

PARASHAT BERESHIT

Genesis 1:1–6:8

Bereshit may be translated as “In the beginning” or “At first.” The Torah begins by telling us how God created the heavens and earth, human beings, and the Sabbath. It continues with the stories of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and of their sons, Cain and Abel, and it concludes with the report that God regretted having created human beings because of all their wickedness. For that reason, God decided to destroy everything on earth except for Noah and his family.

OUR TARGUM

· 1 ·

In the beginning the earth was unformed, and there was only darkness. Then God commanded, “Let there be light,” and saw how good it was. Then God separated between the light, which was named “Day,” and the darkness, which was called “Night.” That was the first day of creation.

On the second day Sky was created.

On the third day Earth and Seas were formed, along with plants and trees of every kind. And God saw how good it was.

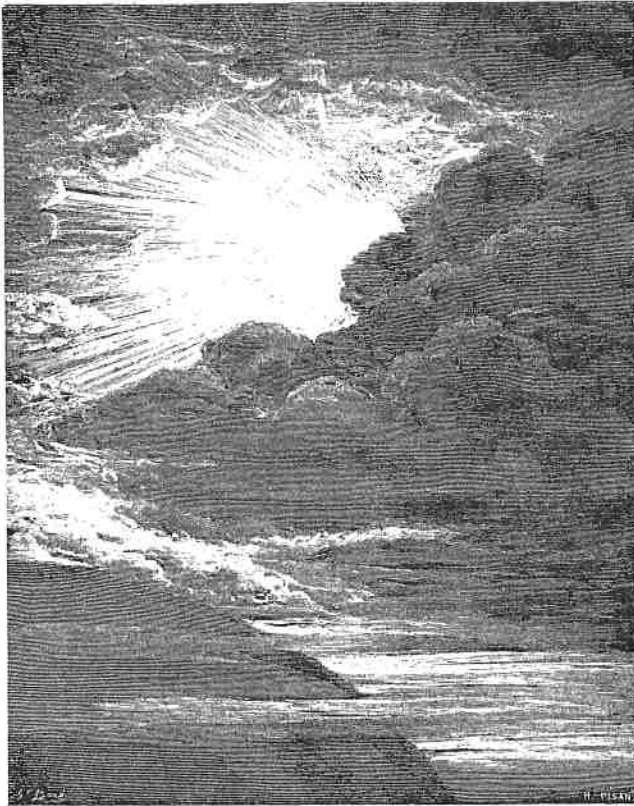
On the fourth day the sun, moon, and stars were set in the sky to separate between day and night. And God saw how it, too, was good.

On the fifth day God brought forth birds out of the waters to fly, and creeping creatures of every kind, and swarms of fish and sea animals to swim in the seas. And God saw how good it was, and ordered them to be “fruitful and increase.”

On the sixth day God created all the beasts of the earth. Seeing it was good, God then decided to create human beings. God said: “I will make Adam in My image, after My likeness.” God created male and female human beings and commanded them to “rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth.” God also blessed them and told them to “be fruitful and increase.” And God saw that it was very good.

When heaven and earth were finished, God rested and declared that the seventh day of each week should be set aside as a Sabbath, a day of

rest. God blessed the Sabbath and called it *kodesh*, which means “holy,” or “unique.”



· 2 ·

God then planted a beautiful garden from which four rivers flowed. The rivers were named Pishon, Gihon, Tigris, and Euphrates. The garden was called *Gan Eden*, the “Garden of Eden,” and was located in what was once known as Babylonia and afterwards called Persia and Iran.

Within the garden were colorful and fruitful trees of every kind. One special tree called the *Etz ha-Chayim*, or “Tree of Life,” grew at the center of the garden. Nearby was another called the *Etz*

ha-Daat Tov va-Ra, or “Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Bad.”

God placed Adam, the first human being, in *Gan Eden* and warned him: “You may eat from every tree in the garden except from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad. If you eat from it, you will die.”

