrasted with high mountains. It can also mean powerful in this context because of the "greatness" of judgment like *tehom*. In this psalm, God's *tzedek*, righteousness, is paired with the heavens and God's *mishpat*, judgment, is paired with the depths of *tehom*. God reigns over all parts of God's world with justice,

including down to the depths of *tehom*. This psalm tells the reader that God is in control.

We read another psalm that affirms God's control over *tehom*. It seems that God is the only entity that can control *tehom*, not even the person who finds themself inside of it. The psalmist in Psalm 71:20 is suffering but knows that God will be there for him. The psalmist says, "You will return me and revive me. From the *tehomot* of the earth, you shall return and uplift me." Here, we see again that *tehom* is a deep place in the world. This deep, low place reflects the suffering that the psalmist feels. We can see that *tehom* is being used in such a way that implies its mysterious and terrifying nature.

In Job 41:24, we read about the ultimate power of God. To assert this point, the verse reads, "A path shines after Him [God]. He makes *tehom* seem white-haired." This implies that *tehom* is a dark place that is difficult to reach. But God is so powerful that even *tehom* can be reached by God and God's presence makes even *tehom* shine.

*Tehom* is a foundational element of the world. In some of the texts in the Hebrew Bible, it seems that *tehom* is also the deep base of the earth which holds everything up. In Psalm 104:6-7, the verses state that, "God established the earth on its foundations, ensuring it will never wobble. *Tehom*, like a garment, conceals it [the earth/foundations]." We see here that *tehom* functions as a barrier between terrestrial life and everything that lies below. It acts as a garment or carpet which covers the mystical, foundational elements of the workings of the world.

**A combination of concepts**

Psalm 107:26 merges two conceptions of *tehom* together. It seems that in this psalm, *tehom* is both a very deep place and it is connected to water. The psalm talks about people who travel the seas in ships to sell their wares (Psalm 107:23) and in their travels, they are

witness to God's wonders (Psalm 107:24). God makes the waves of the seas rage (Psalm 107:25), thus the sailors "went up to the heavens and descended to *tehomot*. Their evil souls were melted away" (Psalm 107:26).

There is a lot the reader can intuit about what *tehom* might be from these verses. Here, *Tehom* is a very deep place as contrasted with the heavens. It is also connected to water because sailors are able to travel there. We see a *tehom* that is extremely powerful, as coming in contact with *tehom* has a transformative impact on the travelers' souls. How did these sailors reach *tehom* in the first place? *Tehom* might be directly connected to the heavens through the water cycle because the sailors are able to travel to the heavens and to *Tehom*.

**Audible Noise**

*Tehom* may be connected to the root letters *hey*, *vav*, *mem*. This root is used to describe a range of noises: murmuring, a roar, a clamoring, or a rumble. We see this root in the word *va-tehom* in Ruth 1:19 when the verse says, "The two of them [Ruth & Naomi] walked until they reached Bethlehem. And the whole city murmured about them. And the women said, 'is this Naomi?'" We find the same root used to convey other meanings. In I Kings 1:45, the verse says, "They came up from there [Jerusalem] celebrating, and the city roared [*va-tehom*]. That is the sound that you heard." And in I Samuel 4:5, when the ark of the covenant enters the camp of the Israelites, "all Israel exclaimed with a shout and the earth rumbled [*va-tehom*]."

In Psalm 42:6 we find a different form of the root, *tehemi*. The verse is translated, "Why is my soul downcast and murmuring [*tehemi*]? I will hope for God, for I will praise Him for the salvation of His presence." psalmist decries his sadness and yearns to feel joy again.

*Tehom*, the thing upon which the entire world is formed, is a murmuring, roaring, clamoring thing. *Tehom* is not stagnant. Rather, it is a great energy that calls out, ready to create great floods, to provide wellsprings of life, and to destroy all that lies in its wake. It murmurs in the depths of a person's grief or sadness, as we saw in Psalm 42:6. *Tehom* speaks from the lowest points of a person's life. In Psalm 107:26, we see that *tehom* changes souls that come into contact with it. It has the potential for spiritual transformation.

*Tehom* is a foundational element of the world. It is a low, dark place. It also seems to be an enormous force of energy that God can either keep contained and restrained, or God can unleash to create or destroy, nourish or kill. God opened up *tehom* in the Genesis flood narrative to destroy life on earth, and in the Exodus narrative, God unleashed *tehom* so the walls of the sea could stand to save the lives of the Israelites. This is God's world, and God uses *tehom* as God wishes to enact God's vision of how the world should be.

## CHAPTER 2

### Rabbinic Understandings of *Tehom* in Mishnah, Talmud, and Midrash

This chapter explores different ways that rabbinic literature looked at *tehom*. This exploration moves chronologically, from Mishnah to Talmud and finally, to Midrash.

### Mishnah

In Parah 3:2, the rabbis paint a vivid picture of their conception of the foundations of our world and *tehom's* place in it.

> Courtyards were built in Jerusalem over rock, and beneath them there was a hollow which served as a protection against a grave in *tehom*. And they used to bring there pregnant women, and there they gave birth to their children and there they raised them. And they brought oxen, upon whose backs were placed doors, and the children sat upon them with stone cups in their hands. When they reached the Shiloah spring they got down and filled the cups with water and then they ascended and sat again on the doors. Rabbi Yose said: each child used to let down his cup and fill it from his place.

In this description of Jerusalem, we learn that the world was believed to be built in layers. At the core was *tehom*. The next layer was a hollow space where graves went. On top of the hollow space where the graves lay were rocks on top of the ground and on top of that was city life. All the layers existed so there would be a safe amount of space between *tehom* and civilization. But *tehom* still appeared to be necessary for human existence. In this mishnah, children are sent to Shiloah to lower their cups down to draw out water. It seems as though the water is coming from *tehom*.

Several mishnayot employ the theme of layered earth with *tehom* at the bottom. In Nazir 9:2, we read that a Nazirite can be "defiled by *tehom*." This happens when the Nazirite "descends to immerse in a cavern and finds a corpse floating at the mouth of the cavern, he is defiled." We see the linkage of *tehom* with the burial of corpses again in Oholot 9:7. In this

tractate, we see that the burial of a corpse renders everything below it, including *tehom*, unclean, resulting in defilement. It reads, "If an olive-size portion of a corpse is buried below it [a house], everything to *tehom* is defiled. Everything above it up to the firmament is defiled."

