

Year for year on Simchat Torah we turn our Torah scrolls back to the Book of Genesis to begin the process of reading anew the 5 books of the Torah. But before we read the first part of Genesis, we read the final parashah of Deuteronomy, merging the old into the new. Although we count time linearly, we know that within each time period there are recurring cycles. Chronological discrepancies in the Torah inspired the sages of the Talmud to develop the principle of “there is no earlier or later in the Torah,” i.e., Torah time is cyclical, not linear. When we begin reading Genesis, we are not simply revisiting the past; we are building upon its foundation, re-creating it with the insights of the past year. Things we used to find boring, puzzling, or irritating may suddenly come into focus, while others may lose or change their significance. In addition, the first word of the Torah is a linguistic challenge buried in a theological minefield. B'reshit (בְּרֵאשִׁית) begins with an indefinite article, which correctly translated means in a beginning. In other words, creation may have already been underway, and verse 1 introduces all that follows. Rashi concurs with his comments on 1:2 “... and God’s spirit hovered over the surface of the water” (1:2): “... from which we can infer that the creation of water preceded that of the earth. Furthermore, heaven was created from fire and water, proving that water existed beforehand. You must therefore admit that the Torah here teaches nothing about the sequence of Creation.” And then we must grapple with 2 conflicting creation stories. Today most of us agree that our scriptures were authored by different people at different times, from differing perspectives, but with striking similarities to myths and legends from around the world. But does it really matter? As we mature, we accumulate a variety of perspectives that help us find significance in each version, even if we do not take either of them literally. The first is about order and classification. It is linear, progressing from emptiness, darkness, and chaos to a fully formed Earth with humans at the pinnacle, equipped and commanded to not only inhabit, but also to subdue it. The second begins with the creation of a man. It is anything but linear, jumping from describing the land and its rivers to planting the Garden of Eden with its two fateful trees, to observing that the man is still alone, to having the man name all the animals, to finally creating woman from the body of the man. Scholarship, science, and mythology aside, one of the most important gleanings from these differing versions is the realization that as human beings, we are not only able to process both, we also need both to understand and appreciate our own complexity. To some extent, we are all able to think logically as well as creatively, but some of us are more analytical than intuitive while others are just the opposite. The first story speaks to our analytical side, the second stimulates our creative nature, and we can – and must – relate to both for healthy balance. In the first story HaShem is אֱלֹהִים *elohim*, a plural noun that takes a singular verb. The Hebrew root *el* denotes power *elim* (mighty ones) are pagan gods, and *Elohim* emphasizes HaShem’s role as the transcendent, powerful creator of the universe. After creating an inhabitable environment and pronouncing each step good, Elohim creates man and woman together, in the image and likeness of Elohim, calling all that has been created very good. This is a story of majesty and power, of work and achievement, and of satisfaction and reward upon completion. In the second story, HaShem, now called יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים (HaShem Elohim), creates **the** man first *min ha’adamah* (from the soil) and breathes the soul of life into his nostrils. It is noteworthy that in the first version man (*adam*) does not have a definite article, i.e., Elohim creates humanity as a species in Elohim’s image. In the second, it is **ha-adam** – **the** human, i.e., a specific person from which male and female emerge. HaShem Elohim then plants a garden and places the man there to work and guard it. This roundabout, disorganized story is about the relationship between Creator and creation. In the first, man is at the top of the food chain, and is commanded to fill and subdue the earth. In the second, the man is told to be the custodian of his environment, and he is simply asked to name, not to dominate, all the animals Elohim HaShem creates and shows him. And Elohim HaShem sees that the man is lonely because he has not found a suitable helpmate, so he creates one for him, because “it is not good that man is alone.” (2:18) This is not only a story about relationships, it is also a story about empathy. Elohim creates; HaShem interacts with creation. The first story lacks individual names; it’s almost as though Elohim were creating objects. In the second HaShem names the garden and the four main rivers. It is also the first mention of humanity having a soul: “God formed the human our of dust of the ground, and blew into his nostrils a soul of life (*nish’mat chayim*) and the human became a living being. (2:7) *Adam* signifies mortality – our bodies come from the soil and return to it. Later, after the incident with the serpent and before banishment from Eden, Adam names his wife *Chava* because she is “the mother of all life.” We are all mortal, but because we are able to procreate, life continues. Creation is an unending process of birth, death, and rebirth. So, in this year’s beginning, once again “Turn it, and turn it [the Torah], for everything is in it. Reflect on it and grow old and gray with it ...” (Ben Bag-Bag in Pirke Avot, 5:22). Yes, we’ve spiraled back to another beginning, a year older, and with another year’s worth of experience. What new vistas will this year’s cycle of Torah readings open for you? It’s not too late to say *shannah tovah* – and may your Torah gleanings be sweet!