

# Creation

There are a myriad issues and challenges that we all face every day. Coping with life can be exhausting and exhilarating. But needing to know when exactly the universe or the earth were created is surely is not amongst them. Some people choose to believe it all happened 5776 years ago precisely, either on Rosh Hashanah in the seventh month or in Nissan, the first month. Others incline towards scientific theories that posit a date many millions of years ago.

According to Wikipedia (the easiest, quickest, but not necessarily the least disputed source readily available nowadays):

“The Big Bang theory is the prevailing cosmological model describing the development of the Universe. Space and time were created in the Big Bang, and these were imbued with a fixed amount of energy and matter; as space expands, the density of that matter and energy decreases. After the initial expansion, the Universe cooled sufficiently to allow the formation first of subatomic particles and later of simple atoms. Giant clouds of these primordial elements later coalesced through gravity to form stars. Assuming that the prevailing model is correct, the age of the Universe is measured to be  $13.799 \pm 0.021$  billion years.”

Well, you can see how out of date I am because whereas I wrote above about millions of years, Wikipedia gives it as billions. That's inflation for you. But notice too how the text says “prevailing cosmological model”, which keeps all options open and is not doctrinaire. It simply means “based on the current evidence”, which might of course change one day, in either direction. When it comes to the age of the earth, the author of another Wikipedia article is a trifle more dogmatic:

“Earth formed around 4.54 billion years ago by accretion from the solar nebula... One very large collision is thought to have been responsible for tilting the Earth at an angle and forming the Moon. Over time, the planet cooled and formed a solid crust, allowing liquid water to exist on the surface.”

All this is important information for anyone who wishes to be up-to-date with current scientific theories. Indeed anyone interested in having a conversation with an educated person nowadays will need to assume that these opinions are the default ones. But that does not stop many apparently intelligent people from believing something altogether different, to the effect that the world is only a matter of thousands of years, not billions. I once knew a professor of nuclear physics at King's College London, no less, who believed, or said he believed, precisely that. Not only, but almost everyone who calls himself or herself Charedi, Chabad, Chasidic, not to

mention all the significant Ba'al Teshuva (internal evangelical) movements within Judaism today, also claims to believe that.

Creationists are a breed of people who believe that God created the heavens and the earth in whatever manner and time frame the Almighty "chose." If that were all, I might be amongst them. But most of them go a step further and also dispute the age of the universe based on a literal reading of the Bible, assuming that Biblical "days" are the same as ours. Which in itself raises problems, as the sun was not "put in place in the heavens" until the fourth day. Of course the age of the universe does not necessarily have any bearing on whether God created it all, because you can have your cake and eat it by believing that it was God who initiated the Big Bang. Time scales, as much in the Bible, were based on earlier Sumerian and Mesopotamian calendars, just as Western calendars are products of Christian theologians.

But what this dispute really highlights is the difference between "Emunah Peshutah" (simple, unquestioning belief) on the one hand, and belief that is prepared to accommodate science and rationalism on the other. The world in general is indeed divided along these lines on almost everything from climate change to whether a Sunni has the obligation to kill a Shia or a Kofir and vice versa. It's not unlike the difference between people who are superstitious and those who are not, between those who choose to follow the herd and those who stand apart. Not everyone has a high I.Q or a penchant for philosophy. No two people are the same, so why should we expect everyone to think or feel in exactly the same way?

I believe in freedom, in the right of individuals to make their own choices wherever possible (provided they do no harm to others they disagree with) about how they live and what they choose to believe. If they want to believe in little men from outer space building pyramids, that's their right. If they want to believe that all Jews want to control the world, are in league with the devil, drink human blood for evening cocktails, that is their right, no matter how crazy or illogical. But once they try to harm anyone, they should be disabled before they kill someone.

Does it really matter to me how many thousands or millions or billions of years ago the earth was created? I am interested, but it really makes absolutely no actual difference. My relationship with God and the way I live a religious life are not at all based on scientific knowledge, but on internal spiritual intuition. You might call it "Simple Faith". It is in one way. But I draw its line at the essential, not the peripheral. I do not believe that smashing willow branches on Hoshana Raba is a matter of life or death. It is significant, but a custom, after all, however ancient.

As we begin this week reading the Torah again, starting with creation, what I take from it is not a scientific theory but rather the idea that there us a spiritual dimension to our lives as well as a physical one. To reject or deny either is to limit one's capacity to cope with life, to enjoy it. Our task is to strive to fulfil our potential in whichever we we are most inclined. Belief, religion, is a means to an end, not an end in itself.