

CHAPTER TWO

THE WORK OF CREATION AND THE FIRST GENERATIONS

The Creation of the World

- * 1. Quoting the verse "Inquire now concerning the days past" (Deut. 4:32),¹ the sages said: These words might be taken to imply that one is allowed to inquire concerning the entire pre-creation period which is "past." Hence Scripture goes on to allow inquiry only "since the day that God created man upon the earth" (ibid.). But these words might be taken to imply that one is also not allowed to inquire concerning the six days of creation [that preceded the making of man]; therefore Scripture extends the time when inquiry is allowed to "the [six] days past, which were [immediately] before thee" (ibid.). Since Scripture's extending the range of inquiry might be taken to imply that one is also allowed to inquire concerning what is above [the heavens] and what is below [the deep], what is before [the beginning of time] and what is after [its end], therefore, with the phrase "from one end of heaven unto the other" (ibid.), Scripture limits inquiry [to the finite span of time and space that the phrase suggests]. Accordingly, you are allowed to inquire concerning the things that are from one end of heaven to the other, but not concerning what is above [the heavens], what is below [the deep], what is before [the six days of creation], and what is after [the world's existence].²
- * 2. Why was the world created with the letter *bet*?³ Just as *bet* is closed on three sides and open only in front, so you are not permitted to investigate what is above [the heavens] and what is below [the deep], what is before [the six days of creation] and what is [to happen] after [the world's existence]—you are permitted only from the time the world was created and thereafter [the world we live in].⁴
3. "The wise man, his eyes are at the beginning" (Eccles. 2:14)—he is one who inquires from the world's beginning, from the six days of creation and thereafter [the world we live in]. "But the fool walketh in darkness" (ibid.)—he is one who puts aside the time of the world's existence and inquires only concerning the time prior, the time of darkness.⁵
4. "Now the earth was worthless and waste (*tohu va-vohu*)" (Gen. 1:2). R. Eleazar said in the name of Ben Sira: "Do not pry into things too hard for you or examine what is beyond your reach. Meditate on the commandments you have been given; what the Lord keeps secret is no concern

of yours" (Ecclesiasticus 3:21). One reason for such limiting of inquiry is suggested by the parable of a king who built a palace on a site of dunghills, sewers, and waste matter. Should a man come and say, "This palace was built on a site of sewers, dunghills, and waste matter," would one not be likely to value the palace less? So, too, should a man come and say, "This world was created upon that which 'was worthless and waste, *tohu va-vohu*'" (Gen. 1:2), does he not demean [God's creation? Hence] R. Huna stated in the name of Bar Kappara: Were not the account set down in Scripture, it would be impossible to say such a thing as "In the beginning God created" (Gen. 1:1). Created on what sort of site? On "the earth which was worthless and waste, *tohu va-vohu*" (Gen. 1:2).⁶

* 5. A pagan philosopher argued with Rabban Gamaliel: "Your God is indeed a great artist, but surely He found on hand suitable materials which were of help to him!" "What are they?" asked Rabban Gamaliel. The philosopher replied, "*Tohu, bohu*, darkness, water, wind, and the depths."⁷ Rabban Gamaliel exclaimed, "May the breath of a man such as you be blasted out! Since the term 'creation' is used by Scripture for all of them, [it is clear that God Himself brought them into being]. *Tohu* and *bohu*: 'I make peace [perfection] and create evil [lack of perfection]' (Isa. 45:7);⁸ darkness: 'I form the light, and create darkness' (ibid.); water: 'Praise Him, ye heavens of heavens, and ye waters' (Ps. 148:4). Why the water's praise? 'Because He commanded, and they were created' (Ps. 148:5); wind: 'For, lo, He that formeth the mountains and created the wind' (Amos 4:13); the depths: 'When there were no depths, I created them' " (Prov. 8:24).⁹

* 6. "God created" (Gen. 1:1). It happened that a heretic came to R. Akiva and asked "This world—who created it?" R. Akiva replied: "The Holy One, blessed be He." The heretic said, "Show me clear proof." R. Akiva replied, "Come back to me tomorrow." The next day, when the

¹ P. Hag 2:1, 47c; Gen. R. 1:5.

