

Creation

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

The belief that God created the universe is a cardinal principle of the faith. Throughout the Bible this doctrine is of central importance, and is a constant theme in the synagogue liturgy. In rabbinic sources, Jewish sages speculated about the nature of the creative process. Similarly, Jewish mystics sought to explain how the universe came into being. In aggadic texts the rabbis frequently discussed the hidden meanings of the Genesis narrative. The most important early treatise, possibly from the second century CE, which describes the process of creation is the *Sefer Yetsirah* (*Book of Creation*). According to this cosmological tract, God created the universe by thirty-two mysterious paths consisting of twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet along with ten *sefirot* (divine emanations). In the Middle Ages, such doctrines were developed by religious thinkers, culminating in the cosmological theories formulated in the *Zohar*. Later in the sixteenth century, Isaac Luria developed the concept of emanation, arguing that the *Ayn Sof* (Infinite) had to contract in order to bring into being an empty space in which creation could occur.

In more recent times, Jewish writers have questioned whether in the process of forming the cosmos, God also created intelligent beings on other planets. Here the Bible offers no information. Even though rabbinic sources attest to the creation of other worlds, they too do not mention the existence of other sentient creatures. Considering this issue, some Jewish writers contend that the existence of extraterrestrial beings undermines the belief that human beings are the ultimate purpose of God's creation. Other thinkers, however, stress that even if life were found on other planets, this would have no impact on religious faith. Pondering this debate, you should ask yourself, whether the Biblical account of creation is plausible in

the light of the findings of modern science. Is there any way of reconciling the Genesis narrative with contemporary scientific discoveries about the origin of the universe? Have such theories eclipsed the mystical understanding of God's creative action? Further, you should ponder whether the discovery of intelligent life on other planets would undermine the Jewish religion. If this were to occur, could Jews still regard themselves as a unique people, chosen by God for a special task?

THINGS TO DO

- Go to Google. Look for websites dealing with Jewish mysticism, such as www.jewfaq.org/kabalah.htm. Here you will find abundant information about mystical theories concerning God's creative process.
- Stay in Google. Search for websites concerning the clash between science and religion. Look for material dealing with the Biblical account of creation and the claims of religious faith.
- Go to Amazon.com. Search for books dealing with the Jewish concept of creation as well as the conflict between science and religion.

TIPS FOR TEACHERS



- Ask a science teacher to speak to your class about modern scientific theories concerning the origin of the cosmos.
- If possible, invite a *Hasid* to speak to your class about mystical theories concerning creation.
- Stage a debate. One side should argue that science provides an adequate answer to the question: how did the universe begin? The other side should argue the opposite.