

The History of Creation Ex-nihilo Within Jewish Thought

By Rabbi Rafael Salber

The recounting of the creation of the world is arguably the most famous story of the bible known to both young and old alike. It even lays claim to being one of the rare instances which all major world religions actually agree upon. God created the world in six days and on the seventh he rested; this has become engrained even in the life of one who has no religious affiliation in the form of the work week and the weekend. Whether that day of rest which celebrates the creation and the subsequent cessation of creation falls on a Sunday or on a Saturday, both attest to an identical claim that the world was created by a creator.

The theory of the creation of the world holds within it ideas which are fundamental to a life which is based on purpose and meaning, in particular a religious life. A world which was created out of chance or without direction contradicts the basic tenet of all religious philosophy which is that there is a system of divine ethics and laws governing our world that obligates individual and collective responsibility to fulfill those requirements. Attaining spiritual fulfillment is also dependant on a world which is invested with

The History of Creation Ex- nihilo Within Jewish Thought

purpose and direction. The direct implication is that there was a reason for the world being created.

Although there are many theories discussing how the world came into being, they can be simply classified into two; *creation ex- hylis* and *creation ex- nihilo*, from pre-existent matter or out of nothingness. The former theory has been attributed to the philosophers, in particular the Greek philosophers⁹¹, whereas the latter has been attributed to the promoters of the religious faith, including Christianity and Islam. One also can clearly see the emergence creation ex nihilo within medieval Jewish sources⁹². Maimonides divides these opinions into three basic groups (although the opinions of Plato and Aristotle are two divisions of one camp); Moses and the opinion of the Torah, Plato and Aristotle. Plato, according to Maimonides, does believe in a creation of sorts, although it is not from nothing. Rather there is a basic prime matter which is eternal; however it does not share the same status as God. Rather it has a relationship as pottery does to a potter. There is creation in as much as there is a transience of forms from one to the other and the possibility exists that that form will cease to exist as well. The opinion of Aristotle and his followers is that there is never a creation or destruction of forms, rather there is a basic indestructible substratum of forms which always has been and always will be. The nature of this paper is to trace the history of creation ex nihilo within Jewish thought until the medieval period, to attempt to discover what the doctrine of creation is within Judaism and to explore whether the alternative approach is reconcilable to religious belief and practice.

The natural course of direction for attempting to trace the history of creation within Jewish sources would be to go to the source of it all,

91 See section entitled Moses Maimonides or Moses Maimonides, *The Guide*, section 2 chapter 13, where a brief introduction is given by Maimonides on the opinions of Plato and Aristotle.

92 Beginning with Saadiah Gaon and continuing throughout the period of the Rishonim.

the written Torah. Whilst this would theoretically satisfy the heart of the purist, in reality it cannot suffice intellectually since we are limited by the scarcity of early interpreters. In this reality even the history of its interpretation is not available to us. There is a gaping hole in the philosophic works of the Jewish scholars prior (and in contrast) to the Rishonim, with almost nothing available within Gaonic literature, except that of Saadiah Gaon who was one of the last of that era. Prior to the Gaonic period, we are left with midrashic literature (which seems to have been redacted as late as the fifth century) which presents a further obstacle in its own right. Once again, theoretically this should provide a solid, reliable source in the interpretation of the account of creation and indeed it does provide the bulk of information on this topic, however it is by its very nature *midrash*, homiletical interpretation which strays away from literal interpretation. The method through which one can understand midrashic literature is an entire study in itself, however what becomes extremely apparent is that discerning between the intention of the statements and its often explicit wording is ambiguous and is therefore difficult to garner an authoritative interpretation free from dispute.

Midrash Rabbah: Torah is the blueprint of the world

At the opening of Genesis Rabbah, the midrash recounts that the Holy One blessed be He “looked into the Torah and created the world”. The analogy is made between a craftsman who does not build a building off the top of his head, rather it is created based on plans and blueprints, so too God when creating the world used a blueprint, and that was the Torah.