² The philosopher believed that God had indeed created the world, but in his question implied that He had used primeval matter, which was preexistent.

³ The philosopher construed "In the beginning God created heaven and earth" as a topical sentence that is followed by a detailed account of creation in which are mentioned *tohu*, *bohu*, darkness, etc., elements he presumed to be preexistent.

⁴ "By *tohu* and *bohu* the philosopher meant primeval matter without form. Thereupon Rabban Gamaliel quoted: "I made *shalom* (that which is whole, i.e., what contains both matter and form) and evil, i.e., that which is defective, consisting of matter only without form." Thus that too was created" (H. Husik). Perhaps, too, this is an allusion to the view that matter is a source of evil" (Gen. R. Soncino, p. 8, n. 5).

⁵ Gen. R. 1:9 (Soncino, p. 8, n. 1): "Since at one time there were no depths, God must have created them"; MhG Gen. 20.

heretic came, R. Akiva asked him, "What are you wearing?" The heretic replied, "A garment." R. Akiva asked, "Who made it?" The heretic: "A weaver." "I don't believe you," said R. Akiva; "show me clear proof." The heretic: "What can I show you? Don't you know that a weaver made it?" R. Akiva then asked; "And you, do you not know that the Holy One made His world?" After the heretic departed, R. Akiva's disciples asked him, "But what is the clear proof?" He replied, "My children, even as a house proclaims its builder, a garment its weaver, or a door its carpenter, so does the world proclaim the Holy One, blessed be He, that he created it."¹

7. R. Judah ben Pazzi expounded: At the beginning the world was nothing but water, as is said, "And the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters" (Gen. 1:2). Then He proceeded to make it into snow: "He tossed down hail like crumbs" (Ps. 147:17). Finally He made it into earth: "He said to the snow: 'Become earth' " (Job 37:6).²

8. R. Judah bar Simon said: "He revealed [to the prophets] deep and secret things" (Dan. 2:22) concerning the world's beginning. Thus Genesis merely says, "In the beginning God created the heaven" (Gen. 1:1), but does not explain how heaven was created. Who explains it? Isaiah: "He stretched out the heavens as a curtain, and spread them out as a tent to dwell in" (Isa. 40:22). Genesis says, "Created . . . the earth" (Gen. 1:1), but does not explain how it was created. Who explains it? Job: "He said to the snow: 'Become loose earth' " (Job 37:6), and presently "the loose earth stuck together" (Job 38:38). Genesis says, "God said: 'let there be light' " (Gen. 1:3), but does not explain how the light came into being. Who explains it? A psalm: "Thou didst cover Thyself with light as with a garment" (Ps. 104:2).³

9. Six things preceded the creation of the world. Some were actually created, and others came up only in God's thought as what was to be created. Torah and the throne of glory were created. The creation of the fathers, Israel, the Temple, and the name of the Messiah came up only in God's thought. R. Ahavah son of R. Ze'era said: So, too, repentance. And some say: Also the Garden of Eden and Gehenna.⁴

It is said in the name of R. Samuel son of R. Isaac that the thought of creating Israel preceded all else.⁵ Had not the Holy One foreseen that after twenty-six generations Israel would accept the Torah, He would not have written in the Torah: "Command the children of Israel" (Num. 5:2) or "Speak to the children of Israel" (Exod. 25:2).

R. Bannai said: The world and the fullness thereof were created only for the sake of Torah.⁶

¹ B. Tem 3.

² P. Hag 2:1, 77a.

³ Gen. R. 1:6.

⁴ The idea that all these came before the creation described in Genesis is based on Prov. 8:22, Ps. 93:2, Hos. 9:10, Ps. 74:2, Jer. 17:12, Ps. 72:17, Ps. 90:2-3, Gen. 2:8, and Isa. 30:33. See Gen. R. 1:4; TdE, ed. Friedmann, p. 160.

