

Frank Kurtz's drash for the Torah portion, Bereshit Shabbat, Oct. 2, 2021

Bereshit – in the beginning – is the Torah's version of primordial soup. It contains myths, legends, speculations and a sprinkling of philosophy to explain why and how the world and everything in it were created. Creation is portrayed both as an act of intention by the Divine as well as a process that had a start but no definitive conclusion. It is a 5,000-year old exercise to describe the indescribable and explain the inexplicable. It leaves us, as it must have left countless generations before, thoroughly baffled and perplexed in the face of questions that have no answers, even to those who might be inclined to accept the myths and legends as real. If G-d is the instigator and architect of creation, what was G-d before, or was G-d created along with everything else? If each stage of creation was good, or in our case very good, what would be the moral state of non-creation? Could we only be here because our existence is very good and our absence would be the opposite?

The underlying issue in any discussion of biblical creation is whether one believes that only G-d could have made it happen. The non-theistic approach in our current time affords us the equivalent story told within the framework of astrophysics, geology and biology. The point of origin, tested and validated by scientific methods that I cannot begin to fathom, is the theory of the Big Bang. The Big Bang was the start of everything in the universe. There is no time before the Big Bang. There is no space outside of the Big Bang. The outcome of the Big Bang is the transfer of energy into matter and vice versa, giving rise to what we are able to perceive or infer as the nature of existence. There is no evidence as to why the Big Bang happened, only that it did happen, and we are here as a result of it.

I am fond of two equivalencies between Bereshit and the Big Bang. First, the Torah describes the state of things before creation as *tohu v'bohu*, formless and void. This is a pretty good approximation of the concept that the Big Bang was the creation of time and space. There is no order of the universe without time and space, from which all energy and matter are established. Second, I also like that on the first day of creation G-d decreed that there should be light. Light is the basis for all measurable things. The equation describing relativity describes the connection between energy and mass quantitatively as the square of the speed of light, a number which is impossibly large but nevertheless constant, finite and measurable. The use of space-based telescopes has allowed us to see distant galaxies where light has traveled for billions of years, which means that we can look farther back in time closer to the instant of the Big Bang itself.

When G-d rested on the seventh day of creation, G-d declared it holy and afforded us the opportunity to recall the act of creation itself *זכרון למעשה בראשית*. Since we rest and recite this phrase every week, we can surmise that creation is still going on within our own limited horizons, and reciting the bracha as part of every Shabbat is like looking through the telescope at those ancient galaxies.

We, the frail and temporary creatures whose existence derives from creation, can, if prodded, conceive of limitless time and space, but it is easier to see our own timespan and physical presence as all that matters. It is a human conceit to opine that only what we perceive is real, and outside of that everything is irrelevant. In each generation someone will come along with the prediction that the world will end soon. Fervent followers will divest themselves of all possessions and wait with great faith that the end is nigh, only to be disappointed that the world goes on despite the prophecy. We cannot decree the end of time and space, and in fact we are infinitesimally small particles in all of it. Why do we matter? Because we are part of the chain of experience from one generation to another, and we have the potential to accomplish deeds that are experienced for the better. Those we leave behind will grapple with problems and potential that we cannot imagine, and yet we can encourage them to live with the same possibilities that were our inheritance.

The instant of creation, as described by Bereshit and by the Big Bang, posits a singularity, a unified origin in which all things had their start as oneness. Each of us ultimately derives from this singularity. The atoms that make our bodies and the energy that courses through our hearts and minds have always existed. All things grow and change and eventually wither and decay, only to be created again as part of the same process. Everything in creation originated in singularity, even G-d, if you are so inclined. We declare that G-d is One, even if we may think G-d and not-G-d, but our declaration transcends our own limitations. The importance of Torah is to establish the moral foundations of our lives, our legacy, and our place in the world. But first it wants us to think about how our own consciousness can be traced to a very good and single origin of everything.