Then God brought all the creatures of earth and sky before Adam so that he might name each of them.

Afterwards, God saw that Adam was lonely and needed a partner, so God created a wife for him. And Adam called her *Chavah*, or “Eve,” which comes from the word *chai* (“life”) and means “mother of all the living.”

One day a serpent tempted Eve by telling her that neither she nor Adam would die if they ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad. So she tasted its fruits and then gave some to her husband. When God questioned them about what they had done, Adam blamed Eve, and she blamed the serpent. All three were punished for having disobeyed God’s command. The serpent was condemned to crawl and eat dirt, and Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden.

· 3 ·

Later, Eve gave birth to Cain and then to another son named Abel. After they were grown, Cain turned on his brother in anger and killed him. When God asked him, “Where is your brother, Abel?” he answered, “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” For murdering his brother, God punished Cain by sending him off to become a lonely wanderer on earth.

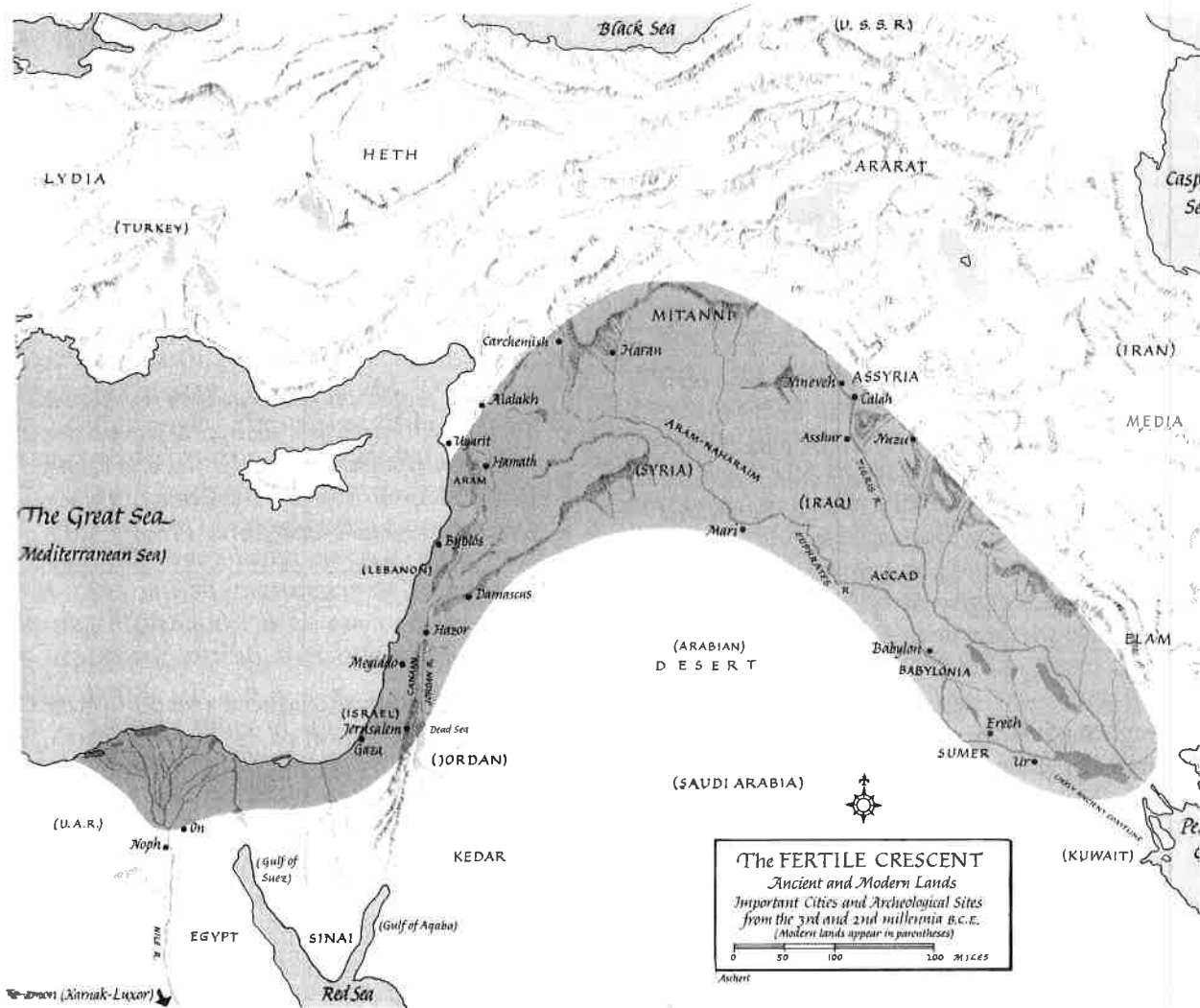
After creating heaven and earth, and all living creatures, God saw that human beings were wicked and constantly doing evil. So God decided to destroy humanity and all living things—but a man by the name of Noah changed God’s intention.

