

Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer

CHAPTER III: PREMUNDANE CREATION

Page 9

R. ELIEZER BEN HYRKANOS opened (his discourse with the text), “Who can utter the mighty acts of the Lord, or show forth all his praise?” (Ps. 106:2). Is there any man who can utter the mighty acts of the Holy One, blessed be He, or who can show forth all His praise? Not even the ministering angels are able to narrate (the Divine praise). But to investigate a part of His mighty deeds with reference to what He has done, and what He will do in the future (is permissible), so that His name should be exalted among His creatures, whom He has

Page 10

created, from one end of the world to the other, as it is said, “One generation to another shall laud your works” (Ps. 145:4).

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. He began to trace (the foundations of) the world before Himself, but it would not stand. They told a parable, To what is the matter like? To a king who wishes to build a palace for himself. If he had not traced in the earth its foundations, its exits and its entrances, he does not begin to build. Likewise the Holy One, blessed be He, was tracing (the plans of) the word

before Himself, but it did not remain standing until He created repentance.

Seven things were created before the world was created.

Page 11

They are: The Torah, Gehinnom, the Garden of Eden, the Throne of Glory, the Temple, Repentance, and the Name of the Messiah.

Whence do we know that this applies to the Torah? Because it is said, “The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works *of old*” (Prov. 8:22). “Of old” means before the world was created. Whence do we know this with regard to the Garden of Eden? Because it is said, “And the Lord God planted a garden of *old*” (Gen. 2:8). “*Of old*,” whilst as yet the world had not been created. Whence do we know this with reference to the Throne of Glory? Because it is said, “Thy throne is established *of old*” (Ps. 93:2). “Of old,” whilst as yet the world had not been created. Whence do we know

Page 12

that Repentance (was premundane)? Because it is said, “*Before* the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world” (Ps. 90:2); and then in close proximity (we read), “Thou turnest man to contrition” (Ps. 90:3). “Before,” *i.e.* before the world was created. Whence do we know this with regard to the temple? Because it is said, “A glorious throne, set on high

from the beginning, is the place of our *sanctuary*” (Jer. 17:12). “From the beginning,” while as yet the world had not been created. Whence do we know that the name of the Messiah (was premundane)? Because it is said, “His name shall endure for ever; before the sun Yinnôn was his name” (Ps. 72:17). “Yinnôn,” before the world had been created. Another verse says, “But thou, Bethlehem Ephrathah, which art to be least among the thousands of Judah, from thee shall he come forth unto me who is to be ruler over Israel; whose ancestry belongs to the *past*, even to the days of old” (Mic. 5:2). “The past,” while as yet the world had not been created.

Forthwith the Holy One, blessed be He, took counsel with the Torah whose name is Tushijah (Stability or Wisdom) with reference to the creation of the world. (The Torah) replied and said to Him: Sovereign of the worlds!

Page 13

if there be no host for the king and if there be no camp for the king, over whom does he rule? If there be no people to praise the king, where is the honour of the king? The Holy One, blessed be He, heard this and it pleased him. The Torah spake: The Holy One, blessed be He, took counsel with me concerning the creation of the world, and it is said, “Counsel is mine, and sound knowledge; I am understanding; I have might”

(Prov. 8:14). Hence they say, “Every government which has no counselors is not a proper government.” Whence do we know this? From the government of the House of David which employed counsellors, as it is said, “And

Jonathan David's uncle was a counsellor, a man of understanding, and a scribe" (I Chron. 27:32). If the government of the House of David had counsellors, how much more so should other people act likewise. This is of benefit to them, as it is said, "But he that hearkeneth unto counsel is wise" (Prov. 12:15), and (Scripture) says, "But in the multitude of counsellors there is safety" (Prov. 11:14).

Eight things were created on the first day, namely,

Page 14

Heaven, Earth, Light, Darkness, Tohu (Chaos), Bohu (Void), Wind (or Spirit), and Water, as it is said, "And the wind of God was moving upon the face of the *waters*" (Gen. 1:2).

Page 15

Whence were the heavens created? From the light of the garment with which He was robed. He took (of this light) and stretched it like a garment and (the heavens) began to extend continually until He caused them to hear, "It is sufficient." Therefore is He called God Almighty (*El Shaddai*), who said to the world: "*It is sufficient,*" and it stood (firm). 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 stretches out the heavens like a curtain" (Ps. 104:2).

Whence was the earth created? He took of the snow

Page 16

(or ice) which was beneath His Throne of Glory and threw it upon the waters, and the waters became so congealed so that the dust of the earth was formed, as it is said, “He saith to the snow, Be thou earth” (Job 37:6).

The hooks of the heavens are fixed in the waters of the ocean. The waters of the ocean are situated between the ends of the heavens and the ends of the earth. The ends of the heavens are spread out over the waters of the ocean, as it is said, “Who layeth the beams of his chambers in the waters” (Ps. 104:3).