Here we see an understanding of *tehom* as the lowest point in the earth, especially when contrasted with the heights of *rakiya*, the firmament, which is the highest point in the world. In these two Mishnaic passages, it is not clear what substance *tehom* consists of, but what is clear is where *tehom* is situated in space and that it is susceptible to defilement.

**Talmud**

The notion that *tehom* is connected to the water cycle appears primarily in Talmudic literature. In one Talmudic tractate, Chagigah 12a, we read that *tehom* is a place of deep waters. There is a discussion of what *tohu*, chaos, and *vohu*, void, are. When clarifying the definition of *vohu*, this tractate says that *vohu* is "the wet stones submerged in *tehom*, from which water emerged."

In Taanit 25b of the Talmud Bavli, Rava describes how Ridya, the angel in charge of irrigating the earth, does his work. "Rava said, I have seen this: Ridya, in the form of a calf whose lips were parted, standing between the lower *tehom* and the upper *tehom*. To the upper, he said, 'Distill your water.' To the lower *tehom*, he said: 'Let your water flow. Now, the rains can begin.'"[1]

Rava's description of *tehom* is one of a united water cycle called *tehom*. Water from the ground like dew or springs and water from the heavens like rain or snow all come from *tehom*. This is why, earlier in the same section of Taanit 25b, the opening of *tehom* is seen as

[1]Taanit 25b

crucial to the water libation festival that happened during Sukkot. In fact, it could not happen without the opening of *tehom*. "Rabbi Elazar said, When the water was poured during the festival [of Sukkot], *tehom* would say to the other [*tehom*], 'Let your waters flow, as I hear the voices of two friends.' As it is stated: '*Tehom* calls to *tehom* at the sound of your cataracts.'"[2]

The two Taanit texts demonstrate where Rava and Rabbi Elazar situate *tehom* in the geography of the earth -- both below and above humanity -- and they demonstrate the power and mystery of *tehom*. *Tehom* is powerful because it is the source of all flowing water. It is mysterious because mere humans do not know how to open or close it. Rather, it is only once *tehom* calls to itself, that its cataracts open or close. If *tehom* has not called upon its cataracts to bring water, humans have no power to change it. Instead, waters flow either when God or an angel of God call upon *tehom* to open up, or when *tehom* calls to itself.

Water is an essential element for civilization and for Jewish ritual practice. As the rabbis of the Talmud have categorized *tehom* as the essential source of water, *tehom* is woven into Talmudic tractates about the building of the Temple in Jerusalem. There are several sources in the Babylonian Talmud and one source in the Jerusalem Talmud that discuss King David's attempt to dig a foundation for the Temple when he comes upon *tehom.*

In Makkot 11a, we read that "When David dug the drainpipes [to build the Temple], *tehom* rose and sought to flood the earth." David then asks if it is permitted to write God's name on a shard of pottery and throw it into *tehom* to cause the waters to subside. Ahitophel, David's sage advisor who comes to betray him in II Samuel, appears with an answer. Ahitophel says that, "To make peace between a husband and his wife, the Torah says, 'My

[2] Ibid.

name that was written in sanctity shall be erased in the water for the whole world.' Is this not all the moreso? He [Ahitophel] said, 'it is permitted.' [David] wrote God's name on a shard of pottery and threw it into *tehom*. *Tehom* descended and rested in its place."[3]

This tractate situates *tehom* in a low place. *Tehom* appears to have its own sentience as it reacts to David's digging. It is a deep place connected to the water level and flooding, which can only be controlled or restrained by God or by invoking God's name. Versions of this story of David digging the foundations of the Temple, disturbing *tehom*, and needing Ahitophel's help to calm *tehom* appear in two other places: Sukkah 53a and 53b, and in the Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin 52b.

In the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Sukkah, a passage serves to explain why there are fifteen songs of ascent in Psalms. The story of David digging the drainpipes is recalled with the following story: "When David dug the drainpipes, *tehom* rose and sought to flood the world. David said, 'Does anyone know if it is permitted to write God's name on a pottery shard? If so, we will throw it into the water and it will descend.'"[4]

As in the Makkot passage, Ahitophel appears and says that God allows God's name to be erased for peace between spouses. All the more so should God's name be used for peace in the world by preventing the world from being destroyed. So David casts the pottery shard with God's name into *tehom*. When this happens, *"Tehom* dropped sixteen thousand cubits. When he saw that they [*tehom*] dropped too much, he said, 'the higher [the water], the more moist [the soil] of the world.' David recited the fifteen ascents [songs of ascent, contained in Psalms] and raised [*tehom*] fifteen thousand cubits."

The story occurs again in the Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin 52b with some slight

[3]Makkot 11a
[4] Sukkah 53a.

differences. In this story, David digs five thousand cubits rather than fifteen thousand cubits. In this telling, he is in search of *tehom*.

> He [David] found a piece of pottery and was about to lift it when it spoke to him, saying, "you cannot." "Why?" asked David. It said, "I am here to cover *tehom*." David said, "How long have you been here?" "Since the time that the Compassionate One's voice was sounded in Sinai 'I am the Lord your God,' the earth trembled and sank, and I was placed here to cover *tehom*."
>
> Nevertheless, he did not listen to it. He lifted it and *tehom* rose up and sought to flood the world. Ahitophel came and stood there. He said, "now, therefore, David will drown and I will reign." David said: "A wise person who knows how to solve this and does not solve it, alas, his end will be through choking." He said what he said, then [Ahitophel] gave him an answer. David began, saying: "a song, a Song of Ascents, a song for one hundred steps/ascents." For each hundred steps/ascents, he said this song. Even so, he [Ahitophel] died by choking.[5]

This tractate contains the elements found in previous talmudic tractates of the story of David attempting to create foundations for the Temple. It has the pottery shard, the song of ascents, and Ahitophel's wise counsel. The difference here is that David goes looking for *tehom* as opposed to stumbling upon it through his digging. The pottery shard serves as a stopper for the waters of *tehom* as opposed to a surface for writing God's name upon. There is no reference to drainpipes for the Temple. *Tehom* is not something that can be used for human needs. Rather, it is mysterious, chaotic, and a source of potential destruction.

Of the three versions of the tale of David digging to create foundations for the Temple, two of them describe David writing down God's real name onto a shard of pottery and throwing it into the water. This act is what makes *tehom* subside. This act is parallel to the *sotah* ritual as described in Numbers 5. The *sotah* ritual is a trial administered by a priest that serves to verify whether a woman is innocent or guilty of adultery. In this ritual, the

[5] II Samuel 17:23

priest writes down the woman's oath of fidelity and the curse that accompanies the oath, which include the name of God. The paper that contains the oath and the curse is then placed in bitter water, thus erasing the words that were on the paper, including the name of God. If she is guilty, she will die. If she is innocent, she will be fine. According to the Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Sotah, Chapter 3, if the woman was innocent and had been barren, the *sotah* ritual will open her womb and she will be able to conceive.

