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# Intro to the Jewish Bookshelf

Rabbi Avi Strausberg

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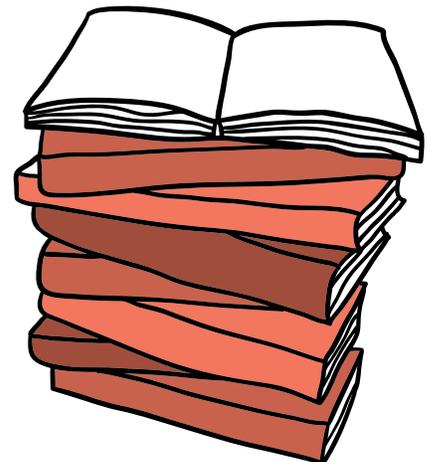
**UNIT 1** The Seventy Faces of Torah  
**SESSION 1** "In The Beginning"

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◆ **The Biblical Text**

**TaNakh** is an acronym that refers to the collection of books that includes the Torah (meaning the Five Books of Moses), *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (Writings). If you skim through a Tanakh, you'll find not only the entire Five Books of Moses but also the books of the prophets that contain prophetic exhortations and the Israelites' journeys in the Land of Israel, as well as the books referred to as Writings. According to the Talmud, a group of sages known as the Great Assembly compiled and codified the Tanakh in 450 BCE, although many scholars believe it wasn't actually codified until between the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE and the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE.

THE FOUNDATION OF EVERY JEWISH BOOKSHELF IS THE Torah. When people refer to the Torah, they might be referring to Torah at large, meaning any and all Jewish teachings or they might mean Torah as narrowly defined by the Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Torah is the basis for all later commentary, ranging from Rabbinic literature to halakhic code, and even modern Jewish poetry. The Five Books of Moses are also referred to as the *Humash*, as the word *hamesh* means "five" in Hebrew. There are many different *Humashim* (plural of *Humash*) that are worthwhile checking, and that may offer slightly different English translations and commentaries alongside the biblical text. ◆



## Questions from Rabbi Avi Strausberg

Read through all of the first chapter of Genesis to get a flow and context for this recounting of creation and ask yourselves:

1. *What do you find striking?*
2. *What words stand out?*
3. *What questions does it raise?*
4. *What is created on each day?*
5. *How does one day relate to the next?*

### SOURCE #1

#### בראשית א:א-לא

<sup>1</sup>בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת  
הָאָרֶץ: <sup>2</sup>וְהָאָרֶץ הִיְתָה תְהוֹ וּבְהוּ וְחֹשֶׁךְ  
עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־  
פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם:

<sup>3</sup>וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי־אֹר וַיְהִי־אֹר: <sup>4</sup>וַיִּרְא  
אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאֹר כִּי־טוֹב וַיַּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים  
בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ: <sup>5</sup>וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת  
הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יוֹם הַיְשׁוּבָה וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב  
וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם אֶחָד:

<sup>6</sup>וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי רָקִיעַ בְּתוֹךְ הַמַּיִם  
וַיְהִי מַבְדֵּיל בֵּין מַיִם לְמַיִם: <sup>7</sup>וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים  
אֶת־הַרְקִיעַ וַיַּבְדֵּל בֵּין הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר מִתַּחַת  
לְרָקִיעַ וּבֵין הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר מֵעַל לְרָקִיעַ וַיְהִי־  
כֵן: <sup>8</sup>וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לְרָקִיעַ שָׁמַיִם וַיְהִי־  
עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם שֵׁנִי:

<sup>9</sup>וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יִקְוּ הַמַּיִם מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם  
אֶל־מְקוֹם אֶחָד וְתִרְאֶה הַיַּבֵּשָׁה וַיְהִי־כֵן:

#### Genesis 1:1-31

<sup>1</sup>In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. <sup>2</sup>Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

<sup>3</sup>And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. <sup>4</sup>God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. <sup>5</sup>God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

<sup>6</sup>And God said, “Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water.” <sup>7</sup>So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it. And it was so. <sup>8</sup>God called the vault “sky.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.

<sup>9</sup>And God said, “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.” And

<sup>10</sup>וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַיַּבֵּשָׁה אֶרֶץ וְלַמְקוּוֹה  
הַמַּיִם קָרָא יַמִּים וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי־טוֹב:

<sup>11</sup>וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים תְּדַשָּׂא הָאָרֶץ דָּשָׂא  
עֵשֶׂב מִזְרִיעַ זֶרַע עֵץ פְּרִי עֵשֶׂה פְּרִי  
לְמִינֵהוּ אֲשֶׁר זָרְעוּ־בּוֹ עַל־הָאָרֶץ וַיְהִי־כֵן:  
<sup>12</sup>וַתּוּצֵא הָאָרֶץ דָּשָׂא עֵשֶׂב מִזְרִיעַ זֶרַע  
לְמִינֵיהוּ וְעֵץ עֵשֶׂה־פְּרִי אֲשֶׁר זָרְעוּ־בּוֹ  
לְמִינֵיהוּ וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי־טוֹב: <sup>13</sup>וַיְהִי־  
עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם שְׁלִישִׁי:

<sup>14</sup>וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי מְאֹרֹת בְּרָקִיעַ  
הַשָּׁמַיִם לְהַבְדִּיל בֵּין הַיּוֹם וּבֵין הַלַּיְלָה  
וְהָיוּ לְאֹתוֹת וּלְמוֹעֲדִים וּלְיָמִים וּשְׁנָיִם:  
<sup>15</sup>וְהָיוּ לְמְאֹרֹת בְּרָקִיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִם לְהָאִיר  
עַל־הָאָרֶץ וַיְהִי־כֵן: <sup>16</sup>וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים  
אֶת־שְׁנֵי הַמְּאֹרֹת הַגְּדֹלִים אֶת־הַמְּאֹר  
הַגָּדֹל לְמַשְׁלַת הַיּוֹם וְאֶת־הַמְּאֹר הַקָּטָן  
לְמַשְׁלַת הַלַּיְלָה וְאֵת הַכּוֹכָבִים: <sup>17</sup>וַיִּתֵּן  
אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים בְּרָקִיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִם לְהָאִיר עַל־  
הָאָרֶץ: <sup>18</sup>וְלַמְשָׁל בַּיּוֹם וּבַלַּיְלָה וּלְהַבְדִּיל  
בֵּין הָאֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי־  
טוֹב: <sup>19</sup>וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם רְבִיעִי:

<sup>20</sup>וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יִשְׂרָצוּ הַמַּיִם שָׂרָץ  
נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה וְעוֹף יְעוֹפֵף עַל־הָאָרֶץ עַל־פְּנֵי

it was so. <sup>10</sup>God called the dry ground “land,” and the gathered water God called “seas.” And God saw that it was good.

<sup>11</sup>Then God said, “Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds.” And it was so. <sup>12</sup>The land produced vegetation: plants bearing seed according to their kinds and trees bearing fruit with seed in it according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. <sup>13</sup>And there was evening, and there was morning—the third day.

<sup>14</sup>And God said, “Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years, <sup>15</sup>and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth.” And it was so. <sup>16</sup>God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. <sup>17</sup>God set them in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth, <sup>18</sup>to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. <sup>19</sup>And there was evening, and there was morning—the fourth day.

<sup>20</sup>And God said, “Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the

רָקִיעַ הַשָּׁמַיִם: <sup>21</sup>וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים  
אֶת־הַתַּיִמִּים הַגְּדֹלִים וְאֶת־כָּל־  
נֶפֶשׁ הַחַיָּה | הַרְמֵשׂוֹת אֲשֶׁר שָׁרְצוּ  
הַמַּיִם לְמִינֵיהֶם וְאֶת־כָּל־עוֹף כָּנָף  
לְמִינֵהוּ וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי־טוֹב:  
<sup>22</sup>וַיִּבְרָךְ אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים לֵאמֹר פְּרוּ  
וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת־הַמַּיִם בַּיַּמִּים  
וְהָעוֹף יִרְבַּ בָּאָרֶץ: <sup>23</sup>וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב  
וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר יוֹם חַמִּישִׁי:

<sup>24</sup>וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים תּוֹצֵא הָאָרֶץ נֶפֶשׁ  
חַיָּה לְמִינָהּ בְּהֵמָה וְרֶמֶשׂ וְחַיִּתוֹ־  
אָרֶץ לְמִינָהּ וַיְהִי־כֵן: <sup>25</sup>וַיַּעַשׂ  
אֱלֹהִים אֶת־חַיֵּי הָאָרֶץ לְמִינָהּ  
וְאֶת־הַבְּהֵמָה לְמִינָהּ וְאֶת־כָּל־רֶמֶשׂ  
הָאֲדָמָה לְמִינֵהוּ וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים כִּי־  
טוֹב:

<sup>26</sup>וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֵׂה אָדָם  
בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ וַיְרִדוּ בְדִגְתַּי הַיָּם  
וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל־  
הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל־הָרֶמֶשׂ הָרֹמֵשׂ עַל־  
הָאָרֶץ:

<sup>27</sup>וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים | אֶת־הָאָדָם  
בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצַלְמֵ אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אוֹתוֹ  
זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם: <sup>28</sup>וַיִּבְרָךְ  
אֹתָם אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים

vault of the sky.”<sup>21</sup> So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living thing with which the water teems and that moves about in it, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good.<sup>22</sup> God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth.”<sup>23</sup> And there was evening, and there was morning—the fifth day.

