

When Was the Universe Created?

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The celebration of *Rosh Hashana* takes place every year on the first and second days of *Tishrei*. This is a time in which we send out greetings for a sweet new year and begin the count of a new year from the time of creation. This past year in all letters and Jewish legal documents we made reference to the year 5769 and in this coming year we will inaugurate the year of 5770 starting with the first day of *Tishrei*. Nonetheless, the notion that the creation of the world took place in *Tishrei* is not universally accepted.

The Talmud in Tractate *Rosh Hashana* (10b) records a disagreement between R' Eliezer and R' Yehoshua regarding when the world was created. According to R' Eliezer, the world was created in the month of *Tishrei*. According to R' Yehoshua, the world was created in the month of *Nissan*.

According to the *Midrash* (e.g., *Midrash Rabbah*, *Parshat Devorim*), even if one assumes the position of R' Eliezer, the world was actually created on the 25th day of *Elul*. However, since man, who represents the ultimate purpose of creation, was created on the sixth day which corresponds to the first of *Tishrei*, this day is considered to be the true beginning of creation (see *Maharsha to Rosh Hashana* 16a).

The Chassidic Master Harav Tzvi Elimelech, author of the work *B'nai Yissaschar*, explains based on this calculation (*Tamuz-Av*, *Ma'amar* 4, “*Betula Be'Machoz*”) the significance of the 15th day of *Av* and the 15th day of *Sh'vat*. Each date precedes the first day of creation by 40 days, either according to the view of R' Eliezer (in which case the actual first day of creation was the 25th day of *Elul*) or the view of R' Yehoshua (in which case the actual first day of creation was the 25th day of *Adar*, see *Tosafot Rosh Hashanah* 8a s.v. “*le'Tekufot*”). The Talmud tells us (*Sota* 2a) that forty days before a child is created, a *Bat Kol* (heavenly voice) declares the future *zivug* (destined partner) for that child. The reason why these days are special days of celebration for the Jewish people is in part due to the fact that these were the days when it was determined that the Jewish nation would be “wed” to *Hashem* through the Torah.

However, it seems odd that both days would be viewed as days of creation. Presumably the correct view would be in accordance with either R' Yehoshua or R' Eliezer, but not both. Which is really the accepted view?

The Talmud (*Rosh Hashana* 27a) quotes R' Shmuel ben Yitzchak as noting that the prayer recited on *Rosh Hashana* containing the words “*zeh hayom techilat ma'asekha*” (this is the day which was the beginning of your creation) is clearly in accordance with the view of R' Eliezer that the world was created in *Tishrei*.

Additionally, the *Ibn Ezra* (*Vayikra* 25, 9) cites several proofs that the world was created in *Tishrei*, including the fact that the Torah states explicitly that the shofar is blown on Yom Kippur of the jubilee year. It stands to reason, argues the *Ibn Ezra*, that this act of blowing the *shofar*, which signifies the start of the jubilee year, would take place at the moment in time signifying the true beginning of the year.

Despite the foregoing, there are many sources that substantiate the position that the world was created in Nissan. This past year, we recited *birkhat hachama*, the blessing on the sun, during the month of Nissan. This blessing is recited when the sun returns to its original position in the heavens (*Tekufat Nissan*) on the same date and at the same moment as when the sun was created on the fourth day of creation. The calculation of the time for *birkhat hachama* as corresponding to *tekufat Nissan* is predicated upon the assumption that the creation of the world was in Nissan, in accordance with the view of R' Yehoshua. Furthermore, the Talmud in *Rosh Hashana* 12a clearly states that all *tekufot* (astronomical seasons) are calculated in accordance with R' Yehoshua's view.

Is there a way to reconcile the discrepancy between the liturgical description of *Rosh Hashana* in *Tishrei* as being the beginning of creation and the astronomical calculation of *birkhat hachama* and *tekufot* which assume that Nissan is the beginning of creation? In his book *Bircas Hachammah* (pages 76-77), Rabbi J. David Bleich quotes a novel explanation from the *Sefer Or haChammah*. A *midrash* in *Bereishit Rabbah* 10:4 states that the planets and spheres traveled at an extremely rapid speed prior to the time of Adam's sin (on the sixth day of creation). According to this explanation, the planets traveled so fast that they completed a six month journey in an actual time frame of two days between the placement of the heavenly bodies in the firmament on the fourth day of creation in *tekufat Nissan*, and the time of the creation of man on the sixth day of creation. Consequently, even though the world was created on the first day of Nissan, the sixth day of creation actually took place on the first day of *Tishrei*.