⁵ Including Torah.

⁶ So that its words may be studied and its precepts obeyed. Gen. R. 1:4.

10. R. Hoshia Rabbah began his discourse with the verse "Then I was by Him as a nursling (*amon*)" (Prov. 8:30). The word *amon* may be read *umman*, meaning "overall design"—I was in the mind of the Holy One, says the Torah, like the overall design in the mind of a craftsman. In the way of the world, when a king of flesh and blood builds a palace, he builds it not according to his own whim, but according to the idea of an architect. Moreover, the architect does not build it out of his own head; he has [a design]—plans and diagrams to know how to lay out the chambers and where to put in wicket doors. Even so the Holy One looked into the Torah as He created the world.⁷

11. R. Zutra bar Tobiah said in the name of Rav: The world was created by means of ten capacities and powers: By wisdom, by understanding,⁸ by reason,⁹ by strength,¹⁰ by rebuke,¹¹ by might,¹² by righteousness, by judgment, by loving-kindness, and by compassion.¹³

* 12. "The Lord God¹⁴ made earth and heaven" (Gen. 2:4). A parable of a king who had cups made of delicate glass. The king said: If I pour hot water into them, they will [expand and] burst; if cold water, they will contract [and break]. What did he do? He mixed hot and cold water, and poured it into them, and so they remained unbroken. Likewise, the Holy One said: If I create the world with the attribute of mercy alone, its sins will be too many; if with justice alone, how could the world be expected to endure? So I will create it with both justice and mercy, and may it endure!¹⁵

Heaven and Earth

13. The sages taught: The school of Shammai says, Heaven was created first and the earth was created afterward, for it is said, "In the beginning God created heaven and earth" (Gen. 1:1). But the school of Hillel says: The earth was created first and heaven afterward, for it is said, "In the day that the Lord God made earth and heaven" (Gen. 2:4). The school of Hillel said to the school of Shammai: According to you, a man should build the upper story of the house first and the lower story afterward, for in the verse "It is He that buildeth His upper chambers

⁷ Gen. R. 1:1.

⁸ The ability to understand what one learns.

⁹ Deductive power.

¹⁰ Physical strength.

¹¹ "In Job 26:11 it is implied that at first the pillars of heaven were weak and shaky, till God rebuked them, when, like a person taken aback by astonishment, they stiffened and hardened" (Israel Abrahams in Hag. Soncino, p. 65, n. 6).

¹² Moral power.

¹³ The aforementioned capacities and powers are taken to be intimated in Prov. 3:19-20, Ps. 65:7, Job 26:11, Ps. 89:15, and Ps. 25:6. B. Hag 12a.

¹⁴ In rabbinic conception, Adonai ("Lord") represents the attribute of mercy, while Elohim ("God") represents the attribute of justice. Both, according to Gen. 2:4, were brought together at the making of heaven and earth.

¹⁵ Gen. R. 12:15; Yalkut, *Bereshit*, §19.

in the heaven, and hath founded His [lower] vault upon the earth" (Amos 9:6), [the upper chambers are identified with heaven]. The school of Shammai replied to the school of Hillel: According to you, a man should first make a footstool and then make the throne,¹ for in the verse "The heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool" (Isa. 66:1) [the earth is identified as God's footstool]. But the sages say: Both were created at one and the same time, for it is said, "Yea, Mine hand hath laid the foundation of the earth, and My right hand hath spread out the heavens; when I called unto them, they stood up together" (Isa. 48:13).²

In the name of the sages, R. Yohanan said: In creation, heaven was first; in being brought to completion, earth was first. R. Tanhuma said, I will state the proof for this statement: the verse "God created heaven and earth" (Gen. 1:1) shows that heaven was first in creation; while the verse "In the day the Lord God completed making earth and heaven" (Gen. 2:4) shows that earth was first in being brought to completion.³