THEMES

Parashat Bereshit contains four important themes:

1. God’s creation of the heavens, earth, all living creatures, and humanity is a blessing.

2. Human beings are responsible for the survival of all that was created by God.
3. The expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden.
4. Human beings are responsible for one another and for the survival of humanity.



PEREK ALEF: *Is There a Jewish View about "Creation"?*

There are many different views about how our planet and galaxy of stars originated. Most scientists who study the stars (they are called astro-physicists and cosmologists) believe that, between ten and twenty billion years ago, all of the matter of the universe concentrated in a single place and

then exploded in a "Big Bang." About a billion years later, clusters of galaxies, composed of gas, dust, and clumps of matter, began to take shape. There were over one hundred billion of them, each with an average of one hundred billion stars. Among these was our Milky Way galaxy containing a vast ocean of four hundred billion stars.

Scientists believe that many stars, such as our own, have planets revolving around them. When

a star has revolving planets, this arrangement is called a solar system. Our planet, Earth, revolves around our star, Sol, the sun. Here on Earth, with all its shimmering blue skies, oceans, forests, deserts, and green valleys is the only place in the cosmos where, to our knowledge, intelligent life has evolved.

At the beginning . . .

Scientist and writer Carl Sagan describes the “awesome transformation” that the Torah calls “creation”: “At the beginning of this universe, there were no galaxies, stars, or planets, no life or civilizations, merely a uniform radiant fire-ball filling all space. The passage from the Chaos of the Big Bang to the Cosmos that we are beginning to know is the most awesome transformation of matter and energy that we have been privileged to glimpse. And, until we find more intelligent beings elsewhere, we are ourselves the most spectacular of all the transformations—the remote descendants of the Big Bang, dedicated to understanding and further transforming the Cosmos from which we spring.” (Cosmos, Ballantine Books, New York, 1980, p. 12)

Throughout history people have gazed into the heavens—or observed life on earth—and wondered how it all began. Nearly every culture developed an explanation. Thousands of years ago in the Middle East the ancient Sumerians, Akkadians, Assyrians, Babylonians, and Egyptians all told “creation” stories.

Most of these, like the Babylonian epic *Enuma Elish*, put forward the belief that many gods had created the heavens, earth, and human life. In most of these versions of creation, everything depended upon the whim of the gods. It was believed that they could order rain or blow away the clouds, send plagues or wipe out whole populations with floods or famine. In these ancient stories human beings were helpless. Whether they suffered or were successful and happy did not depend upon their accomplishments but rather upon the arbitrary decisions of the gods.

One of the most famous of the “creation” stories is the Enuma Elish, told by early Babylonians, Assyrians, Akkadians, and Sumerians:

*The holy house, the house of the gods, in a holy place had not yet been made;
No reed had sprung up, no tree had been created;
No brick had been laid, no building had been erected. . . .*

The Deep had not been made. . . .