Another interpretation: *amon* is a workman (uman). The Torah declares: “I was the working tool of the Holy One blessed be He.” In human practice, when a mortal king builds a palace, he builds it not with his own skill, but with the skill of an architect. The architect moreover does not build it out of his head, but employs plans and diagrams to

The History of Creation Ex- nihilo Within Jewish Thought

know how to arrange the chambers and the wicket doors. Thus God consulted the Torah and created the world, while the Torah declares, “*In the beginning God created*” (Genesis 1: 1), *the beginning* referring to the Torah, as in the verse, “*The Lord made me as the beginning of His way*” (Proverbs 8: 22).⁹³

Whilst one may infer from this statement that the Torah existed prior to the creation of the world, as it was in fact the very plan of creation, one can also assert that this is not referring to a temporal description of the creation. Perhaps an alternate interpretation is that the midrash is intending to teach the reader the purpose for the creation of the world and the impetus for the creation, namely the will of God, and that is what Torah over here is intended to represent. However there are those who have suggested⁹⁴ that this is a copy of the Plato’s Timaeus, “The artificer looked for a pattern to that which is eternal”⁹⁵, prompting speculation as to whether the world was created out of primordial matter or out of nothing. Maimonides also seemed to be bothered by the expression *looked into* or *contemplated*, which is mentioned in this midrash, as he claims that “Plato uses this very expression when he states that God contemplates the world of ideas and thus produces the existing beings.”⁹⁶

Six things preceded the creation of the world

The midrash relates that six things preceded the creation of the world, however of those six things, only two were created and the other four were intended to be created (but were not). Those that

93 *Midrash Rabbah*, translated into English with notes, glossary and indices under the editorship of H. Freedman and Maurice Simon ; with a foreword by I. Epstein (Soncino Press, London, 1939), 1: 1

94 Altmann, Alexander, *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism* (Routledge and K. Paul, London, 1969), p. 128

95 Timaeus 29a

96 Moses Maimonides, *The Guide* 2: 6, also see Efraim Elimelech Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* / translated from the Hebrew by Isarel Abrahams (Harvard University Press, London, 1987), p. 191, footnote 69

were actually created were the Torah and the Throne of Glory. Those that were not actually created were the forefathers, (Nation of) Israel, the holy temple, and the name of the messiah. There is also an opinion which includes repentance in the last list.

Six things preceded the creation of the world; some of them were actually created, while the creation of the others was already contemplated. The Torah and the Throne of Glory were created. The Torah for it is written, “*The Lord made me as the beginning of His way, prior to his works of old*” (Proverbs 8: 22). The Throne of Glory as it is written, “*Thy throne is established of old, etc*” (Psalms 93: 2). The creation of the Patriarchs was contemplated as it is written, “*I saw your fathers as the first-ripe in the fig tree at her first season*” (Hosiah 9: 10). [The creation of] Israel was contemplated as it is written, “*Remember thy congregation which thou hast gotten aforetime*” (Psalms 74: 2). [The creation of] the Temple was contemplated, for it is written, “*Thou throne of glory, on high from the beginning, the place of our sanctuary*” (Jeremiah 17: 12). The name of the Messiah was contemplated for it is written; “*His name existeth ere the sun*” (Psalms 72: 17). Rabbi Ahavah ben Rabbi Ze’ira said: Repentance too as it is written “*before the mountains were brought forth etc and from that very moment, thou turnest man to contrition and sayest: Repent ye children of men*” (Psalms 90: 2).⁹⁷

A very similar version is also found in *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer*, however there a seventh creation is added:

⁹⁷ *Midrash Rabbah*, translated into English with notes, glossary and indices under the editorship of H. Freedman and Maurice Simon ; with a foreword by I. Epstein (Soncino Press, London, 1939), 1: 4

The History of Creation Ex- nihilo Within Jewish Thought

Seven things were created before the world was created. They are: the Torah, gehinnom, the Garden of Eden, the throne of glory, the temple, repentance and the name of the messiah.⁹⁸

On a superficial level, the midrash seems to be hinting at the to the idea that the creation of the world as recorded in genesis is not necessarily to be understood that it was the initial creation, rather there were things that preceded it. This reading would not reject the possibility that there could have previously been a creation of the world out of nothing; rather that genesis was not that event. However the ambiguity of midrashic literature must be noted prior to any conclusive analysis. One encounters the limits of explanation and interpretation, where it becomes almost impossible to claim any definitive understanding of the true meaning of the sages. What are the things that preceded creation? Were they physical creations or spiritual entities as some commentaries suggest⁹⁹, or perhaps they were merely concepts intended to emphasize a certain ethical principle rather than a temporal description of creation? There is however a certain midrash which actually attributes a period of time with which the Torah preceded the creation:

Thus the works of each day asked one another, “Which creatures did the holy one blessed be he create among you today?” The sixth asked the fifth, the fifth of the fourth, the fourth of the third, the third of the second, the second of the first. Of what was the first to ask? Surely of the Torah which preceded the creation of the world. As Reish Lakish says:

98 *Pirke De Rabbi Eliezer: The chapters of Rabbi Eliezer the Great*, translated by Gerald Friedlander (Hermon press, New York, 1965), ch. 3

99 פירוש מהר"ו מדרש רבה 99

“The Torah preceded the creation of the world by two thousand years”.¹⁰⁰

The difficulty that this midrash presents is twofold. Firstly, the fact that it provides a period of time that the Torah preceded creation makes it more difficult to push aside suggestions that it is indeed discussing a temporal description of creation. Secondly, it also implies that there was time prior to creation, which implies a belief in eternity of the world.¹⁰¹

The Philosopher and Rabban Gamliel

Perhaps one of the most explicit encounters between these two opposing world views and a clear indication of the opinion of the sages is found in this section of Bereishit Rabbah. A certain philosopher approaches the Nasi, the political and religious head of the Jewish community in Israel, Rabban Gamliel, and attempts to highlight that according to the accounting of the Torah, the world was not created ex- nihilo, but rather that God used pre-existent materials with which to create the world.

A certain philosopher asked R. Gamliel, saying to him: “Your God was indeed a great artist, but surely He found good materials which assisted Him?”

“What are they”, said he to him?

“*Tohu, bohu*, darkness, water, wind and the deep,” replied he.

“Woe to that man” he exclaimed. “The term creation is used by scripture in connection with all of them.” ***Tohu and Bohu***, *I make peace and create evil (Isaiah 45: 7)*; **darkness**: *I form the light and create darkness*; **water**: *Praise Him, ye the heavens of*

100 *Midrash Rabbah* / translated into English with notes, glossary and indices under the editorship of H. Freedman and Maurice Simon ; with a foreword by I. Epstein (Soncino Press, London, 1939), 8: 2

101 *The Guide*, 2: 30

The History of Creation Ex- nihilo Within Jewish Thought

*heavens and ye waters that above the heavens – wherefore? For he commanded, and they were created (Psalms 148: 5); wind: For Lo, He that formeth the mountains and created the winds (Amos 4: 13); the depths: When there were no depths I was brought forth (Prov. 8: 24).*¹⁰²

The opinion of the philosopher seems to be similar to the concept of the Platonist theory of creation. It does not deny a certain direction or “will” within creation, nor does it suggest the eternity of the world, rather that the creation was performed through an eternal amorphous matter. The philosopher does not attempt to engage in philosophical debate with the opinion of the Torah, rather he attempts to prove that the opinion of the Torah is in accordance with his. Therefore the response of Rabban Gamliel is within a similar vein; through the verses of the torah he disproves the theory of the philosopher. The accounting of the interchange between Rabban Gamliel and the philosopher is interesting since it does not follow the usual dialectical discussion in that Rabban Gamliel calls out “woe to that man” in response to his suggestion. Despite the fact that we do see many examples of strong language used by the sages towards each other, the method of debate is usually a back and forth of question and answer. For what purpose would this great sage recoil and harshly criticize this certain philosopher, if it were not to illustrate and emphasize that the suggested opinion is anathema to Torah belief. The fact that the sage mentioned is Rabban Gamliel, who was the political and religious head of *Israeli* Jewry, is extremely important for it clarifies the mainstream opinion of Torah thought at that time.

“Let there be light”

When expounding the following verse of the Torah, we encounter an eye opening dispute between two great sages:

102 *Midrash Rabbah*, translated into English with notes, glossary and indices under the editorship of H. Freedman and Maurice Simon ; with a foreword by I. Epstein (Soncino Press, London, 1939), 1: 9

And God said Let there be light (Genesis 1: 3)

Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Nechemiah disagree. Rabbi Yehudah maintains: that light was created first, this being comparable to a king who wished to build a palace, but the site was a dark one. What did he do? He lit lamps and lanterns, to know where to lay the foundations; in like manner was the light created first. Rabbi Nechemiah said: The world was created first, this being similar to the king who built a palace and then adorned it with lights.¹⁰³