In Vayikra Rabbah 9:9, Rabbi Meir explains that the *Sotah* ritual exists to create peace between a husband and his wife. As Ahitophel points out in the Makkot 11a and Sukkah 53a and 53b texts, when the world is in chaos, just as a home might be in chaos when a man suspects his wife of adultery, it is worth blotting out God's name for the sake of creating peace in the world. This is why, like the priest in the *sotah* ritual, David is permitted to write down and toss God's name into the raging waters of *tehom*.

David's act of digging to create foundations for the Temple is akin to the act of a wayward woman. As David acts to build the Temple, he acts against God's desires. God explicitly tells David that he is not the right person to build the Temple. In I Chronicles 22:8, David recounts that God said to him, "You have shed much blood and have fought many battles. You shall not build a house for my name, for you have shed much blood upon the ground before me." David knows that he is not supposed to build the Temple, but he attempts to build it anyway. It is in his attempt to begin the building process that, in these Talmudic and Midrashic renderings of the story, *tehom* responds by threatening to rise up and flood the world. The wayward David has to be reminded that he is a mere human who cannot usurp God's authority. In the end, it is the power of God's name and God's will that will save him. *Tehom* is a tool used to teach this lesson to David.

In these narratives, *tehom* is destructive waters. We see this pattern of destruction through *tehom* in the Genesis flood narrative in the Noah story. The flood happened when the world was still very new. As David builds foundations for the Temple, David participates in the creation of a new Israelite world. Just as *tehom* opened up to create the flood soon after the world was created in the creation story, so too did *tehom* rise up to flood the world soon after David began to dig a foundation for the Temple.

The rabbis in Sukkah 49a imagine that foundations for the Temple were laid long before David. This tractate says that when God began to create the world, the Temple's foundations were included in God's designs of the world. The text reads,

> The drainpipes [*shittin*][in the altar of the Temple] were created during the days of creation [*breishit*], as it is said, "Your round thighs are like ornaments, crafted by an artist." (Song of Songs 7:2) "Your round thighs," these are the drainpipes that are like the links of a chain. They are hollow and descend to *tehom*. "Crafted by an artist:" this is the work of the Holy One, blessed be he. It was taught in the school of Rabbi Ishmael that "In the beginning [*b'reishit*]" should be read instead as, "a drainpipe was created [*bara shit*]."

In this passage, Rabbi Ishmael states that the drainpipes for the altar in the Temple were created at the very beginning of time. And these drainpipes led down to *tehom*. The creation of the Temple relied on access to *tehom*. Here, we see *tehom* as integral to the central locale for Israelite ritual. *Tehom* here is part of the ordering of God's world. It is a functional element that God employs for the future benefit of Israelite society.

**Midrash**

*Tehom* was defined differently in each Talmudic tractate. Unlike in the Talmud, Midrash appears to present *tehom* in a more unified way. Here, it becomes clearer that *tehom*

has come to be understood as the water cycle. In Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer[6] 5:4, we read that *tehom* is responsible for watering the world.

> Once a month, ducts rise from *tehomot* and irrigate the whole face of the earth, as it is said in Genesis [2:6], "And a mist would rise up from the ground and irrigate the whole face of the earth." The clouds cause the waters to hear the sound of their spouts, and the waters cause the *tehomot* to hear the sound of their spouts, and *tehom* calls to *tehom* to raise the waters and give them to the clouds, as it is said, "*tehom* calls to *tehom* at the sound of your spouts."

Here we see *tehom* at the heart of the watercycle. *Tehom* is in charge of moving the waters from the ground up to the clouds. *Tehom* is not something that simply lays dormant. Rather, in this midrash, *tehom* is a necessary part of the rhythm of the world. Without it, the ground would never have enough moisture to be fertile. So once a month, the water calls upon *tehom* and *tehom* calls out to itself to lift water up to the clouds. This implies that there are two *tehomot*, perhaps a *tehom* in the heavens and a *tehom* in the depths of the earth, as we saw in Taanit 25b when "upper *tehom*" and "lower *tehom*" were part of the passage that explained how Ridya could irrigate the world. It seems that the two *tehomot* are intimately connected to one another, which enables the water cycle to work.

We see the concept of two *tehomot*, one in the heavens and one in the depths, in Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael[7] 15:5:1. The text delves into a question about Exodus 15:5, where it says that "*tehomot* covered pharaoh's army, and they descended into the depths like a stone." This midrash asks how the *tehomot* could cover the Egyptians if the ground was dry. We read, "It is taught that the lower *tehom* rose to the upper *tehom* and the waters fought inside of them… lower *tehom* raised itself upon upper *tehom*, and the firmament covered over them [the Egyptian soldiers] and the stars darkened over them." Here, it is clear: there

[6] 9th century
[7] 3rd-5th centuries

are two *tehomot*, one in the upper sphere and one in the lower sphere. This midrash also insinuates that bringing the two *tehomot* together can result in raucous waters and a shift in the natural order of the world. When the two come together, the fixed firmament can be moved down lower to the earth. The stars can be concealed.

The idea that *tehom* needed to be split in two, that was first found in Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael 15:5:1, is repeated in Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 3:12. The midrash explores how the world was first created. It says that God created the world with three divine attributes: "in wisdom, in understanding, and in knowledge, as it is said, 'in wisdom God founded the earth, in understanding God founded the heavens, and in knowledge God split *tehomot*. With these three attributes, the Temple was built." What did God know that prompted God to split the *tehomot* apart? Perhaps it was knowledge of the power and potential destruction that could result from *tehom* staying together. Perhaps it was the knowledge that the earth couldn't sustain itself without a water system that stemmed from the upper sphere and the lower sphere. This act of separation was necessary to create sustainable foundations for the world and doing so reflected God's knowledge.

We begin to see *tehom* as a potentially dangerous element in Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 3:12, and then in Genesis Rabbah[8] 2:4. In Genesis Rabbah, we read that certain foundations of the world, mentioned in the creation narrative, represent *galut*, exile. *Tohu* is the exile in Babylon, *Vohu* is the exile in Madai, darkness is the exile in Greece, and *tehom* is "exile in the kingdom of evil. Just as they cannot examine *tehom*, they cannot examine the depths of evil there." *Tehom* is a mysterious substance that no person could ever fully comprehend. It

[8] 6th Century

becomes a useful metaphor for describing the unknowable depths of evil that exist in the kingdom of evil, and the depths of pain that comes from being in exile.