Then there was a movement in the midst of the sea. . . .

At that time Eridu was made. . . .

*And the gods, the spirits of the earth,
Marduk made at the same time. . . .*

*Marduk laid a reed on the face of the waters,
He formed dust and poured it out beside the reed;*

That he might cause the gods to dwell in the dwelling of their hearts’ desire, He formed mankind. (Excerpt from Robert Graves and Raphael Patai, Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis, Greenwich House, New York, 1983, p. 22)

The Jewish people introduced a revolutionary theory about the creation of the heavens, earth, and human life. Unlike the other ancient stories, which attribute all that was created in the heavens and on earth to numerous gods, the Torah begins by teaching that one God alone created everything. It puts forward the idea that creation is “good,” that the world and the galaxy of stars in which it spins are not a random accident but have a unique design and purpose.

Furthermore, the Torah teaches that human life is a result of God’s will, and human beings are not “toys” of the gods. Instead, human beings are created in God’s image. They have choices and can exercise freedom. They are partners with God in shaping life and preserving the world.

Echoing the Torah’s “creation” story, the Psalmist not only captures the mystery of God’s creation but also elaborates the role and responsibility of human beings.

O God, our God,
 How majestic is Your name throughout the earth,
 You who have covered the heavens with Your
 splendor! . . .
 When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your
 fingers,
 the moon and stars that You set in place:
 what are human beings that You have been
 mindful of them,
 mortals that You have taken note of them,
 that You have made them little less than divine,
 and adorned them with glory and majesty;
 You have made them master over Your
 handiwork,
 laying the world at their feet. . . .

(Psalms 8:1-7)

Jewish tradition holds that one God created the heavens and earth, but it also teaches that human beings are “masters” of the world. Their choices make a difference. The power of life or death, survival or destruction is in their hands.

But Jewish tradition goes a step further. While the first chapters of *Bereshit*, or Genesis, describe in detail what was created on each of the six days of creation, Jewish interpreters of Torah did not take that explanation as an exact report of what had happened. Instead, they offered many different opinions.

For example, some of the rabbis argued that God had created everything on the first day. Then, on each of the five following days, God introduced what had already been formed. Other rabbis disagreed. They believed that the creation of light came before everything else. Still others taught that God, like an unsatisfied artist looking for perfection, had created and destroyed many worlds before deciding that this one was acceptable. (*Genesis Rabbah* 1:15; 3:1,7; 9:2; and 12:14)

And do Jewish teachers say that the world was created in six twenty-four-hour days?

Rashi



The most famous interpreter of the Torah, Solomon ben Isaac, known best as Rashi, denied

this. He pointed out that the word *yom*, or “day,” could mean “thousands of years.” As proof for his argument he quoted the ancient Psalmist who had written: “For a day in Your sight is like a thousand years. . . . (Psalms 90:4) For Rashi, God’s creation of the world did not happen within six twenty-four-hour days but rather over thousands of years. “The Torah,” he explained to his eleventh-century students, “does not intend to teach us the order of creation.” (Rashi on Genesis 1:1)

Most Torah interpreters agree with Rashi. The Torah does not offer us a “scientific” explanation of creation. It offers us something else of great importance.

Well before modern science, Jews realized that the purpose of Torah was not to tell us “how” the world was created but to help us understand “Who” created all the wonders of the heavens and earth. The “creation” story of *Bereshit* is not a lesson in evolution. It neither contradicts modern scientific theories nor requires proofs from the laboratory. The Torah’s story of creation is meant to express our sense of wonder about the origins of the world in which we live. It affirms our faith that one God formed and sustains all of cosmic existence and that human beings are partners with God in preserving and advancing the precious gift of life.