✠ 14. R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon observed: Why does Scripture at times put earth before heaven, and at other times heaven before earth? To teach that the two are of equal value.⁴

15. "From the beginning . . . [the inhabitants of] the earth [were such dissemblers that they] set one to wonder what their true nature (*tohu va-vohu*) was" (Gen. 1:2).⁵ And so R. Berekhiah began his discourse with the verse "Though his actions appear to be innocent and proper, even a child may in fact dissemble in his behavior" (Prov. 20:11).⁶ Accordingly, R. Berekhiah went on to say: At the very beginning, mankind was like a young fig tree which put forth thorns even before it bore fruit. Hence, in prophetic vision it was to be said, "I looked at [the inhabitants of] the earth, and they set one to wonder what their true nature was" (Jer. 4:23).⁷

Differing, R. Abbahu [construed the verse "The inhabitants of the earth were bewildered and confounded (*tohu va-vohu*)" (Gen. 1:2) and in explanation] told the parable of a king who bought two slaves, both on one bill of sale and at the same price. For one, he decreed that he be fed by the royal treasury; and for the other, that he must toil to eat. The latter sat bewildered and confounded (*toheh u-voheh*), and said: Both of us were acquired through one bill of sale and at the same price. Yet he is fed by the treasury, and I am fed only for my toil! Likewise, the earth sat bewildered and confounded (*tohah u-vohah*), say-

¹ "The size of the footstool cannot be determined till the throne has been made" (Israel Abrahams in Hag, Soncino, p. 66, n. 6).

² B. Hag 12a; Gen. R. 1:15.

³ Gen. R. 1:15.

⁴ Ibid. Accordingly, the difference in order has no bearing on the priority of either in creation.

⁵ JV: "Now the earth was unformed and void." But *tohu* ("unformed") may be derived from *thh* ("to wonder"); and *bohu* [*vohu*] ("void"), broken into the syllables *bo* [*vo*] ("within") and *hu* ("it"), may be taken to mean "what is in it."

⁶ NJV: "A child may be dissembling in his behavior even though his actions be innocent and proper."

⁷ JV: "I beheld the earth, and, lo, it was waste and void."

ing: The beings above and the beings below were created at the same time. Yet those above are nourished by the splendor of the Presence, while those below do not eat if they do not toil. I am perplexed!

R. Judah bar Simon told the parable of a king who bought two maidservants, both on one bill of sale and at the same price. For one, he decreed that she need never leave the palace; while for the other, he decreed banishment. The second one sat there bewildered and confounded (*tohah u-vohah*), and said: Both of us were acquired through the same bill of sale and at the same price. Yet she need never leave the palace, while for me the king has decreed banishment. I am perplexed! Likewise, the earth sat bewildered and confounded (*tohah u-vohah*), saying: The beings above and the beings below were created at the same time. Yet the beings above live on, while the beings below die. Hence Scripture: "The earth was bewildered and confounded (*tohu va-vohu*)" (Gen. 1:2).

R. Tanhuma told the parable of a prince who slept in a cradle while his nurse sat by anxious and troubled (*tohah u-vohah*). Why? Because she knew she was to receive her punishment through him. Likewise, the earth foresaw that she was to receive her punishment through Adam, as is said, "Cursed be the earth because of thee" (Gen. 3:17). Hence Scripture: "The earth was bewildered and confounded."⁸

16. "And God made the firmament" (Gen. 1:7). This is a verse whose apparent implication caused Ben Zoma to shake the world [of Jewish learning]. " 'And God made!'—an unbelievable utterance," he said. "Did not the firmament come into being by God's word—'by the word of the Lord were the heavens made, and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth' (Ps. 33:6)?"