A different approach is apparently taken by the author of the *Maset Binyamin* in his responsa (*teshuva* 101). The *Maset Binyamin* addresses the question of how we can engage in the contradictory practice of calculating the time for *birkhat hachama* based on the astronomical calculations of Shmuel and at the same time calculate our 19 year calendar cycle, including leap years, based on the astronomical calculations of Rav Adda, according to whose calculations *birkhat hachama* should ostensibly never be recited because the sun has never returned at the same time to its precise location that it occupied upon the fourth day of creation. The *Maset Binyamin* responds that in these matters we need not be bothered by contradictions since, after all, we also calculate years based on the assumption that the world was created in *Tishrei* and yet calculate astronomical seasons based on the assumption that the world was created in Nissan.

This approach of the *Maset Binyamin* may be better understood in light of the comments of *Rabbeinu Tam* quoted by *Tosafot* (*Rosh Hashana* 27a). In a liturgical poem designed for the holiday of *Shmini Atzeret*, Rabbi Eliezer HaKalir describes the world as having been created in *Tishrei*, and yet in a prayer designed for the holiday of *Pesach*, he describes the world as having been created in *Nissan*. In response to this discrepancy, *Rabbeinu Tam* formulates a fascinating response. Both views (“*Elu V’Elu*”) are correct. The world was created both in *Tishrei* and in *Nissan*!

How could the world have been created both in *Tishrei* and in *Nissan*? *Rabbeinu Tam* explains that in *machshava* (thought) the creation of the world was conceived by Hashem in the month of *Tishrei*, but in actual *ma’aseh* (deed) the world was physically created in *Nissan*.

Based on this answer, we may interpret the *Maset Binyamin* in similar fashion. There can be multiple truths with respect to our perspectives towards understanding creation. Depending upon different perspectives, or different objectives in explaining and applying astronomical phenomena, even contradictory results can be reconciled. Thus, while creation took place at a specific moment, different aspects of the beginning of creation may well have occurred at different times. Similarly, while the calculations of Shmuel and Rav Adda regarding the length of the solar year may differ, they may differ based on different methodologies of how to quantify astronomical data, and each approach may have merit for purposes of different types of *halakhic* calculations.

The *Torah Temima* similarly writes (*Bereishit*, Chapter 1, notes 44 and 50) that for purposes of *birkhat hachama*, we follow the opinion of *Rabbeinu Tam* that the world was physically created in *Nissan*. However, we nonetheless describe the beginning of *Tishrei* as “*techilat ma’asekha*” – the “beginning of the works of Hashem,” because we follow the opinion of *Rabbeinu Tam* that the world was created in thought on *Tishrei*. Since from a divine perspective there is no differentiation between thought and deed (see *Bemidbar* 23:19), the world is considered created by Hashem from the moment that the idea of creation was conceived, in accordance with the opinion of R’ Eliezer.

The *Arukh Le’Ner* (*Rosh Hashana* 11a) utilizes the distinction of *Rabbeinu Tam* to answer a question posed by the *Ran* (*Rosh Hashana* 16a). The *Ran* (*Rosh Hashana* 16a) asks that according to the view of R’ Yehoshua that the world was created in *Nissan*, shouldn’t we count the years and celebrate *Rosh Hashana* in *Nissan* rather than *Tishrei*? He answers that since *Yom Kippur* is the time that Hashem declared that he was forgiving the Jewish people, it is appropriate to celebrate *Rosh Hashana* during a time of forgiveness. The *Maharsha* critiques this answer, indicating that *Rosh Hashana* should then be celebrated on the day of *Yom Kippur* which is the 10th day of *Tishrei*, rather than the first day of *Tishrei*. Rather, the *Maharsha* explains that *Tishrei* was chosen for *Rosh Hashana* because of the auspicious events that occurred during the first day of *Tishrei*, such as the pregnancies of Sarah and Rachel and the release of Yosef from his Egyptian jail cell. Therefore, the first day of *Tishrei* was deemed as a fitting time for the “day of judgment” since it is the time when the deeds of all men are recounted by Hashem.

The *Arukh Le’Ner* suggests a different answer consistent with the approach of the *Torah Temima*. Assuming *Rabbeinu Tam*’s distinction between thought and deed, even R’ Yehoshua is in agreement that the world was created in thought at the beginning of *Tishrei*. As *Rashi* notes on the first verse in the Torah, it was originally the intention of *Hashem* to create the world based solely on “*din*” – strict judgment. Upon observing that the world would not be able to survive based on strict judgment, *Hashem* added the attribute of “*rachamim*” – of mercy, to exist alongside the attribute of strict judgment. Thus, in establishing the day for *Rosh Hashana*, which is the “*yom din*” – the day of judgment, it was appropriate to choose the first day of *Tishrei* because that was the day of the original intention to create the world only based on “*din*”.

