

Parshat Yitro
Matan Torah: A New Creation Narrative
Talia Weisberg - Class of 2024

In Parshat Yitro we read about the experience of Bnei Yisrael as they received the Torah, a transformative event that made a ragtag group of former slaves into a united nation of free people. The pesukim describe Ma'amad Har Sinai as an awesome and also overwhelming moment, replete with thunder, blasts of the shofar, a trembling mountain, and Hashem's voice itself. Shemot Rabbah 29:9 understands this auditory experience to be highly localized, however:

Rabbi Abahu said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: When the Holy One Blessed Be He gave the Torah, no bird chirped, no fowl flew, no bull lowed, the angels did not fly, the heavenly serafim did not say their litany of "holy, holy," the sea did not roll, none of the creations spoke; rather, the world was silent, and the voice went out: "I am the Lord Your God," and so he [Moshe] said (Deut. 5:19): "The LORD spoke those words—those and no more—to your whole congregation," a great voice, with nothing additional... The whole world was silent, and the upper and lower worlds were quiet, and the world was unformed and void as if there were not a creation in the world... (Translation mine)

אמר רבי אבהו בשם רבי יוחנן, כשנתן הקדוש ברוך הוא את התורה, צפור לא צוח, עוף לא פרח, שור לא געה, אופנים לא עפו, שרפים לא אמרו קדוש קדוש, הים לא נדעצע, הבריות לא דברו, אלא העולם שותק ומחריש, ויצא הקול: אנכי יקוק אלקיך, וכן הוא אומר (דברים ה, יט): את הדברים האלה דבר יקוק אל כל קהלכם קול גדול ולא יסף... הדמים כל העולם והשתיק העליונים והתחתונים, והיה העולם תהו ובהו ואלו לא היה בריה בעולם...

Although Bnei Yisrael experienced a sheer amount of noise, the rest of the world went completely quiet when the Torah was given. Time functionally stood still, with Matan Torah as the only event occurring on either the heavenly or earthly plane. The Midrash describes the state of the world during this time as "tohu vavohu," which is often translated as "chaos" or "void." This phrase is only used one time in the Torah, to describe the world before Creation: "When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep" (Gen 1:1-2).

Shemot Rabbah succeeds the Talmud by hundreds of years; perhaps its author was inspired by the connection in Shabbat 88a between tohu vavohu and Matan Torah:

Reish Lakish said: What is the meaning of that which is written: "And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day" (Genesis 1:31)? Why do I require the superfluous letter heh, the definite article, which does not appear on any of the other days? It teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, established a condition with the act of Creation, and said to them: If Israel accepts the Torah on the sixth day of Sivan, you will exist; and if they do not accept it, I will return you to the primordial state of chaos and disorder. (Koren translation via Sefaria)

דאמר ריש לקיש, מאי דכתיב: "ויהי ערב ויהי בקר יום הששי", ה' יתירה למה לי? — מלמד שהתנה הקדוש ברוך הוא עם מעשה בראשית ואמר להם: אם ישראל מקבלים התורה — אתם מתקיימין, ואם לאו — אני מחזיר אתכם לתהו ובהו



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These ideas from Shemot Rabbah and Masechet Shabbat teach us that Matan Torah was not only the moment in which the Jews became a nation, but it was also the beginning of an entirely new world. Similarly to the way that Hashem took the world from a state of *tohu vavohu* to creation at Bereishit, He brought the universe back to *tohu vavohu* during Ma'amad Har Sinai in order to establish it once more - but this time, with Torah as its core.

Although the Talmud elsewhere discusses the idea that the Avot and Imahot kept the Torah in some capacity, this moment was the first time that the Jewish people as a cohesive unit accepted the entirety of Torah upon themselves and endeavored to observe its dictates in an organized way. Matan Torah ushered in a new era of being, a world unlike the one that had existed beforehand. In his seminal work *The Sacred and the Profane*, religious theorist Mircea Eliade understands the idea of “chaos” - the primordial state of being that we call *tohu vavohu* in Hebrew - as the absence of religious organization. When Bnei Yisrael accepted the Torah, they created an opening for Hashem to radically reorganize the world, giving us access to spiritual heights that had been previously unattainable.

There are times when it can feel like we are still in a state of *tohu vavohu*, a world of chaos and disorder. We know this is not the case, however; Hashem dispelled the *tohu vavohu* with Torah, establishing it as the foundation of our world. The Torah is our blueprint and life map, there to direct us through the darkest of days. As we forge on and make our way through complicated and confusing times, we bring with us the knowledge that no matter what happens, the Torah will always be there to guide us.



Talia Weisberg is originally from New York, NY. She previously served as the Director of Academic Affairs at the Consulate General of Israel to New England, where she designed and executed strategic initiatives to promote understanding and knowledge of Israel among university students, faculty, and administrations. She earned her Bachelor of Arts at Harvard University in the Comparative Study of Religion with a secondary field in Women, Gender, and Sexuality. Her senior honors thesis explored the Bais Yaakov girls' school movement, of which she is an alumna, and its role in the evolution of Orthodox women's formal religious education. As an undergraduate, Talia held several leadership roles within Harvard Hillel and campus feminist groups. She currently serves as the Ritual Chair on the board of the Orthodox

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