17. Concerning the verse "And God said: 'Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters'" (Gen. 1:6), the sages observed: When the Holy One commanded, "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters," the middle layer solidified, and thus the separation between the lower heaven and the upper heaven of heavens came into being.⁹

"Let there be a firmament." But was not heaven already made on the first day? Rav explained: On the first day, heaven was in a form that was still fluid, but on the second day, it congealed. Hence, "Let there be a firmament" is to be understood as meaning: Let the firmament congeal, let it be covered by an overlay, let it be stretched out, let it become firm.¹¹

R. Hanina said: Fire descended from above and licked the top surface of the firmament. Hence, whenever R. Yohanan came to the verse "By His [fiery] breath heaven was smoothed"¹² (Job 26:13), he would say, "R. Hanina taught me well."¹³

⁸ Gen. R. 2:1-2.

⁹ "Made" would seem to imply almost blasphemously that God had to work at the "making" of the firmament. Gen. R. 4:6; Yalkut, *Beresheet*, §6.

¹⁰ Gen. R. 4:2.

¹¹ P. Ber 1:1, 2c; Gen. R. 4:2.

¹² JV: "was serene."

¹³ Gen. R. 4:2.

✠ 18. "And God called the firmament heaven (*shamayim*)" (Gen. 1:8). Rav said: *Shamayim* is a composite of *esh* ("fire") and *mayim* ("water"). The Holy One took fire and water, and worked them into each other; and out of the two, heaven was made.

Another comment: *Shamayim* is so called because men wonder (*mishtomemini*) at it, saying: Of what (*shel mah*) is it composed? Of fire? Of water? It is an enigma!¹

19. "All that has been generated in heaven and on earth is now in the form in which it was created" on the day the Lord God made earth and heaven" (Gen. 2:4), which implies, R. Nehemiah stated: On the very same day that heaven and earth were created, they brought forth at once the generations that have since issued from them. R. Judah objected: But is it not said, "And there was evening and there was morning, one day . . . a second day . . . a third day . . . a fourth day . . . a fifth day . . . a sixth day"?² R. Nehemiah replied: All that has been generated from heaven and earth corresponds to the experience of those who harvest figs³—each being [was created at the beginning but] became visible only at the time designated for it.

[In agreement with R. Nehemiah], R. Berekhiah said: The words "And the earth brought forth" (Gen. 1:12) imply that what was brought forth had already been deposited within it.⁵

20. A Caesar said to Rabban Gamaliel [of Yavneh]: He who created the mountains did not create the wind, for it is written, "There is He that formed the mountains and there is He that created the wind" (Amos 4:13).⁶ Rabban Gamaliel replied: If so, then in the account of the making of Adam, where Scripture says, "He created" (Gen. 1:27) and "He formed" (Gen. 2:7)—would you, in keeping with your reasoning, also say that He who created one part of Adam did not create any other part of him? Further, there is an area of the human body no more than a handbreadth square, which contains two openings,⁷ of which it is written, "He that planteth the ear, shall He not hear? He that formeth the eye, shall He not see?" (Ps. 94:9)⁸—would you maintain here, too, that He who created the one did not create the other? "Yes, even so," answered Caesar. "Yet," Rabban Gamaliel retorted, "Would you say that at

¹ Gen. R. 4:7.

² JV: "These are the generations of the heaven and of the earth when they were created."

³ Which would indicate that only heaven and earth were created on the first day, whereas what issued from them was created on subsequent days.

⁴ Figs on the tree assume their shape at about the same time but do not all ripen simultaneously. So, too, all that was to issue from heaven and earth had already been created on the first day; only their appearance was delayed to subsequent days.

⁵ Gen. R. 12:4.

⁶ JV: "He that formeth the mountains, and createth the wind." Caesar took these words to refer to two divine beings.

⁷ The face, which contains the eye and the ear.