In Genesis Rabbah 33:1, *tehom* is again associated with evil. However, in this midrashic rendering, *tehom* is used as a barrier between evil and the rest of the world. The text reads, "The evil ones are darkness, *gehinom* is darkness, *tehom* is darkness. Therefore, I [God] brought the evil ones to *gehinom*, and covered them with the *tehom*. Darkness shall cover darkness." In this passage, *tehom* is associated with darkness and it can cover the darkness of evil. Perhaps because *tehom* is darkness just like evil is darkness, *tehom* is the substance that can best serve as a suppressor of evil. Because *tehom* is so similar to evil in its dark form, it is able to cloak evil. It should be noted that in this passage, we see that *tehom* is not the lowest layer in the earth. Rather, *tehom* lays on top of a layer of *gehinom* and conceals the evil ones who are placed there.

Throughout this chapter, we have seen how *tehom* is approached in a variety of ways. The Mishnaic sources refer to *tehom* primarily as a low, watery place where corpses exist. It is a place that, under the right circumstances, renders a person ritually impure. *Tehom* is not seen in the Mishnah so much as a mystical, powerful source. Rather, it is viewed through a lens that is focused on geography, described primarily as a low layer of the world.

The talmudic sources are less focused on *tehom*'s location and are more descriptive of *tehom* as related to water. Several tractates describe *tehom* as the water system. Others describe *tehom* as a powerful source of rushing water that can destroy the world. In almost every tractate, *tehom* is written about through a lens of control. The rabbis discuss who can get *tehom* to open up and irrigate the earth. They also discuss how *tehom* can be stopped when its power threatens to destroy the world.

The midrashic sources here portray a *tehom* that God has control over. God crafted a world that relies on *tehom* and benefits from the presence of *tehom*. It seems that God split *tehom* into two because it was too powerful as one united whole. In doing this, *tehom* serves as the water system that irrigates the world. God places the evil ones beneath *tehom* because, as a strong substance, it can shield the world from all the evil that lies below. *Tehom*, throughout these midrashic sources, is a tool that God utilizes for the benefit of the world.

## Chapter 3

### Rabbinic Understandings of *Tehom* in Parshanut

The *meforshim*, the rabbinic commentators, illuminate the evolution of thought about the physical nature of our world and God's role in its construction. The *meforshim* understood *tehom* through the knowledge of God's universe that they inherited from prior rabbinic sources such as Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash, and their own rabbinic teachers. They also understood *tehom* through the scientific knowledge available to them at the time. What they wrote about *tehom* is a product of the combination of these two types of knowledge. This chapter will delve into rabbinic commentaries in chronological order from oldest to newest.

In Rashi's (Solomon ben Yitzhak, 11th century, France) exploration of Genesis 1:2, he explains that the phrase "on the face of *tehom*" means "on the face of the waters that are on the earth."[1] To Rashi, *tehom* and bodies of water are one and the same. Rashi's explanation of *tehom* is widened when he explains what the mist is which rises from the ground in Genesis 2:6. The next verse describes God forming *adam* from the ground. Rashi says, "This [the mist] is about the creation of *adam*. He [God] raised up *tehom* and filled the clouds to moisten the ground and create *adam*. This is like a kneader who adds water [to flour] and then kneads the dough. Similarly, He [God] filled [the earth] and then created *adam*."[2]

Here, Rashi describes *tehom* not only as the seas on top of the earth but also as a watery source from below the earth. *Tehom* is something God can employ to fulfill God's

[1] Rashi on Genesis 1:2
[2] Rashi on Genesis 2:6

vision of creation. *Tehom* is an integral part of the formation of humankind. *Tehom* and the earth are God's tools in the formation of humanity.

Ibn Ezra (Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra, Spain, 12th century), like many *meforshim*, is less interested in exploring the definition of *tehom* and is more interested in understanding what *tohu* and *vohu* are. *Tohu* and *vohu* describe the earth's physical state in Genesis 1:2 and are typically translated as "unformed" and "void." These words appear right before the verse that says "and darkness was on the face of *tehom*." Ibn Ezra explores an idea that the rabbinic scholar Saadya Gaon once posed, which is that the words *tohu* and *tehom* share the same root letters. Ibn Ezra writes, "The Gaon said that *'tohu'* is from *'tehom,'* but that it isn't possible because the mem of *tehom* is part of a root letter like the *mem* of *mayim,* water. And in *Sefer Yetzirah*, *'tohu'* is a green line and *'vohu'* is *mefulmot,* rocks. And this is correct as it is translated in the Aramaic."[3]

What was Ibn Ezra's dominant question? What primary elements lay at the center of the world from the very beginning of creation? He determines that the earth is made of three essential layers: at the top is a green line which is *tohu*, below it are rocks which is *vohu*, and below that is water which is *tehom*. Here, Ibn Ezra crafted a tangible blueprint of the earth by using three words from Genesis 1:2.

Radak (David Kimhi, France, late 12th, early 13th century), had a different focus. He looked at the varying grammatical forms the word *tehom* takes in the Hebrew Bible. He said, "*Tehom* is in the feminine language, as is 'when I raise *tehom* upon you' (Ezekiel 26:19) '*tehom* is exalted' (Ezekiel 31:4) and in the masculine language, '*tehom* calls to *tehom*' (Psalm 42:8)."[4] It is unclear whether Radak was attempting to demonstrate a difference in

[3]Ibn Ezra on Genesis 1:2
[4]Radak on Genesis 1:2

gender based on context or if he simply wanted to show that the word *tehom* has more than one grammatical gender form. A multi-gender noun is quite unusual in the Hebrew language. Radak's discovery about *tehom's* multi-gender usage is interesting because it places *tehom* in a special category that is only shared with a few words like *ruach*, wind/spirit, *shemesh,* sun, and *etsem*, bone, just to name a few. Like *tehom*, the words listed are integral to the creation story of our world and of humanity. It is clear that *tehom* is an essential primary element of our world which transcends the human trappings of gender.

Radak does not remain situated within the realm of grammar. He goes on to describe what he believes *tehom* is in substance and form. He says, "It [*tehom*] is the place of an abundance of water, and that mass of water is called Tehom."[5] Radak describes *tehom* in two ways within one sentence. He says that *tehom* is an area which acts as a container for water. He also says that *tehom* is water itself, and that in form, it is a mass of water. So *tehom* is both a place and a substance, all associated with water.

