

## CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

**Learn with Rabbi Abrams! If you like the website, you'll love learning with Rabbi Abrams in person even more! She can come to your synagogue or group as a scholar-in-residence or you can learn with her long distance via phone or skype. You can also have her teach single lectures to your group. Click [here](#) for a list of just a few of the talks available.**

Posted February 23, 2012, by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

**BH**

### **IN A BEGINNING ... UNDERSTANDING THE FIRST FEW STORIES OF THE TORAH**

**© Judith Z. Abrams**

I thought we'd do a bit of "living midrash" this time. Somehow, people seem to think that the first word of the Bible means, "In the beginning." Trust me, it doesn't. It absolutely, positively means, "In a beginning." When you read the word as it's written, all of a sudden the first few chapters of Genesis begin to make much more sense.

We have the following:

1. The nice, orderly story of creation (Genesis 1:1-2:3). We have three days of making containers (heavens, earth, water) and then three days of filling the containers (birds, animals, fish) and a day of rest. Men and women are created equally in this version of creation.
2. Next, we have the far more dramatic story in which we have the garden, the tree, the snake and a woman made from Adam's bone (Genesis 2:4-3-24). It's a story of loneliness: Adam and Eve end up outside of the garden, with angels preventing their return.
3. Next, we have the Wisdom Literature's version of creation (Genesis 4:1-26). How do we know it's Wisdom Literature's story? The name of one of the characters gives us the clue. It's usually translated "Abel" but it's really "Hevel." Hevel ("vanity" or "futility") is one of Wisdom Literature's most important words. In fact, the book of Ecclesiastes begins with it. "Vanity of vanities, said Kohelet, all is vanity," In Hebrew it's "Havel havalim amar Kohelet, havel havalim hakol havel (Ecclesiastes 1:2)." Do you really think a mother would name her son Futility? Really. And, of course, this creation story ends with the world's first murder.
4. The Genealogist/Census Taker is the next entry in the "creation stakes". This "story" (Genesis 5:1-32) tells us who lived and for how long.
5. We have the "Armageddon/Creation" story next: the story of Noah and the flood (Genesis 6:1-10:28). This story is actually the interweaving of two versions of the same story. For example, one version has the animals coming in two-by-two and another has 7 pairs of pure animals coming into the ark.
6. The Genealogist now pops back in (Genesis 10:1-32).
7. The Tower of Babel story comes next (Genesis 11:1-9). Some (and I'm one of them) sees this as a send-up of the Babylonian ziggurats.

8. The Genealogist comes back in (Genesis 11:10-32).

So, we have 8 creation stories (6 if you count all the genealogists as one voice) all right there at the beginning of the Bible, not one of which is given more weight than any of the others. Given all this, the first word **MUST** mean in A beginning. There is no **THE** beginning because there are many, many different ways to understand our origins.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. The next time someone tries to tell you that "the" story in creation should be taken literally, please help him/her actually read the biblical text. If they would do this, they would understand that there is no one-way to understand the creation of our world. Those who composed the Torah understood that there's no way to reduce it down one nice, neat package. It's a big, sprawling, living, complicated phenomenon. The question is: how can we (or can we) help people understand that literalism has never been the name of the game when it comes to understanding Scripture? Do you have any success when you do this? If so, how did you do it?
2. Why do people tend to want there to be **THE** beginning? Is it just because that's the way the King James Translation phrases it that way? What benefit can be derived from this misreading?
3. Obviously, this is a great simplification of the first 11 chapters of the Bible. They are actually far more nuanced than this. They're something like a well-cut diamond. The more you look at it, the more aspects of it you see.

Let's at least help people get that one word, b'reishit, right. That might be a good beginning for interfaith/intrafaith relations.

[NOTE: Maqom is now a discussion group, [Maqom613](http://groups.google.com/group/maqom613), at Google groups. To leave a comment on the above passage, go to <http://groups.google.com/group/maqom613> and join the group. Also, you will need a gmail account to log in, so if you don't have one, then first go <https://mail.google.com/> to set up your email account.]