PEREK BET: *We Must Care for Creation*

Modern scientists are fond of referring to our Earth as a “tiny fragile world . . . drifting in a great cosmic ocean.” Certainly our contemporary studies about space confirm the vastness of the cosmos and the fact that our planet is a mere speck where, miraculously, all of the conditions that promote life happen to be present.

Scientists agree that there is a very delicate balance between all earthly life forms and the atmosphere surrounding our planet. They speak of a “cooperating system” between the five million separate species of animals and plants on Earth

and its stone foundations, waters, and blue blanket of sky. Without the delicate interrelationship between all forms of life and the conditions of our atmosphere, Earth would be a lifeless planet.

As an example of our “cooperating system,” British chemist and inventor James Lovelock describes how the Earth’s atmosphere is amazingly shaped to fit life’s needs. “With no oxygen, for instance, there would be no respiration. With just a little more oxygen, on the other hand—even 25 percent instead of 21—the whole living world would burst spontaneously into flames. . . . Similarly, without carbon dioxide, photosynthesis would fail, plants would die, and life would vanish from the Earth. With more carbon dioxide, however, so much heat would be trapped in air and sea by the greenhouse effect that the planet would descend into hell.” (Jonathan Weiner, *Planet Earth*, Bantam Books, New York, 1986, p. 327)

Abravanel



Interpreters of the Torah’s “creation” story also called attention to the fragile balance of conditions they observed in the heavens and on earth. For example, Don Isaac Abravanel, who lived and taught in late fifteenth-century Spain, speculated that, had the sun been larger, or placed closer to the earth, its heat would have destroyed our planet. Had it been placed a fraction farther away, our Earth would have been locked forever in a frozen winter. God, Abravanel taught, had wisely set each star in its precise position. (Abravanel on Genesis 1:1)

Other Jewish teachers went several steps beyond Abravanel. They likened the world to a “palace” brought into existence for the benefit of human beings. God, they explained, had not only created it but had furnished and filled it with opportunities for enjoyment. Then, God had presented it as a gift to human beings. From that point on, they maintained, human beings had been appointed as “caretakers” of the world. (*Sanhedrin* 38a)

*It is up to human beings. . . .
The heavens belong to God, but the earth God gave to humanity. (Psalms 115:16)*

In interpreting the phrase: “Let the earth sprout vegetation . . .” Aderet Eliyahu explains that God placed the potential for growth in the earth. It is up to human beings to sow the seeds. (Genesis 1:11)

As “caretakers” of this “palace” called Earth, Jewish tradition teaches that human beings have important, even critical, choices to make, especially today.

The advance of industrial power and technology have brought us many blessings in this century, but they have also brought us serious “curses.” For instance, we warm our homes from the cold of winter and cool them from the heat of summer by using huge quantities of energy drawn from critical resources. We are polluting the air we breathe, the water we drink, and our sources of food production. We are cutting down forests to build our homes, industrial centers, and cities and to make room for more farmlands on which to grow enough food to feed increasing numbers of human beings. One recent United Nations report warns that, because of overpopulation, by the end of the twentieth century “all accessible tropical forests will have disappeared.”

And there is another frightening condition to add to our burden as “caretakers” of this “palace” we call Earth. It is the danger of nuclear destruction. Today, there are enough nuclear warheads to end all life on our planet. It is estimated that a full-scale nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union would not only bring death to hundreds of millions of human beings but would probably eliminate the civilizations of Europe, China, Japan, Russia, and the United States.

Jewish tradition teaches us that human beings are responsible for the earth. According to the rabbis, after Adam was created, God led him around the Garden of Eden, showing him all the beautiful flowers and trees. Then God told him: “See how beautiful everything is that I have created. It has all been made for you. Remember this,

and do not corrupt or destroy My world. For, if you do, there will be no one left to save it.” (*Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 7:13)

According to the Torah, God gave humanity the power to rule the world. We are its “caretakers.” It is ours to enjoy, but it is also our responsibility to preserve. The choice is ours. The Torah challenges us with God’s commandment: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life. . . .” (Deuteronomy 30:19)

PEREK GIMEL: *Expelled from the Garden of Eden*

The Garden of Eden was a beautiful place in which to live. All of Adam’s and Eve’s needs were satisfied, but in the end they were expelled. What happened? What did they do to deserve such punishment?