Ramban (Moshe ben Nahman, Spain, 13th Century) speaks about *tehom* in the context of the creation story. He attempts to harmonize the various materials used at the beginning of creation. He says, "the water, with which the dirt was kneaded, is called '*tehom*.' Therefore, the waters of the seas are *tehom*."[6] Ramban's first statement about *tehom* recalls Rashi's interpretation of the mist in Genesis 2:6 as coming from *tehom* to wet the earth enough so that God could create *adam*. His second statement defines *tehom* as the seas. Rashi also says that *tehom* is the seas.

[5]Ibid.
[6]Rambam on Genesis 1:1

Ramban then moves into a different place. He threads together several elements that were mentioned in the creation story and describes their purpose. He says,

> It is known that the four foundational elements are one, and that the globe stands in them. The waters extend over the land, and the air extends over the waters, and the fire extends over the air. The verse says that the earth took form, and the fire was extended to rise over the waters and the dirt mixed in, and the wind blew and darkness entered and hovered over the waters...
>
> In the beginning, God created the heavens out of nothing, and created the land out of nothing, and the land when it was created was chaos and void, and in them was darkness and in the waters was dirt, and the wind rested upon the waters. And behold, the earth was created and made.[7]

An essential question that Ramban seems to be answering is whether any elements that were part of the creation story existed before God. He wants to address any doubts that may arise from reading the first verses in Genesis about God creating the universe ex-nihilo, out of nothing. Whether any substances existed prior to God's formation of the world. Ramban gives us an answer: of course God created it all on God's own.

Bahya ben Asher (Bahya ben Asher Ibn Halawi, Spain late 13th/early 14th century) distinguishes between two words that are used in the creation story: *bara* and *yatzar*. Bahya says that God first *bara* two materials: *tohu* and *vohu*.[8] These are God's building materials. Then, God *yatzar*, formed/fashioned things out of those materials. Bahya, like Ramban, puts forth a statement that describes a universe where everything is created by God, even the unformed, chaotic parts. The unformed chaotic parts are then shaped into something useful.

Bahya asserts that the world was created out of four elements: earth, fire, wind, and water. He then goes on to say that, "The earth's shape was formed, and the darkness, which is the fire [one of the four elements], spread above the mixture of dirt and water. The mixture

[7] Ibid.
[8] Bahya ben Asher on Genesis 1:2

of the two elements together is called '*tehom*' like the sea which is mixed with dirt. This is the essence of *tehom* in Torah."[9]

Bahya's definition of *tehom* is something that God created because it is formed from two of the original four elements. *Tehom* is a powerful source of nature because it is imbued with two of the natural elements of the world. And it is not more powerful than God because God created it.

Later in Bahya's commentary on Genesis 1:2, he says that God "showed His justice through the great *tehom* when the waters lowered themselves [by God's command]. It is contrary to their [the waters'] nature to save the people and animals who live on land."[10] According to Bahya, even though God created *tehom*, it was still created with a desire to do what is contrary to God's vision of creation. God created with a vision of separation between land-based creatures and the seas. Instead, the seas, *tehom*, were created with a desire to flood the land. And God demonstrates justice and compassion by commanding *tehom* to submerge itself. There seem to be two competing narratives in Bahya's explanation: the perfect creation of a world designed by an all-powerful God, and the creation of a near-perfect world by an all-powerful God that has one design flaw: *tehom*.

Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenberg (Germany, 19th Century), like many *meforshim* who came before him, said that *tehom* is water. He is the first commentator to draw a connection to the word "*tehom*" with the word "*hoom*" which means to moan, stir up, or make noise. He says, "The language of moaning and turmoil is the essence of its [*tehom's*] mystery/foundation, and from it comes water, and therefore, the sea."[11] Here, we find a picture of the sea which is

[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenberg, *HaKtav VeHaKabbalah*, Genesis 1:2

quite unnerving. The foundation of the sea is *tehom*, and *tehom* is a constantly churning, moaning, tumultuous thing.

Shadal (Samuel David Luzzatto, Italy, 19th Century) also attempts to connect the word "*tehom"* with root letters but did not find a connection with *hoom* like Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenberg does. Instead, he agrees with Saadya Gaon that *tehom* stems from the same root as *tohu*. He says that this is "a language of disorientation [*sh'mamah*] and wonder [*t'mihah*]" because of "the abundance of water and their depths, since there is no end to them."[12] Just the massiveness of *tehom* and the imagined infinity of its depths provokes feelings of *t'mimah*, wonder.

Shadal continues by describing what *tehom* must have been like before God spoke light into being. He imagines how it would have felt to be present for that moment in the world's history. Shadal says, "on the face of *tehom*, there was no light. Only darkness. So this is a frightening painting: horror below and horror above." While Shadal spoke earlier about *tehom*'s connection to *t'mimah*, his description of *tehom* lying in darkness sounds very similar to experiences of *yirah. Yirah* is a word used to describe how people feel when they encounter God. *Yirah* is both awe and fear. Yet this word could also be used to describe an encounter with *tehom*, a foundational element of the world.

Each of the *meforshim* focus on different questions as they try to determine what *tehom is.* Some of them are invested in explaining how *tehom* could exist in a world that God created ex-nihilo. Some of them are interested in exploring the root word that *tehom* comes from and delve into exegesis about the foundations of the world based on that root word. Some wanted to describe what *tehom* looked like or what materials it was made out of. And

[12] Shadal on Genesis 1:2

others were interested in describing what it would have felt like to witness God's world at the very beginning of creation.

Each of the *meforshim* had their own unique focus based on the time and place in which they lived, the theological questions that they were wrestling with, and the topics which were of personal interest. Just like the *meforshim*, contemporary thinkers have their own interpretations of *tehom* based on the time and place in which they live, the theological questions that they are wrestling with, and the topics which are of personal interest.

## Chapter 4

## Contemporary Thought on *Tehom*

In the previous chapters, we have seen how *tehom* is employed throughout the Hebrew Bible and we have seen how the rabbis throughout many generations have thought about *tehom*. In this chapter, we will explore the place of *tehom* in contemporary thought. *Tehom* is a subject ripe with exegetical possibilities, particularly because of its mysterious qualities. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, *tehom* is difficult to define. It possesses mystical, somewhat magical, qualities. It is always present yet unseen. It seems to have a mind of its own. *Tehom* is a unique and powerful source of energy, and as such, contemporary Jewish and non-Jewish thinkers look to *tehom* for new answers. The questions that this chapter will focus on are within historical, theological, and psychological frameworks.