The dome (or inside shape) of the heavens ascends upwards like a tub, (that is to say) like a tent (*denda*) which is spread out with its extremities (fixed) _ downwards and its dome stretching upwards so that people can sit beneath it and their feet stand on the earth, whilst all of them are inside the tent; in like wise are the heavens, their extremities are (fixed) downwards and their dome stretches upwards

Page 17

and all creatures dwell beneath them as in a tent, as it is said, “And he spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in” (Isa. 40:22).

Four quarters have been created in the world; the quarter facing the east, that facing the south, that facing the west and that facing the north. From the quarter facing the east the light goes forth to the world. From the quarter facing south the dews of blessing and the rains of blessing go forth to the world. From the quarter facing west where

are the treasuries of snow and the treasuries of hail, and thence come forth into the world cold and heat and rains. From the quarter facing north darkness goeth forth into the world. The quarter facing north He created, but He did not complete it, for He said, Anyone who says: I am a God, let him come and complete this quarter which I have left (incomplete) and all will know that he is a God.

There (in the north) is the abode of the destroying spirits, earthquakes, winds, demons, lightnings and thunders; thence evil issues forth into the world, as it is said, “Out of the north evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the earth” (Jer. 1:14). Some say by ten Sayings was

Page 18

the world created, and in three (Divine attributes) are these (ten Sayings) comprised, as it is said, “The Lord by wisdom founded the earth; by understanding he established the heavens, by his knowledge the depths were broken up” (Prov. 3:19, 20). By these three (attributes) was the Tabernacle made, as it is said, “And I have filled him with the spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, and with knowledge” (Exod. 31:3). Likewise with these three (attributes) was the Temple made, as it is said, “He was the son of a widow woman of the tribe of Naphtali, and his father was a man of Tyre, a worker in brass; and he was filled with wisdom and understanding and knowledge” (1 Kings 7:14). By these three attributes it will be rebuilt in the future, as it is said, “Through wisdom is a house built;

and by understanding it is established ; and by knowledge are the chambers filled” (Prov. 24:3, 4).

With these three attributes will the Holy One, blessed be He, give three good gifts to Israel in the future, as it is

Page 19

said, “For the Lord will give wisdom, out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding” (Prov. 2:6). It is not said, “The Lord has given wisdom.” These three attributes will be given to King Messiah, as it is said, “And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord” (Isa. 11:2).

Page 20

CHAPTER IV: CREATION ON THE SECOND DAY

On the second day the Holy One, blessed be He, created the firmament, the angels, fire for flesh and blood, and the fire of Gehinnom. Were not heaven and earth created on the first day, as it is said, “In the beginning God created⁶ the heaven and the earth”

(Gen. 1:1)? Which firmament

Page 21

was created on the second day? Rabbi Eliezer said: It was the firmament which is above the heads of the four

Chajjôth (living creatures), (as it is said), “And over the head of the four Chajjôth there was the likeness of a firmament, like the colour of the terrible crystal” (Ezek. 1:22). What is the meaning of (the expression), “like the colour of the terrible crystal”? It means like precious stones and pearls; it illuminates all the heavens like a lamp which is illuminating the whole house and like the sun which is shining with maximum intensity at noonday, as it is said, “The light dwelleth with him” (Dan. 2:22); and like this in the future will the righteous shed light, as it is said, “And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament” (Dan. 12:3). Were it not for that firmament the world would be engulfed by the waters above it and below it; but (the firmament) divides the waters (above) from the waters (below), as it is said, “And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, (and let it divide the waters from the waters)” (Gen. 1:6), it illuminates between the waters above and the waters below.

(As for) the angels created on the second day, when they are sent (as messengers) by His word they are changed into winds, and when they minister before Him they are changed into fire, as it is said, “Who

Page 22

makes his angels winds; his ministers a flaming fire” (Ps. 104:4).

Four classes of ministering angels minister and utter praise before the Holy One, blessed be He: the first camp (led by) Michael on His right, the second camp (led by) Gabriel on His left, the third camp (led by) Uriel before

Him, and the fourth camp (led by) Raphael behind Him; and the Shekhinah of the Holy One, blessed be He, is in the center. He is sitting on a throne high and exalted. His throne is high and suspended above in the air. The appearance of His Glory is like the colour of amber. And the adornment if a crown is on His head, and the Ineffable Name is upon His forehead. One half (of His glory) is fire the other half is hail, at His right hand is life and at His

Page 23

left is death. He has a scepter of fire in His hand and a veil is spread before Him, and His eyes run to and fro throughout the whole earth, and the seven angels, which were created first, minister before Him within the veil, and this (veil) is called Pargod. His footstool is like fire and hail. Fire is flashing continually around His throne, righteousness and judgment are the foundation of His throne. And the likeness of His throne is like a sapphire throne with four legs, and the four holy Chajjôth are fixed to each leg, each one

Page 24

has four wings, as it is said, “And every one had four faces and four wings” (Ezek. 1:6), and these (Chajjôth) are the Cherubim.