⁸ "Two different expressions are used for the creation of the eye and ear respectively" (Jacob Shachter in Sanh, Soncino, p. 249).

a creature's death the creators of the eye and the ear agree to let their creature die?"⁹

The Light

✠ 21. "And God said: 'Let there be light'" (Gen. 1:3). R. Judah taught: The light was created first, and then [all that is in] the world.¹⁰ A parable of a king who wanted to build a palace, but the site was dark. What did he do? He lit lamps and lanterns to see where to lay the foundations. Hence, light had to be created first. But R. Nehemiah maintained: The world was created first; just as a king would first build a palace and then adorn it with lights and lanterns.¹¹

22. R. Simeon ben Jehozadak interrogated R. Samuel bar Nahman, saying: Since I hear that you are a master of *Aggadah*, tell me how light was created. R. Samuel bar Nahman replied: God wrapped Himself in a white garment, and the radiance of His majesty illuminated the world from one end to the other.¹²

✠ 23. "And God saw the light, that it was [for the] good, and God set it aside" (Gen. 1:4). R. Eleazar said: By the light that the Holy One created on the first day, one could see from one end of the world to the other. But as soon as the Holy One observed the generation of the flood and the generation of the dispersion of mankind,¹³ and saw that their conduct was to be depraved, He proceeded to secrete His light from them. And for whom did He secrete it? For the righteous in the time-to-come, just like a king who has a goodly treasure and sets it aside for his son. And where did He hide the light? In the Garden of Eden.¹⁴

24. "And God divided the light from the darkness" (Gen. 1:4). R. Berekhiah said: Two men of renown, R. Yohanan and R. Simeon ben Lakish, took the words "And . . . divided" to imply actual division of domains and illustrated this interpretation by a parable: A king had two chiefs of the guards who argued with each other. One said: I am to be in charge during the day. And the other said: No! I am to be in charge during the day. So the king summoned the first, saying to him: So-and-so, daytime is to be your domain; then he summoned the second: So-and-so, nighttime is to be your domain. Likewise, "for the light God summoned the day" (Gen. 1:5), saying, "Daytime is to be your domain"; "and for the darkness He

⁹ B. Sanh 39a. "The one who planted and the one who created, i.e., assuming that there were two creators of man, he could not completely die unless both agreed; otherwise, the creator of the eye might insist that the eye go on living, whilst the creator of the ear might wish it to die" (Jacob Shachter in Sanh, Soncino, p. 249).

¹⁰ According to R. Judah, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" (Gen. 1:1) is a general statement, followed by details which begin with the command "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3).

¹¹ Gen. R. 3:1; Exod. R. 34:2.

¹² Gen. R. 3:1; MTeh 104:4.

¹³ See Gen. 11:9.

¹⁴ B. Hag 12a; Gen. R. 3:6; Exod. R. 35:1.

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I

THE CREATION OF THE WORLD

THE FIRST THINGS CREATED

In the beginning, two thousand years before the heaven and the earth, seven things were created: the Torah written with black fire on white fire, and lying in the lap of God; the Divine Throne, erected in the heaven which later was over the heads of the Hayyot; Paradise on the right side of God, Hell on the left side; the Celestial Sanctuary directly in front of God, having a jewel on its altar graven with the Name of the Messiah, and a Voice that cries aloud, "Return, ye children of men."²

When God resolved upon the creation of the world, He took counsel with the Torah.³ Her advice was this: "O Lord, a king without an army and without courtiers and attendants hardly deserves the name of king, for none is nigh to express the homage due to him." The answer pleased God exceedingly. Thus did He teach all earthly kings, by His Divine example, to undertake naught without first consulting advisers.⁴

The advice of the Torah was given with some reservations. She was skeptical about the value of an earthly world, on account of the sinfulness of men, who would be sure to disregard her precepts. But God dispelled her doubts. He told her, that repentance had been created long before, and sinners would have the opportunity of mending

their ways. Besides, the Temple service would be invested with atoning power, and Paradise and hell were intended to do duty as reward and punishment. Finally, the Messiah was appointed to bring salvation, which would put an end to all sinfulness.⁴