In the late 19th century, scholarship began to emerge that focused on the Hebrew Bible's mesopotamian origins. Biblical historians began publishing academic works that made a case for shared motifs between mesopotamian mythological stories and the creation story in Genesis. German scholar Hermann Gunkel published the first major work on similarities between the Genesis creation story and the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* story in 1865 in his book, *Creation and Chaos in the Primeval Era*. He states that, "In Genesis 1 the divinity overcomes the water. In Genesis 2 he creates it. The myth of Genesis 1 would, however, be completely understandable in Babylon."[1]

In *Creation and Chaos*, Gunkel draws parallel lines between the Babylonian god

[1]Hermann Gunkel, *Creation and Chaos in the Primeval Era and the Eschaton: A Religio-Historical Study of Genesis 1 and Revelation 12*, trans. K. William Whitney Jr. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), 12.

Marduk and the God of Genesis, and he draws parallel lines between the Babylonian chaos monster Tiamat and the subject of this thesis: *tehom*. Gunkel offers a translation of the Akkadian in which the *Enuma Elish* was written. He writes, "The power of the Deep held sway -- water and darkness were everywhere -- until Marduk, the god of the emerging sun, defeated Tiamat and divided the waters above and below."[2] Gunkel's retelling of the story in this way enables readers to see the thematic parallels in Genesis 1. Genesis 1 could be told in the following way: the world was an unformed place filled with water. Darkness covered *tehom* [the deep] (Ibid. 1:2). God brought light/the sun into the darkness (Ibid. 1:3) and divided the waters below and above (Ibid 1:7).

Gunkel's framing through the use of intertextual comparison uproots standard ideas about cosmogony in the Hebrew Bible. Several *meforshim* in the previous chapter uphold the standard notion that God created everything in the universe from the very beginning of time. This means that the unformed void, the water, *tehom*, and the darkness were all created by an omnipotent and omniscient God. In God's omniscience, God would have planned out the purpose and use of each foundational element of the world. In God's omnipotence, God would be able to do anything necessary or desirable with every foundational element. However, Gunkel's reframing of a God/Marduk who fights and tames *tehom*/sea monster of chaos sets the stage for larger theological questions.

This reframing presents a creation story where the unformed void, the water, *tehom*, and the darkness all existed before God entered the story of the creation of the world. This means that God did not create everything from nothing. The story of God who struggles against *tehom* is a story that says God is not omnipotent because God could not make *tehom*

[2]Ibid., 18.

anything that God wanted or needed it to be. Instead, God needed to separate it from itself to shrink its power. This reframing of *tehom* tells a story of a power that exists separately from God.

Hermann Gunkel was the first of many scholars who would explore the connections between the creation story in Genesis and *Enuma Elish*. Just two years after Gunkel published *Creation and Chaos*, an Irish scholar named Abram Smythe Palmer published his own book on Babylonian mythology and Genesis (1897) titled, *Babylonian Influence on the Bible and. Popular Beliefs"Tehôm and Tiâmat," "Hades and Satan," a Comparative Study of Genesis*. Smythe Palmer says *tehom* shares etymological and narrative roots with Tiamat[3] and paints *tehom* as a foil for evil in contrast to God's goodness.[4]

From the turn of the 20th century and on, much scholarship about the Genesis creation story hovered over these ideas.[567] Scholars looked at God's role in creation, etymological foundations of certain words in the Genesis creation story, and they looked at the creation story through the lens of theodicy as Smythe Palmer did. At the same time, several scholars published works which disputed the notion that the Genesis creation story had much, if any, relationship to Mesopotamian mythology.[89] This topic is huge and is well worth probing because the answer defines God's relationship to power.

*Tehom*, when associated with Tiamat, takes on new characteristics. *Tehom* becomes

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[3]Abram Smythe Palmer, *Babylonian Influence on the Bible and. Popular Beliefs"Tehôm and Tiâmat," "Hades and Satan," a Comparative Study of Genesis* (London: David Nutt, 1897) 6.
[4]Ibid., 10.
[5]David Toshio Tsumura, *The Earth and the Waters in Genesis 1 and 2.* (Worcester, Great Britain: Billing and Sons Ltd, 1989)
[6]James B. Pritchard, "The Creation Epic," *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, trans. E.A. Speiser. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969)
[7]Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003)
[8]G.F. Hasel, "The Polemic Nature of Genesis Cosmology," *Evangelical Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (1974)
[9] A. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951)

feminized, it has a personality of its own which is largely seen as negative, and it is terrifyingly powerful. Smythe Palmer found strong ties between *tehom* and Tiamat. He wrote, "Tiamat, the dark aboriginal chaos, is regarded as no part of the Divine creation, but as a self-determining, brutal power disowning the authority of Anu, the god of heaven. The process of reducing this elemental savage into law and order takes the form of a violent struggle…"[10] If we think about *tehom*/Tiamat as an embodied dark feminine entity, we read Smythe Palmer's last sentence in a very different light. She is not considered divine. Her dark aboriginal form is chaotic. She has too much power and too much agency. She is a savage who must be violently beaten into submission for the good of law and order.

It seems that *tehom*'s power is deeply threatening to God's authority, and *tehom*'s power is deeply threatening to major Jewish and Christian conceptions of theology and cosmogony. Catherine Keller, a contemporary scholar of constructive theology, addresses the threatening power of *tehom* in her book *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (2003). In this book, she crafts a feminist and anti-racist theology based in her own conceptions of *tehom*. Where many might see the power, agency, and mystery of *tehom* as threatening to a coherent theology, Keller sees abundant opportunity.

Constructive Theology is distinct from other theological approaches. As opposed to systematic theologies which seek to organize truths into a coherent whole, "constructive theology neither seeks to be comprehensive nor assumes it has the capacity to discern, much less describe, an essential reality."[11] *Tehom* is the symbol that Keller looks toward to present her ideas of constructive theology. She says that all orthodox theologies claim God created

[10]Ibid., 10.
[11]Krista E. Hughes. "Constructing Constructive Theology: An Introductory Sketch: Review." *Reading Religion*. http://readingreligion.org/books/constructing-constructive-theology (accessed January 5, 2020).

the world *ex nihilo.*[12] Yet, *tehom* undermines the *ex nihilo* theology.

Keller's understanding of *tehom is* rooted in the framework of Tiamat the chaos monster. She describes how orthodox theologies need to put the feminine *tehom* in a negative light and portray her as a sinister monster whom a masculine God slays because it helps perpetuate a systemic Christian theology of God the Father.[13] In doing this, she argues, the complexity of the creation narrative and thus the complexity of the human and natural world is simplified to our own detriment.