Based on this distinction, the *Arukh Le’Ner* explains why in the entire description of the story of creation the Torah (*Bereishit* 1:1-2:3) employs the term “*Elokim*,” which denotes the attribute of strict judgment, while afterwards (*Bereishit* 2:4) the Torah describes the first day of creation as “*be’yom asot Hashem Elokim Eretz Ve’Shamayim*” (“the day that *Hashem Elokim* made heaven and earth”), indicating that from the very first day the world was created with an commingling of the attribute of strict judgment (“*Elokim*”) together with the attribute of mercy denoted by the term “*Hashem*.” The answer, suggests the *Arukh Le’Ner*, is that the term “*Elokim*” in the story of creation describes the time of the thought process of creation in *Tishrei*, while the Torah’s description of “*beyom a’sot*” is a reference to the later time in *Nissan* that the physical creation of the world took place, when indeed strict judgment was mixed together with mercy.

Along these lines, the *Tzitz Eliezer* (18:37) quotes the *Ari Hakodesh* as elucidating the famous passage recited on *Rosh Hashana* in the *Mussaf* service, “*hayom harat olam*” (“today is the day of the conception of the universe”). Birth consists of two components: conception and birth. The first day of *Tishrei* marks the day of the conception of the universe. The first day of *Nissan* marks the date of the birth of the universe. Accordingly, explains the *Tzitz Eliezer*, every single year on the first day of *Tishrei*, the same thought process that accompanied the first day of *Tishrei* at the time of creation, to judge based on “*din*” – strict judgment, becomes resuscitated, and it is our job each *Rosh Hashana* to convert the attribute of strict judgment into the attribute of mercy. This is the meaning of the verse (*Tehillim* 47) that we recite on *Rosh Hashana* immediately prior to the blowing of the *Shofar*: “*ala Elokim b’Truah, Hashem b’kol Shofar*” (“*Elokim* has ascended with a blast, *Hashem* with the sound of the *Shofar*”), namely that the attribute of “*Elokim*” (of strict judgment) present on the day of *Rosh Hashana* should turn into the attribute of “*Hashem*” (of mercy) as denoted by the latter part of the verse.

Interestingly, the *Mishna Berura* (592:5), in commenting upon the prayer “*hayom harat olam*,” actually notes (based on the *Magen Avrohom*) that this prayer is appropriate despite the fact that we essentially accept the opinion that the world was physically created in *Nissan*, because of the fact that it was *Tishrei* that the idea of creation was conceived even though the actual creation did not take place until *Nissan*. Thus, the *Mishna Berura* appears to codify *Rabbeinu Tam*’s distinction as *halakha*.

This distinction also presents us with an understanding of the dual significance of the 15th day of *Av* and the 15th day of *Sh’vat* as representing the days signifying the destiny of *klal yisroel* to have

a special relationship with *HaKadosh Barukh Hu*. Both days, explains the *B'nei Yissaschar*, represent the advent of the dual aspects of creation.

On a final note, the *Vilna Gaon* (*Orach Chaim* 581:1, based on the *Ran*) explains that the differing practices with respect to when to begin reciting *slichot* is dependent on the dispute between R' Yehoshua and R' Eliezer. The practice to begin reciting *slichot* the week before *Rosh Hashana* is in accordance to the view of R' Eliezer that man was created on the first day of *Tishrei* and therefore the world was created on the 25th day of *Elul*. Since the world was effectively created on the 25th day of *Elul*, *slichot* are begun on a date that is roughly consistent with that date from year to year. By contrast, those who recite *slichot* from the beginning of *Elul* are following the view of R' Yehoshua that the world was created in *Nissan*, and therefore there is no special status attributable to the 25th day of *Elul*. Rather, it makes sense to begin the recitation of *slichot* on the first day of *Elul* because that is the day which began the final forgiveness period when *Moshe Rabbeinu* ascended the mountain of Sinai to receive the second set of tablets from Hashem. According to this approach, the dispute as to when the world was created is actually a dispute between the *Ashkenazim* (who begin reciting *slichot* the week before *Rosh Hashana*) and *Sefardim* (who begin reciting *slichot* at the beginning of *Elul*).

Even according to this explanation of the *Vilna Gaon*, we should bear in mind the everlasting truth of *Rabbeinu Tam*'s premise – “*Elu V'Elu Divrei Elokim Chayim*.” Each of these practices, representing both the *Ashkenazic* and *Sefardic* traditions, is predicated upon a legitimate Torah perspective.

Of course, this discussion also underscores how matters of creation are fundamentally beyond our comprehension, and we can at best gain a small glimpse of understanding from an analysis of these sources.

There is, nonetheless, at least one important insight for the season of repentance that we can draw from the dichotomy of thought and deed articulated by *Rabbeinu Tam*. During these days of repentance and introspection, when the world was originally created “in thought” for the purpose of being created at a later time “in deed,” we should strive to purify our minds and thoughts in order to ensure that the pure and good intentions that we express on *Rosh Hashana* translate into proper and righteous deeds during the rest of the year. *K'tiva V'chatima Tova*.