One answer may be found in the differences between what God commanded them to do and how they reported it to each other and the serpent. Compare the following two versions found in the Torah:

God says to Adam: “Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat; but as for the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die.” (Genesis 2:16–17)

Eve says to the serpent: “We may eat of the fruit of the other trees of the garden. It is only about fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said: You shall not eat of it or touch it, lest you die.” (Genesis 3:2–3)

It is clear that Adam was given one version of the commandment and that Eve reports another to the serpent. Adam is told that, if they eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad, they will die. Eve reports that, if they either eat from the “tree in the middle of the garden” or touch it, they will die. She not only fails to report the name of the tree but clearly adds a new condition to

God’s original statement. Later interpreters of Torah reached the conclusion that her alteration of God’s commandment led to misunderstanding and, ultimately, to expulsion from the Garden of Eden.

For example, Rashi believed that the serpent took advantage of Eve’s misrepresentation of God’s commandment to Adam. He speculated that, when Eve told the serpent that God had warned her: “You shall not eat of it or touch it, lest you die,” the serpent pushed her until she touched the tree. Then the serpent said to her: “You see, you have not died after touching it. Nothing has happened to you. And you will not die after you eat from its fruit.”

Rashi’s theory is that the serpent was very clever, using Eve’s misrepresentation of what God had said to Adam as a way of tricking her into eating the fruit.

On the other hand, perhaps it was Adam who misrepresented the original commandment to Eve. The Torah does not tell us what he said to her. He might only have pointed to a tree in the middle of the garden without identifying it by name. And he may have even added the warning about *touching it* in order to frighten her.

We will never know what Adam did or did not tell Eve or who was to blame, but it is clear that the first small lie about what God had said led to much trouble and, ultimately, to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Perhaps that explains why Jewish teachers emphasize the importance of careful communication and accurate reporting.

Be careful of your words

We are warned: “Let your words be few,” and “A fool multiplies words.” (*Ecclesiastes* 5:1 and 10:14; also *Job* 35:16 and 38:2)

Zugot



The rabbinic teacher Abtalyon told his students: “You who are wise, be careful of your words. . . .” (*Avot* 1:11)

In the Book of Proverbs (30:6), we are taught: “Do not add to God’s words, for you will be criticized and revealed as a liar.” In other words, when we are given a message for someone else, we are expected to deliver it *exactly* as it was given. Adding to what we have been told, even if we believe that our interpretation will improve communication, may lead to distorting the truth.

That is the mistake that Eve, and perhaps Adam, made in the Garden of Eden. Then, after they had eaten the forbidden fruit and were about to be punished by God, they made things worse for themselves by blaming each other for what had happened. The Torah reports their conversation with God as follows:

Then [God] asked . . . “Did you eat of the tree from which I had forbidden you to eat?”
[Adam] said, “The woman You put at my side—she gave me of the tree, and I ate.”
And God said to Eve, “What is this you have done!”
And Eve replied, “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.”

(Genesis 3:11–13)

Adam and Eve each offer an excuse for eating the forbidden fruit. Adam blames God for putting Eve at his side. Eve blames the serpent for tricking her. No one says: “It’s my fault. I am sorry. Forgive me. I made a mistake.” Neither Adam nor Eve is willing to take responsibility for what has happened.

Perhaps that is why they were expelled from the Garden of Eden. They changed the meaning of God’s original commandment by not reporting it accurately. Then, after they had eaten from the fruit of the forbidden tree, they sought to place the blame on God, on the serpent, and on each other. For misrepresenting what they had been told and for refusing to accept responsibility for their actions, God expelled them from Eden.