Keller offers a statement that aligns with constructive theology: "What if we begin instead to read the Word from the vantage point of its own fecund multiplicity, its flux into flesh, its overflow?" Creation, she asserts, "takes place within the shared, spatiotemporal body of all creatures."[14] *Tehom* and God, two beings each with their own agency, do not have to cancel each other out. Rather, they can work in tandem as the world and humanity evolve and change.

Six years after Catherine Keller published *Face of the Deep*, Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg published her book, *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious*, which also explored *tehom* as it relates to God and humanity. While Keller used *tehom* as a framework for discussing theology, Zornberg used *tehom* as a framework for discussing psychology in the Hebrew Bible. Zornberg explores the psychological unconscious that lies between people and God as they communicate with one another. As she peers into the unconscious through the lens of communication, she begins her exploration with listening. If one listens closely, Zornberg posits, one can hear *tehom* rumbling. She

[12]Catherine Keller. *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 16.
[13]Ibid., 19.
[14]Ibid., 19.

writes, "Communication takes place between depths, abysses, the voices of many waters."[15]

Zornberg presents *tehom* as the voice of the biblical unconscious. She does this by linking the root of *tehom* with *hoom*, the hebrew letters *hey*, *vav*, and *mem*, which means to murmur, roar, or rumble, which she suggests are murmurings, whisperings, restless cracklings. She asserts that *tehom* is the murmur of the unconscious that lies between every human interaction. Unlike Keller's theory that God's power and agency is distinct from *tehom*'s power and agency, Zornberg sees *tehom* as God's "present absence" upon which all communication is formed. She says, "The communality represented by God may be found, I suggest, precisely in the void between people. The abyss of otherness from which we reach out to translate and retranslate the world may be invisible, but it is not inaudible. Murmurings, whisperings, restless cracklings of life animate that space between us and within us."[16]

For Zornberg, *tehom* is unfiltered wrestlings, yearnings, pains, and hopes that come from the deepest parts of ourselves. It is the sound of these primal states of existence that is not yet translated into language. It is both terrifying and exhilarating.[17] And it is an integral part of a world that God created, not separate from God's world. Zornberg mines the *tehom* of figures in the Hebrew Bible to uncover what they have either repressed or have not consciously chosen to express. As she does this, she simultaneously mines the *tehom* of the Hebrew Bible itself, seeking to uncover what lies hidden between the words.

This thesis also attempts to uncover the complexities of *tehom* to discover what lay inside its depths. Just as *tehom* is understood to be physically deep beyond reach, so too are

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[15]Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections on the Biblical Unconscious* (New York: Schocken Books, 2009) x.
[16] Ibid., xix.
[17] Ibid., xxii.

its layers of meaning. When the author of this thesis would describe the subject of *tehom* to people of varying religious, age, and gender backgrounds, their responses would vary. These responses stemmed from each person's lived experience. Frequently, people would respond by linking one part of their lived experience with the subject of this thesis. What seemed to be a subject that they found to be so clearly linked to *tehom* was not an obvious link for most other people.

After hearing the dramatically different and interesting responses, the author decided to compile responses in an online forum. Respondents were asked to provide their own thoughts in response to the following description of *tehom*:

> In the second verse of Torah (Genesis 1:2) we learn that the world is built upon "*tehom*." This word appears several times throughout the Hebrew Bible, and it typically appears in relationship to water. No one is really sure of what *tehom* is, but it is often translated as "abyss" or "the deep." It is thought to share root letters with a word that means "rumble," "murmur," or "roar."
>
> In my own study of the different contexts that *tehom* appears in, *tehom* seems to be an unstoppable raw energy which God can contain and then unleash for the purposes of destroying or creating, harming or nourishing. My question is about the psychological and spiritual implications of this. If this rumbling powerful thing that is so hard to define lies at the heart of our world, what does that mean for us? And if we each have a *tehom* that lies at the heart of our own personal worlds, how do we manage it?

Fifteen people submitted their thoughts to the forum. Some people responded with strong associations to the physical world. One person related *tehom* to the feelings they encountered when standing near a powerful waterfall in Argentina. They[18] wrote that they felt, "exhilarated, fearful, never wanted to leave." They wondered if the power of *tehom* is akin to the energy of the natural world and said, "I hope Tehom is not damaged by climate

[18]The pronoun "they" is used to describe one singular respondent. This pronoun is used for all respondents because the submissions were anonymous.

change but remains a source -maybe THE source - of power." Another said *tehom* reminded them of "the chaos and randomness that is so often present in our world" which is physically present in "the life-giving and necessary and also very destructive molten elements of the earth's core and shifting tectonic plates."

Several responses were about the way we use our personal power. One person wrote about how peering into *tehom* is akin to tapping into the depths of our own power. They said, "We all have the power to do things in life, for good or ill. How that manifests itself is a result of those around us and the guidance we get." Along these same lines, another person wrote, "the concept of *tehom* serves to remind us that we have been imbued with endless energy that we can use for good or for evil, for creating or destroying." A third person wrote that *tehom* "is the ability that we have to take personal leaps. To be comfortable enough with the potential for chaos and limited predictability to follow through with a difficult choice." They continued by saying that *tehom* reminds us that "stagnation (failure to make an intentional choice) is not an option." All three respondents associated *tehom* with the responsibility that comes with power. The way we channel *tehom* and use our power is a choice.

Two respondents related to *tehom* in a similar fashion to Zornberg, in which *tehom* is the deepest part of the self. One person wrote that *tehom* is "the deepest meaning of your true essence. It drives your decisions, not in obvious energetic ways, but with deep, constant, persistent pressure." The second person wrote that *tehom* seems "like both the event and the intuition that rumbles before the event. It can be swift and painless or overwhelming (an abyss) but with acceptance, it's simply medicine." The respondent here seems to be saying that the *tehom* of big moments in our lives can feel overwhelming, but facing *tehom* can

become an act of healing.

A few people associated the power of *tehom* with the power of chronic physical health issues and mental health issues. One person wrote, "sometimes my body is very suddenly in terrible pain, and it can feel like I have no control over it," which made them wonder how much control they have over their chronic illness. Another person wrote that they associate *tehom* with darkness."There is certainly darkness that prevails in our world and ourselves, and it is hard to come out of it without some help, perhaps from the Holy One. If we think of it as a rumble or roar, imagine how we can use that for good."