Nor is this world inhabited by man the first of things earthly created by God. He made several worlds before ours, but He destroyed them all, because He was pleased with none until He created ours.⁵ But even this last world would have had no permanence, if God had executed His original plan of ruling it according to the principle of strict justice. It was only when He saw that justice by itself would undermine the world that He associated mercy with justice, and made them to rule jointly.⁶ Thus, from the beginning of all things prevailed Divine goodness, without which nothing could have continued to exist. If not for it, the myriads of evil spirits had soon put an end to the generations of men. But the goodness of God has ordained, that in every Nisan, at the time of the spring equinox, the seraphim shall approach the world of spirits, and intimidate them so that they fear to do harm to men. Again, if God in His goodness had not given protection to the weak, the tame animals would have been extirpated long ago by the wild animals. In Tammuz, at the time of the summer solstice, when the strength of behemot is at its height, he roars so loud that all the animals hear it, and for a whole year they are affrighted and timid, and their acts become less ferocious than their nature is. Again, in Tishri, at the time of the autumnal equinox, the great bird ziz⁷ flaps his wings and utters his cry, so that the birds of prey, the eagles

and the vultures, blench, and they fear to swoop down upon the others and annihilate them in their greed. And, again, were it not for the goodness of God, the vast number of big fish had quickly put an end to the little ones. But at the time of the winter solstice, in the month of Tebet, the sea grows restless, for then leviathan spouts up water, and the big fish become uneasy. They restrain their appetite, and the little ones escape their rapacity.

Finally, the goodness of God manifests itself in the preservation of His people Israel. It could not have survived the enmity of the Gentiles, if God had not appointed protectors for it, the archangels Michael and Gabriel.⁸ Whenever Israel disobeys God, and is accused of misdemeanors by the angels of the other nations, he is defended by his designated guardians, with such good result that the other angels conceive fear of them. Once the angels of the other nations are terrified, the nations themselves venture not to carry out their wicked designs against Israel.

That the goodness of God may rule on earth as in heaven, the Angels of Destruction are assigned a place at the far end of the heavens, from which they may never stir, while the Angels of Mercy encircle the Throne of God, at His behest.⁹

THE ALPHABET

When God was about to create the world by His word, the twenty-two letters of the alphabet¹⁰ descended from the terrible and august crown of God whereon they were engraved with a pen of flaming fire. They stood round about God, and one after the other spake and entreated, "Create

the world through me!" The first to step forward was the letter Taw. It said: "O Lord of the world! May it be Thy will to create Thy world through me, seeing that it is through me that Thou wilt give the Torah to Israel by the hand of Moses, as it is written, 'Moses commanded us the Torah.'" The Holy One, blessed be He, made reply, and said, "No!" Taw asked, "Why not?" and God answered: "Because in days to come I shall place thee as a sign of death upon the foreheads of men." As soon as Taw heard these words issue from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He, it retired from His presence disappointed.

The Shin then stepped forward, and pleaded: "O Lord of the world, create Thy world through me, seeing that Thine own name Shaddai begins with me." Unfortunately, it is also the first letter of Shaw, lie, and of Sheker, falsehood, and that incapacitated it. Resh had no better luck. It was pointed out that it was the initial letter of Ra', wicked, and Rasha', evil, and after that the distinction it enjoys of being the first letter in the Name of God, Rahum, the Merciful, counted for naught. The Kof was rejected, because Kelalah, curse, outweighs the advantage of being the first in Kadosh, the Holy One. In vain did Zaddé call attention to Zaddik, the Righteous One; there was Zarot, the misfortunes of Israel, to testify against it. Pe had Podeh, redeemer, to its credit, but Peshah, transgression, reflected dishonor upon it. 'Ain was declared unfit, because, though it begins 'Anawah, humility, it performs the same service for 'Erwah, immorality. Samek said: "O Lord, may it be Thy will to begin the creation with me, for Thou art called Samek, after me, the Upholder of all that fall." But God