PEREK DALET: *We Are Responsible for One Another*

The tenth-century Babylonian scholar and head of the Babylonian Academy at Sura, Sa’adia ben

Joseph Ha-Gaon, commented that “the human being is the purpose of creation.”

This understanding that human beings were created in “the image of God” and, therefore, represent the highest expression of God’s power and love led Jewish teachers to the conclusion that every human life is sacred. And, because it is, human beings must not only care for the world in which they live but bear a special obligation to care about one another.

The life or death of the world

The Mishnah says that “Adam was created as a single person in order to teach that, if one murders another person, the Torah holds him responsible for the death of a whole world. And, if a person saves the life of one person, the Torah considers him as if he saved the whole world.” (Sanhedrin 4:5)

For Jewish tradition, each human life is a precious and sacred world of possibilities. Not only does each person possess special talents, thoughts, and abilities but from each person others are born and the chain of humanity continues. “Each person is a world,” the rabbis commented. Therefore individuals contain within themselves future worlds.

That is what made the murder of Abel by Cain such a serious offense. When the rabbis discussed the murder, they pointed out an unusual phrasing of God’s statement to Abel. God said to him: “Behold, your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground!” (Genesis 4:10) In the Hebrew, the words *deme* [*achicha*] *tzoakim* are plural and may be translated, “[your brother’s] *bloods* cry out.”

According to the rabbis the phrase “*bloods* cry out” is an indication that Cain murdered more than just Abel. He also destroyed Abel’s future generations. They tell us that God said to Cain: “Not only are you responsible for murdering your brother, but you have also murdered his unborn offspring. The voice of your brother’s blood, and of all his would-be descendants whom you prevented from coming into the world, cries out to Me.” (*Midrash Agadah* 4,9)

In killing Abel, Cain destroyed a whole line of humanity. The great tragedy was not only the death of Abel but the loss of all the thousands of future lives cut off with his murder.

Because Jewish tradition considers every human life sacred, it holds that each human being must care for others. We are guardians or caretakers of one another. Cain murdered his brother because he failed to understand that he was his brother's "keeper," or "guardian."

The Torah tells us that, when God saw what he had done, God asked, "Where is your brother Abel?" And Cain answered, "I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?"

The word for "keeper" in Hebrew is *shomer*, which also means "guardian," or the one who is responsible to look out for the safety and security of others. Cain failed to see himself as the *keeper* or *guardian* of his brother. He did not believe that he was responsible for protecting or caring for him. As a result, when they quarreled and became angry with each other, he struck and killed him.

We are guardians

A famed chasidic teacher, Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk (1788–1859), once warned his students: "Be sure to take care of your own soul and of another person's body, not of your own body and of another person's soul."

From the Torah's report of Cain's murder of his brother, Abel, we are taught that each human life is sacred and that we are guardians of one another. Our duty is to protect one another both physically

and spiritually. We are obligated to be concerned about one another's safety, health, and welfare. Human beings are responsible for one another.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Why have human beings throughout the centuries created explanations about the creation of the world and human beings?
2. The nineteenth-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once commented: "The world is beautiful but has a disease called humanity." How would Jewish thinkers respond to such an observation?
3. In one day American miners dig up 625 acres of land, almost one square mile; they clean up and replant about 337 acres. In one day Americans produce 1.5 million pounds of hazardous waste. In what other ways are human beings not "caring" for the world we inhabit? Why? What, according to Jewish tradition, are our obligations?
4. There is a Yiddish proverb that states: "A half-truth is a whole lie." Would you agree? Are there times when the truth should not be spoken? Why do so many of us, like Eve, have difficulty telling the truth?
5. In light of our discussion of Cain and Abel, what can we say about the scope of human destruction during World War II when eleven million men, women, and children, including six million Jews, were killed?