Like the generations who came before us who explored the rumble of *tehom* in their own ways, we have the opportunity today to explore *tehom* for ourselves. In this 21st century, we stand in a period of time that encourages exploration of the self. In many progressive Jewish spaces, we see spiritual leaders and communities balance individual introspection with connection to that which is larger than the self. *Tehom* is slowly emerging as a symbol of depth and introspection which has begun to find its place in Jewish spaces.

The Institute for Jewish Spirituality, which grounds itself in the cultivation of mindfulness through the lens of Jewish tradition, named its 2014 prayer book *Siddur T'hom el T'hom.* Cantor Richard Cohn, a member of the IJS faculty who compiled and edited *Siddur T'hom el T'hom*, explained why the prayer book is named after *tehom*:

> Our hope is that, through these practices and in the context of quieting the mind, it becomes possible at times for the deep consciousness and wisdom coursing through Creation (or, the emanation of *Ein Sof* through the spiritual channels interconnecting the *S'firot*) to manifest in the embodied soul-

experience of our participants, individually and in community. Thus "Deep calls to deep through the voice of Your coursing channels."[19]

The depths of *tehom* never cease. As the concept of *tehom* becomes more well known in Jewish circles and among Jewish leadership, it may well become a vehicle for growth and exploration. *Tehom* can be a perfect metaphor for many things. The power of *tehom* as metaphor changes with context and with the perspectives that come from each person.

There is much that lives deep beneath the surface. There is a rushing, roaring, exhilarating, and sometimes terrifying reality that moves inside every individual and every society. In every person, place, and time, there are unseen forces that drive us. It is only when we become aware of the tug of *tehom* that lies beneath the surface that we can begin to guide where *tehom* is taking us rather than let the *tehom* guide us.

[19]Richard Cohn, email to Thalia Halpert Rodis, January 5, 2020.

## Conclusion

*Tehom* has served as a rich source of commentary and imagination from early on. This thesis attempted to look at the vast expanse of understandings that people have had about *tehom* from the time that the Torah was written through to today. This thesis found that *tehom* can be defined in several ways. Primarily, the lenses that people have looked through when discussing *tehom* in the sources explored in this thesis are lenses that focus on *tehom*'s location or geography, psychological implications of *tehom*, and theological understandings of *tehom*.

There are several definitions of *tehom* that are present in the literature. An analysis of the literature portrays definitions of *tehom* that weave together and contradict one another. Mishnaic sources primarily describe *tehom* as a geographic location, an underbelly of the earth. Some talmudic sources locate *tehom* in the heavens and below the earth. *Tehom* is described in midrash as a barrier between evil and the rest of the world. *Tehom* is also described as a thick substance that lifts up water in biblical verses which describe the Exodus narrative.

*Tehom* is frequently described throughout rabbinic literature as a very deep place, but sometimes it is also described as located in the heavens. *Tehom* is described as integral to the water cycle, sometimes described as the water cycle itself, in sources found in Torah, Mishnah, Talmud, and Midrash. Many *meforshim* and rabbinic texts describe *tehom* as water. Several *meforshim* assert that God created everything out of nothing, yet some contemporary

scholars assert that something else like an alternative creation myth or *tehom* itself, existed before God spoke the world into being.

Even with these diverse and sometimes conflicting definitions of *tehom*, some primary themes emerged from analyzing *tehom* in a variety of contexts. One major theme is that *tehom* is a powerful, never-ending force of energy. In the narratives about David digging for foundations of the Temple as told in the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud, we read that when *tehom* is unleashed, it has the power to destroy the whole world. When God wants to flood the world in Genesis, *tehom* is unleashed and then the floodgates of heaven open. When God wants to stop the flood, *tehom* is closed and then the floodgates of heaven are closed. When the Israelites make their Exodus from Egypt, at God's command, *tehom* is unleashed and makes the water stand.

Biblical and rabbinic literature share definitions of *tehom* which demonstrate that humans have no control over what *tehom* does. Only God, the name of God, and angels of God, have control over *tehom*. Humanity's lack of control in relationship to *tehom*'s power and mystery, serves as a catalyst for deep thought. The presence of *tehom* provokes inquiry and sometimes transformation. It can provoke a transformation of theology, as Catherine Keller crafted a new theology centered on *tehom*. It can provoke an exploration into the unconscious that lays dormant yet present in our lives, as Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg suggests. It can provoke introspection and creative thought.

Since *tehom* is threaded into the foundations of the world, people from all backgrounds can find connection to it. Since *tehom* lacks definition, it is like field without fence. Its fertile ground is open to all. *Tehom*'s presence from the beginning of the world, its lack of definition, its endless power that humans cannot control or fully comprehend, and its

universalistic nature are qualities that are frequently attributed to God. Some of the descriptions of *tehom* that were offered by respondents in the online forum could have been descriptions of God. These similarities are interesting considering the questions raised over the ages about *tehom*'s relationship to creation *ex nihilo*. Some of the later *meforshim* and contemporary scholars discussed in this thesis attempted to address two questions: is *tehom* a powerful source that came into existence before God created the world and is *tehom*'s power and agency beyond the scope of God? If the answer to either of these questions is yes, does that mean there is more than one deity threaded into the Hebrew Bible?

Just as it seems to be impossible to give one definition of *tehom*, it seems to be impossible to give one answer to those big questions. However, the ideas from the sources in this thesis help us to think about these questions from a variety of perspectives. They help us make meaning out of the world that surrounds us and explore God's role in creation. It is our role now to make meaning out of this world. We are tasked with listening to the roar or murmur of *tehom*. At the same time, we are tasked with understanding how those who came before us interpreted the roar or murmur of *tehom*. The combination of listening to ourselves and to those who came before us will enable us to navigate *tehom* amid God's creation.

This thesis is a starting point for exploring many areas of the depths of *tehom*. Much can be done to demonstrate the practical applications for *tehom*. Its multiplicity of meanings can benefit clergy, religious professionals, lay leaders, and spiritual seekers as individuals and religious communities move through moments of transition. It can serve as an access point for uncovering the unseen realities that need to be placed in the forefront of individuals' personal lives and of communal life. There are many avenues to explore that can take the shape of curricula, sermons, and pastoral care guidebooks.

Another major area that was not explored in this thesis is *tehom* in Zohar. This thesis limited its scope to specific areas of rabbinic writing in Mishnah, Talmud, and Midrash. There is much yet to explore and uncover about *tehom* and about the creation narrative through the lens of kabbalistic literature. There are also several talmudic tractates, *midrashim*, and *mishnayot* that were not explored in this thesis which could illuminate deeper or alternate understandings of *tehom*.

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