The basic question being addressed is whether the world was created first or whether the “light” was created before the world. If the “light” was created prior to the world, what can be said of the initial verses of the Torah, was it not the initial creation? Due to the lack of detail of the statement of Rabbi Yehudah, it is difficult to know what exact opinion he was espousing with this statement on the order of creation. Was he referring to the theories of eternal matter existing before the world or was he hinting at a theory of creation as one of emanation that the world came out of the light? It does not seem that that Rabbi Yehudah is referring to one of the concepts of eternity, since the midrash implies that the light was in fact created and not eternal matter. One still needs to question the relevance of this statement within the context of creation ex nihilo, since this midrash does not address how the light was created. However what is clear is that according to Rabbi Yehudah the mechanism and the order of the creation do not follow the normative approach that is generally understood on a simple level according to the verses of the Torah. If he can claim that light was created before the world, in seeming opposition to the verses, what else is one permitted to claim about the account of creation?

103 Ibid. 3: 1

The History of Creation Ex- nihilo Within Jewish Thought

An emanation of light

On the same verse discussed previously, there is another dispute which is relevant to the subject of creation ex nihilo:

And God said: “Let there be light”

Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak asked Rabbi Shmuel ben Nachman: “As I have heard that you are a master of aggadah, tell me whence the light was created?” He replied: “The Holy One blessed be He, wrapped himself therein as in a robe and irradiated with the luster of his majesty the whole world from one end to the other.” Now he had answered him in a whisper, whereupon he observed, “There is verse which states it explicitly: *“Who covers Yourself with light as with a garment”*, yet you say it I a whisper!” “Just as I have heard it in a whisper, so have I told you in a whisper”, he rejoined.¹⁰⁴

This midrash is not only limited to the midrash Rabbah, it is also found in Pirkei D’Rabbi Eliezer, however the statement is not attributed to Shmuel b. Nahman. There are those who claim that this midrash refers to a certain theory of emanation, in which the rest of creation was brought into existence through the light as a type of butterfly effect, a developmental evolution of creation out of one base matter, the light, and not the usual description of the cosmology of the world as a creative power.¹⁰⁵ While there may be theories of emanation within Jewish literature which testify to the creation of the world as an emanation from God, this midrash seems to be limited to a description of the creation of light alone, and not the entire creation, for the midrash states, “whence was the light created”.

104 Ibid. 3: 4

105 Altmann, Alexander, *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism* (Routledge and K. Paul, London, 1969), p. 130/ 31

And there was evening

And there was evening

Rabbi Yehudah ben Rabbi Shimon said: “Let there be evening” is not written here, but “And there was evening”: hence we know that a time order existed before this.¹⁰⁶

Maimonides particularly takes issue with the subject of this midrash, since according to him, time was part of creation itself as it dependant on motion which is itself a vital element of creation. If time were to exist prior to the world, it would imply the eternity of the universe.¹⁰⁷

Furthermore we see the existence of worlds prior to ours, a theme which has appeared throughout the midrashic literature. However over here it is more explicit, since it is discussing specifically worlds that were created and destroyed and not merely the creation of light before the earth or the like.

Rabbi Abahu said: This proves that the Holy One blessed be he, went on creating worlds and destroying them until he created this one and declared, “This one pleases me, those did not please me”. Rabbi Pinchas said: “This is Rabbi Abahu’s reason: *And God saw everything that he had made and behold it was very good (Gen 1: 31)*: this pleases me, those did not please me.¹⁰⁸

106 *Midrash Rabbah*, translated into English with notes, glossary and indices under the editorship of H. Freedman and Maurice Simon ; with a foreword by I. Epstein (Soncino Press, London, 1939), 3: 7

107 *The Guide*, 2: 30

108 This is repeated in *Genesis Rabbah* 9: 2

The History of Creation Ex- nihilo Within Jewish Thought

One Day

“And there was evening and there was morning one day.”

Rabbi Yudan said: The day in which the Holy One blessed be He was one with his universe, *for there was only him in the world (existence).*¹⁰⁹

This appears to be an example one of the few midrashim which does not claim that there was an existence of any other material, substance, concept or other prior to the creation, rather all that was in existence was God. What is slightly perplexing about this statement is that the “one day” which it is discussing is mentioned after the account of the initial creation, when there was more than just God in the world. Is the author claiming as we have witnessed several times that the account of creation cannot be interpreted literally and chronologically? Similarly we see this statement in the *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer*.