<sup>24</sup> And God said, “Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind.” And it was so.<sup>25</sup> God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

<sup>26</sup> Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

<sup>27</sup> So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.<sup>28</sup> God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and

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פָּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֹאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וּכְבֹּשְׁהָ  
וּרְדוּ בְּדִגַּת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם  
וּבְכָל־חַיָּה הָרֹמֶשֶׂת עַל־הָאָרֶץ:  
<sup>29</sup>וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים הִנֵּה נֹתְתִי לְכֶם אֶת־  
כָּל־עֵשֶׂב | זֶרַע זָרַע אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי  
כָּל־הָאָרֶץ וְאֶת־כָּל־הָעֵץ אֲשֶׁר־בוֹ  
פְּרִי־עֵץ זֶרַע זָרַע לְכֶם יִהְיֶה לְאֹכְלָה:  
<sup>30</sup>וּלְכָל־חַיַּת הָאָרֶץ וּלְכָל־עוֹף  
הַשָּׁמַיִם וּלְכָל | רוֹמֵשׁ עַל־הָאָרֶץ  
אֲשֶׁר־בוֹ נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה אֶת־כָּל־יֵרֶק עֵשֶׂב  
לְאֹכְלָה וַיְהִי־כֵן:

<sup>31</sup>וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה  
וַהֲנִיחַ טוֹב מְאֹד וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר  
יוֹם הַשִּׁשִּׁי:

subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”<sup>29</sup>Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.<sup>30</sup>And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so.

<sup>31</sup>God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

### Questions from Rabbi Avi Strausberg

1. Now, go back and closely read verses 1-5.

*What’s confusing about these verses? What questions do you have that are unanswered?*

2. Draw a picture in your mind of what the world looked like before God began creating. Describe this picture to your havruta.
  - a. Was there a world? What was it like?
  - b. Then, what happened?
  - c. When does light enter the picture? Darkness? Water? Are these things pre-existing or does God bring them into the world through creation?
  - d. Are your answers similar, or very different?

Take a look at the following two texts drawn from a great project called ‘929’ that provides modern commentary and interpretations on all of Tanakh from great teachers, thinkers, and writers. The project invites you to join with students all around the world learning a daily chapter of Tanakh, according to a set schedule, until they complete all ‘929’ chapters of Tanakh. ◇

## SOURCE #2

### **Etgar Keret, from '929—Bible Together'**

I remember the first time I read from the Bible. I was six years old and after I read the first verse I stopped. I had a strong impulse, not to read the next verse but rather, to understand what it was there in front of me. Before the first verse, in verse zero, before the heavens and the earth, before it all began, before that scary word “B’reishit—In the beginning”. Because I knew, even then, that everything in the world had something that existed before it, that influenced it, that caused it to change, and suddenly here is this word, used like a ‘No Entry’ sign preventing me from asking what existed there before it. As a son to Holocaust survivors I was well acquainted with this sign, that place that declares itself the beginning so as not to be obligated to expose the horrors that occurred previously.

I felt that the Bible too was concealing some secret, some primeval trauma. Something that happened before its first written word. The thought scared me as I had no knowledge of this terrible thing that couldn’t even be expressed in words, but it also filled me with hope because it revealed that a certain point in time, whenever things become too terrible, anyone can just decide “that’s enough”. Anyone may stop and start from the beginning, create his world anew. Anyone, even God.

## SOURCE #3

### **Rabbi Ilay Ofran, from '929—Bible Together'**

The first three words in the Torah have no meaning in Hebrew. The first three words in the Bible, in the definitive text of the Jewish People, of the Jewish religion, of Jewish culture over the generations and maybe of all of humanity, are words that no-one has ever understood.

“*B’reishit*—In the beginning”—we cannot understand or define the concept of time but merely how to measure it. Human consciousness is incapable of comprehending the infinite, and therefore when we hear the word “*B’reishit*”, we always ask “And what existed before that?” And we cannot understand a beginning that has no end before it.

“God”—easy and simple: if humankind succeeded in understanding it, it cannot be God.

“Created”—humans are incapable of creating anything, they are limited by the law of Conservation of Mass. We know how to assemble materials, to dismantle them, to change their physical state and even use them to make complex tools, but we are unable to “create” anything. We can make things from other

pre-existing things but never out of nothing. Our feeble intellect has difficulty in understanding how it is possible to create an object from material that didn't exist.

So the Torah begins with three words that humans, by definition, nature and essence cannot understand.

Maybe this is in order to teach us a touch of humility while reading this book. Maybe in order to encourage us to investigate and seek and make an effort. Maybe to accord a measure of awe and fear of ecstasy to our study.

But for those who, despite all this, successfully traverse these three words—the continuation is usually a little less complex.

### **Questions from Rabbi Avi Strausberg**

These two writers offer very different and very compelling responses to the first three words of the Torah.

1. *What's your response to reading the first three words of the Torah? What do they make you think of? What do you think of the responses of Etgar Keret and Eli Ofran?*
2. *Have you ever read any parts of the Torah before? If yes, in what context? What do you remember from those times? If this is your first time, was there anything surprising?*
3. *Does the story of the creation of the world feel important to you? Why or why not? What makes Torah a compelling (or not compelling) place to learn about creations?*