said: "Thou art needed in the place in which thou art;" thou must continue to uphold all that fall." Nun introduces Ner, "the lamp of the Lord," which is "the spirit of men," but it also introduces Ner, "the lamp of the wicked," which will be put out by God. Mem starts Melek, king, one of the titles of God. As it is the first letter of Mehumah, confusion, as well, it had no chance of accomplishing its desire. The claim of Lamed bore its refutation within itself. It advanced the argument that it was the first letter of Luhot, the celestial tables for the Ten Commandments; it forgot that the tables were shivered in pieces by Moses. Kaf was sure of victory. Kisseh, the throne of God, Kabod, His honor, and Keter, His crown, all begin with it. God had to remind it that He would smite together His hands, Kaf, in despair over the misfortunes of Israel. Yod at first sight seemed the appropriate letter for the beginning of creation, on account of its association with Yah, God, if only Yezer ha-Ra', the evil inclination, had not happened to begin with it, too. Tet is identified with Tob, the good. However, the truly good is not in this world; it belongs to the world to come. Het is the first letter of Hanun, the Gracious One; but this advantage is offset by its place in the word for sin, Hatat. Zain suggests Zakor, remembrance, but it is itself the word for weapon, the doer of mischief. Waw and He compose the Ineffable Name of God; they are therefore too exalted to be pressed into the service of the mundane world. If Dalet had stood only for Dabar, the Divine Word, it would have been used, but it stands also for Din, justice, and under the rule of law without love the world would have fallen to ruin. Finally, in spite of reminding one of Gadol, great,

Gimel would not do, because Gemul, retribution, starts with it.

After the claims of all these letters had been disposed of, Bet stepped before the Holy One, blessed be He, and pleaded before Him: "O Lord of the world! May it be Thy will to create Thy world through me, seeing that all the dwellers in the world give praise daily unto Thee through me, as it is said, 'Blessed be the Lord forever. Amen, and Amen.'" The Holy One, blessed be He, at once granted the petition of Bet. He said, "Blessed be he that cometh in the name of the Lord." And He created His world through Bet, as it is said, "Bereshit God created the heaven and the earth."

The only letter that had refrained from urging its claims was the modest Alef, and God rewarded it later for its humility by giving it the first place in the Decalogue."

THE FIRST DAY

On the first day of creation God produced ten things: "the heavens and the earth, Tohu and Bohu, light and darkness, wind and water, the duration of the day" and the duration of the night."

Though the heavens and the earth consist of entirely different elements," they were yet created as a unit, "like the pot and its cover." "The heavens were fashioned from the light of God's garment, and the earth from the snow under the Divine Throne." Tohu is a green band which encompasses the whole world, and dispenses darkness, and Bohu consists of stones in the abyss, the producers of the waters. The light created at the very beginning is not the same as the light emitted by the sun, the moon, and the stars, which

appeared only on the fourth day. The light of the first day was of a sort that would have enabled man to see the world at a glance from one end to the other. Anticipating the wickedness of the sinful generations of the deluge and the Tower of Babel, who were unworthy to enjoy the blessing of such light, God concealed it, but in the world to come it will appear to the pious in all its pristine glory."

Several heavens were created," seven in fact," each to serve a purpose of its own. The first, the one visible to man, has no function except that of covering up the light during the night time; therefore it disappears every morning. The planets are fastened to the second of the heavens; in the third the manna is made for the pious in the hereafter; the fourth contains the celestial Jerusalem together with the Temple, in which Michael ministers as high priest, and offers the souls of the pious as sacrifices. In the fifth heaven, the angel hosts reside, and sing the praise of God, though only during the night, for by day it is the task of Israel on earth to give glory to God on high. The sixth heaven is an uncanny spot; there originate most of the trials and visitations ordained for the earth and its inhabitants. Snow lies heaped up there and hail; there are lofts full of noxious dew, magazines stocked with storms, and cellars holding reserves of smoke. Doors of fire separate these celestial chambers, which are under the supervision of the archangel Metatron. Their pernicious contents defiled the heavens until David's time. The pious king prayed God to purge His exalted dwelling of whatever was pregnant with evil; it was not becoming that such things should exist near the Merciful One. Only then they were removed to the earth.