Before the world was created the holy one blessed be he with his name alone existed, and the thought arose in him to create the world.¹¹⁰

Fire and Snow

Perhaps the most astonishing statements regarding creation are found in the following midrashim. The common denominator amongst all the varying opinions is that when describing how the heavens and earth were created, they all state that they were fashioned from a seemingly pre- existent material, either fire and snow or water. This is more explicit than the discussion of how light was created, for there it is limited to a discussion of the creation of light alone and here it

109 *Midrash Rabbah*, translated into English with notes, glossary and indices under the editorship of H. Freedman and Maurice Simon ; with a foreword by I. Epstein (Soncino Press, London, 1939), 3: 8

110 *Pirke De Rabbi Eliezer: The chapters of Rabbi Eliezer the Great*, translated by Gerald Friedlander (Hermon press, New York, 1965), ch. 3

encompasses the entire world. Once again the sages seem to be hinting to a platonic version of the creation out of primordial matter. Maimonides clearly recognizes the platonic undertones and speaks harshly against the advocates of these opinions.¹¹¹

“And the Heaven and the Earth were finished.”

How did the holy one blessed be he create his world? Said R. Yohanan: “The Lord took two balls, one of fire and the other of snow, and worked them into each other, and from these the world was created. R. Hanina said: “He took four balls, for the four corners of the universe. R. Hama said: Six, four for the four corners and one for above and one for below.”¹¹²

We find a similar statement in the name of Rav:

And the Lord called the firmament Heavens (Shamayim). Rav said: Fire and water. R. Abba bar Kahana said in the name of Rav: The Holy One blessed be he took fire and water and kneaded them into each other and therefrom were the heavens made.¹¹³

A slight variation of this account is also recorded in *Bereishit Rabbah* and identically in *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer*.

Whence were the heavens created? From the light of the garment with which he was robed. He took of this light and he stretched it like a garment and the heavens began to extend continually until he caused them to hear, “It is sufficient”.

111 The Guide, 2: 30

112 *Midrash Rabbah*, translated into English with notes, glossary and indices under the editorship of H. Freedman and Maurice Simon ; with a foreword by I. Epstein (Soncino Press, London, 1939), 10: 3

113 Ibid. 4: 7; Efraim Elimelech Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* / translated from the Hebrew by Isarel Abrahams (Harvard University Press, London, 1987), p. 195, footnote 43

The History of Creation Ex- nihilo Within Jewish Thought

Whence do we know that the heavens were created from the light of his garment? Because it is said, “Who coverest Thyself with light as with a garment; who stretchest out the heavens like a curtain.

Whence was the earth created? He took the snow which was beneath his throne of glory and threw it upon the waters, and the waters became congealed so that the dust of the earth was formed, as it is said, “He saith to the snow, Be thou earth.”¹¹⁴

It is eye opening to see the opinions that are found in these various midrashim ranging from one extreme end of the spectrum to the other. What is even more intriguing is that the one who steps up to present the authoritative opinion of the Torah many centuries later, out rightly rejects any suggestion that there is more than one correct approach.

Saadia Gaon

The ninth century witnessed the emergence of the first organized and articulated discourse on the creation clarifying the Jewish tradition, in the form of Saadia Gaon’s *Emunot Ve-De’ot*.¹¹⁵ One is presented with a lengthy and detailed composition of the various proofs for creation ex- nihilo as well as refutations those opposing theories of creation and eternity. This treatise comes like a lightening bolt out of dark skies of Jewish philosophy (not necessarily due to the actual lack of philosophic activity, but at the very least due to the absence of

114 *Midrash Rabbah*, translated into English with notes, glossary and indices under the editorship of H. Freedman and Maurice Simon ; with a foreword by I. Epstein (Soncino Press, London, 1939), 12: 10 and *Pirke De Rabbi Eliezer: The chapters of Rabbi Eliezer the Great*, translated by Gerald Friedlander (Hermon press, New York, 1965), ch. 3

115 Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, translated from the Hebrew and Arabic by Samuel Rosenblatt (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1948) Treatise 1, p.38

articulated Jewish philosophical writings from that time period) and its thundering message resounds emphatically; one can only believe in the creation of something out of nothing! Rationally there can be no alternative, and scriptural evidence verifies that conclusion. Saadiah Gaon, as his name suggests, was the head of the Babylonian Jewry in the mid tenth century and toiled to reestablish Jewish centers of learning within Babylonia. The leader and scholar of his generation, his importance is emphasized by Maimonides who states that “were it not for Saadiah, the Torah would almost have disappeared from among Israel”.¹¹⁶ As the translation movement intensified in Baghdad in the eighth century, with works of the Greek philosophers now becoming readily available to the Arabic speaking lands¹¹⁷, so did the “threat” of foreign elements infiltrating Judaism intensify. If this was the cultural backdrop of the times of Saadiah Gaon, it is not surprising to encounter such a clear exposition of the basic Jewish principles of faith in *Emunot Vede’ot*, in particular commencing with the treatise on the creation of the world.

