

## THE ARTIST'S TORAH

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From the earliest verses in the book of Genesis we learn of the power of language to create, not just narrative or poetry, but a world. God speaks: “Let there be...” and there is. It takes naught but sparse language to bring into being not only light but earth and sky, plant and animal, man and woman.

It should come as no surprise then, that we find wisdom in the words of Scripture, not only about a sacred covenant, the fashioning of a people, its beliefs and values, but about the very art of creating itself.

And so we begin—“In the beginning”. What appears as a simple phrase is not simple at all. The first word of Genesis in Hebrew, *b’reshit*, yields two different, even contradictory understandings. Does the text mean to say: “In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth...” suggesting that before God’s initial act, there was nothing? Or should we translate: “When God began to create heaven and earth, the earth being unformed and void...,” suggesting that the earth already existed but was unformed? In other words, is creation a crafting out of nothing or is it an ordering out of chaos?

What is the creative process that yields prose and poetry, dance, art and music? Is it an act of breathing in what is, the chaotic swirl of feeling and thought, the jumble of smells and tastes, sounds and sights and breathing out of form? Or is it a calling up from the emptiness, the void of nothingness, of absence, something new and altogether original? Might it be that the very first words of the Bible offer us the possibility that creation is both?

From the first words, we turn to the first story. What appears to be a simple account of the world's birthing is not simple at all. The author of the first chapter of Genesis seeks to capture the wonder of creation in majestic poetry. Yet no sooner than we have completed the poem, taken a breath of rest, then we begin again.

This time, in Genesis' second chapter, the world is formed anew in the rich mythic narrative of Eden, a Garden of Delights. It seems that no literary form can hold the grand process completely; each is a partial glimpse of the mystery of creation.

So it is that in the Bible everything begins as an art project. God is the Master Artist, potter and gardener, painter and musician creating with words and breath. We learn not only of God as Master Architect but of the human being created "in the image of God". As God celebrates creation and argues with it, builds and uproots, affirms and regrets so we construct and tear down, assert and repent, quarrel with the world and rejoice in it. Perhaps the Bible wishes to teach us that our share in divinity is not merely as creatures formed by God, but as divine co-creators in an ever-changing universe.