When He speaks towards the west He speaks between the two Cherubim with the face of an ox, when He speaks towards the north He speaks between the two Cherubim with the face of an eagle.

Over against them are the Ophanim (Wheels) and the Whirling Wheels of the Chariot,

Page 25

upon the earth His chariots are upon the Ophanim, and owing to the noise caused by the whirling wheels of the Chariot—lightnings and thunder go forth into the world. When He dwells in heaven He rideth upon a swift cloud. When He hastens He flies upon the wings of the wind, as it is said, “And he rode upon a cherub, and did fly; yea, he flew swiftly upon the wings of the wind” (Ps. 18:10).

The Chajjôth stand next to the throne of His glory and they do not know the place of His glory. The Chajjôth stand in awe and dread, in fear and trembling and from the perspiration of their faces a river of fire arises and goes forth before Him, as it is said, “A fiery stream issued and came forth before him...” (Dan. 7:10). And the wings of Gallizur the angel, who stands next to the Chajjôth, (are spread forth) so that the fire which consumes the fire of the angels should not burn (them). Two Seraphim stand, one on His right and one on His left, each one has six wings, with twain they cover their face so as not to behold the presence of the Shekhinah, with twain they cover their feet so that they should not be seen before the presence of the Shekhinah, so that the standing of the foot of the calf might be forgotten. With twain do they fly,

Page 26

praising and reverencing, and they sanctify. One answers and another calls, one calls and another answers, and they say, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of Hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory” (Isa. 6:3).

The Chajjôth stand at the side of the throne of His glory and they do not know the place of His glory; they respond and say in every place where His glory is, “Blessed be the glory of the Lord from his place” (Ezek. 3:12). Israel, a nation unique on the earth, declares daily the unity of His great Name, saying, “Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is one” (Deut. 6:4). He answers His people Israel and says to them, I am the Lord your God who has delivered you from every trouble.

Page 27

CHAPTER V: THE GATHERING OF THE WATERS

On the third day all the earth was flat like a plain and the waters covered the surface of all the earth. When the word of the Almighty was uttered, “Let the waters be gathered together” (Gen. 1:9), the mountains and hills arose from the ends of the earth and they were scattered over the surface of all the earth, and valleys were formed over the inner parts of the earth; and the waters were rolled together and gathered into the valleys, as it is said, “And the gathering together of the waters he called seas” (Gen. 1:10).

Forthwith the waters became proud and they arose to cover the earth as at first, when the Holy One, blessed be He, rebuked them and subdued them, and placed them beneath the soles of His feet, and measured them with

Page 28

the hollow of His hand¹ that they should neither decrease nor increase. He made the sand as the boundary of the sea, just like a man who makes a fence for his vineyard. When they rise and see the sand before they return to their former place, as it is said, “Fear ye not me? saith the Lord: will ye not tremble at my presence, which have placed the sand for the bound of the sea?” (Jer. 5:22).

Before the waters were gathered together the depths were created. These are the depths which are beneath the earth; for the earth is spread upon the water like a ship which floats in the midst of the sea, so likewise is the earth spread out over the water, as it is said, “To him that spread forth the earth above the waters...” (Ps. 136:6). He opened an entrance to the Garden of Eden because thence were planted upon the face of all

Page 29

the earth all kinds of trees yielding fruit according to their kind, and all kinds of herbs and grass¹ thereof, and in them (was seed), as it is said, “Wherein is the seed thereof, upon the earth” (Gen. 1:11).

He prepared a table for the creatures whilst as yet they were not created, as it is said, “Thou preparest a table before me” (Ps. 23:5). All the fountains arise from the depths to give water to all creatures. Rabbi Joshua said: The diameter of the earth is equal to a journey of sixty years, and one of the depths which is near to Gehinnom

bubbles with water and produces water for the delight of the sons of man.

Rabbi Jehudah said: Once every month ducts rise from the depths to irrigate the face of all the earth, as it is said, “And there went up a *mist* from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground” (Gen. 2:6). The clouds cause the seas to hear the sound of their waterspouts, and the seas cause the depths to hear the sound of their waterspouts, and the deep calls to the deep to bring up waters to give them to the clouds, as it is said, “Deep

Page 30

calleth unto deep at the sound of thy waterspouts” (Ps. 42:7).

The clouds draw water from the depths, as it is said, “He causeth the vapors to ascend from the ends of the earth” (Ps. 135:7), and in every place where the King commands them, there they cause rain (to fall), and forthwith the earth becomes fruitful and yields produce like a widow who becomes pregnant through debauchery. But when the Holy One, blessed be He, desires to bless the produce of the earth, and to give provision to the creatures, He opens the good treasuries in heaven and sends rain upon the earth, namely, the fructifying rain, and forthwith the earth becomes fruitful like a bride who conceives from her first husband and produces offspring of blessing, as it is said, “The Lord shall open unto thee his good treasury the heaven.”