Maimonides

Maimonides devotes the first half of the second section of the *Guide* to the perplexed to the investigation of the creation; there he introduces his readers to the varying opinions on the creation of the world. Maimonides states clearly that he is not even attempting to address those who do not believe that the world was brought into being by God, but rather through an accidental occurrence, since those opinions clearly deny the existence of God or of a Divine governor and ruler, which is untenable within the realm of Jewish thought.¹¹⁸

116 *History of the Jewish People: From Yavneh to Pumpedia* by Meir Holder (Mesorah Publications Ltd., Jerusalem 1986), p. 297- 300

117 *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy: Islamic Philosophy and Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005), p.353

118 *Moses Maimonides, The Guide for the Perplexed* translated by M. Friedlander PhD (Dover Publications, INC., New York), Ch. 13, p. 171- 173

The History of Creation Ex- nihilo Within Jewish Thought

When introducing the opinion of Moses and the Torah, Maimonides focuses on the idea that time is part of the creation. He explains that this is fundamental to believing that the world is created for if one asserts that time is more abstract than other “accidents”, one may be mistaken into thinking that time is not created. The danger of that is that one will come to claim that there was time before creation and thus admitting to eternity of the world. The second opinion, which is the opinion of Plato (as mentioned in the introduction), opposes the concept of creation ex- nihilo since it presents a logical impossibility. It is equal to God making himself into a body, or making a square which the diagonal is equal to its sides. Except for creation ex-nihilo, Maimonides also holds that creating a logical impossibility is not possible¹¹⁹ however for the philosophers this is also true of creating something from non-being into being. According to the third opinion, which is the opinion of Aristotle, something can never go from a formless state to formed state, rather from one form to another. Neither can something go from basic form to a more complex form, rather from one category to another. The Heavens could not have come from any substratum that is different to it; rather the world is as it always was. Both the second and the third theory have beneficial aspects – How can “God” create something out of nothing, which is a logical impossibility, and yet cannot create a square that its diagonal is equal to its side? Secondly, how could God reject his previous will? Rejecting Aristotle compromises one’s monotheism, the oneness and incorporeality of God who is not subject to change, whereas rejecting Plato compromises one’s rationalism! The dilemma that one encounters when proposing creation ex- nihilo is that one’s monotheism and rationalism is compromised. Can one assert creation if it rejects monotheism and vice versa? Despite the fact that Maimonides expresses that the opinion of the Torah proposes creation and not one which implies eternity, at no stage does Maimonides outrightly reject the opinion of

119 *The Guide*, 1: 73

Plato. In fact the following chapters are devoted to demonstrating that the theory of Aristotle is not logically necessary and are not directed at Plato at all. Furthermore, Maimonides does not declare that he is attempting to prove creation ex-nihilo; rather he is attempting to prove that it is not a paradox.

A major point of discussion within Maimonidean literature, especially “The Guide”, is the real message of Maimonides. There is the overt or exoteric message which is intended for the masses and there is the subtle, esoteric message intended for the intelligent reader. In the introduction to “The Guide”, Maimonides lists seven causes for contradictions to occur, of which he claims are absent in his work, except for cause five and seven. The contradictions mentioned in the seventh cause are those which present two perspectives, a and b, when a is true, b is false and vice versa. Either this could mean that one is true and the other is acting as a decoy to conceal the truth. Alternatively, both are true, however depending on one’s stance one seems to be true and not the other! Both these truths reveal a deep truth that cannot be reconciled, an irreducible dichotomy which naturally occurs when discussing the *secrets* of the world. It has been pointed out¹²⁰ that one of these contradictions occurs at the very place where Maimonides is declaring the belief of the Torah on creation. Maimonides brings two verses which externally seem to testify to the supreme governance of the creator of the world. The second verse states that God is “The Possessor (acquirer) of heaven and earth”. It is most perplexing that Maimonides chose this verse to be the banner under which creation ex-nihilo is to be represented for he himself states¹²¹ that the word **קונה**, possessor, implies eternity of the world. One should use the word creator of the heavens and earth, not possessor. One would use the word possessor by a slave, since one does not create a slave, rather one owns one. Therefore when

120 Lectures of Rabbi Meir Triebitz on Rambam and Creation, The Guide, section 2, chapters 12- 30 available at www.hashkafacircle.com/Rambam.

121 *The Guide*, 2: 30

The History of Creation Ex- nihilo Within Jewish Thought

used in relation to the world, it implies that the relationship is like that of a master to a subject that has always been there! This would seem to be a clear indication of one of those contradictions in *The Guide*, highlighting that the very nature of this treatise of creation is a Maimonidean contradiction, an irreducible dichotomy.

Conclusion

The lack of discussion within Chazal on creation ex- nihilo raises questions particular to this subject. Whose opinion was Saadiah Gaon espousing with his treatise of creation? Was it really a flash out of the darkness, symbolizing a shift and change in Jewish thought? Perhaps Saadiah Gaon was merely the illuminator of opinions and beliefs so basic to Judaism that it needed no articulate presentation until an external threat was perceived, coming in the shape of the availability of Greek philosophy. Based on the previous midrashim that were presented, both of these suggestions seem to have evidence counter to their claim. It is clear that there was a strong tradition of creation ex- nihilo, as is evident in the opinion of Rabban Gamliel, even though it only seems to come to light when challenges are faced. Interestingly, both the adamant and unfaltering position of Rabban Gamliel and of Saadiah Gaon is brought to the fore by a “certain philosopher” and the backdrop of philosophic activity in the Middle East. However on the other hand, there is an abundance of midrashim whose obscure message can easily be interpreted as laying claim to the opinions of the eternity of matter, perhaps most clearly from the writings of *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* and the statements in the name of Rav. According to the various midrashim, it would almost seem that there was not one definitive position on the creation, but rather multiple perspectives with which to view that auspicious moment. While it would be heretical to assume that God did not have a part to play in creation and that the Divine will is not free to create out of nothing, it would seem that to claim that there was a prime matter from which the world was formed is not. How the eternity of matter is reconcilable with the image of an omnipotent

creative God is perhaps as was hinted in the writings of Maimonides a paradox, an irreducible dichotomy, which cannot be fathomed according to the constraints of the mind of man. Whether the story of creation is there to teach us a fundamental principle of the Will of God, that it is absolutely unconfined and “free”, and thus substantiating the unchangeability and incorporeality of God and not necessarily literally intended to be interpreted as creation ex-nihilo, or it is in fact meant in its simple interpretation, both attest to the omnipotence of God. The trend to interpret the opening passages of Genesis as the simpler interpretation would suggest is undeniable, with almost all of the earlier and latter commentaries following in this path. The only difference is that the earlier commentaries all seem to hold on to the philosophical vernacular when expressing the account of creation, as is overtly apparent in the commentary of Nachmanides.¹²² However the option of interpretation in contrast to this trend has been made available through the subtle hints of Maimonides.

As we have seen, the position of the creation in Jewish thought, in particular the earlier midrashic sources, is not as streamlined as the latter medieval campaigners would suggest. Whilst the reality of the opposing views of creation is fascinating in its own right, it also raises fundamental questions as to the nature of Jewish thought and philosophy. Beyond the halachic demands to the opinions and thoughts a Jewish person is required to adhere to, is there an authoritative position and tradition of Jewish thought? What is the basis and root of Jewish philosophy and what guidelines does a Jewish philosopher advocating the way of the Torah have in formulating his philosophical outlook? Do the treatises and expositions of leading Jewish sages whose works are based on the opinions of their times enter the canon of Torah literature, even though there is a divergence of opinions on this topic prior to their own. Furthermore, what becomes of their opinions when the basis of

פירוש הרמב"ן על התורה, ספר בראשית, א, א 122

The History of Creation Ex- nihilo Within Jewish Thought

their treatises and expositions becomes outdated and disproved, does their Torah now cease from being Torah. Is there an eternal backbone of Jewish thought which remains invulnerable to the seasons of time? Perhaps that is the real paper that begs to be researched and written, but it is possible that the nature of that very topic, the nature and development of Jewish thought, will always be one that is inconclusive and unauthoritative as it is also inevitably subject to be a product of its time.

