

By Rabbi Zvi Lampel

Current academia depicts the world as having existed for eons, rather than merely six millennia, and to man as a creature evolved from others. Although many Torah scholars object that these claims are in contradiction to the teachings of the Mesorah, others have claimed that one can find support among the earlier Torah authorities for accommodating the Torah to academia's depiction. This essay takes issue with this claim.

It is not implausible that despite someone's endeavors to make a point clear and simple—despite his striving to expunge any ambiguities and to prevent any misconstruing of what he means—there still will be some who will construe from [his very words] the very opposite of the point he wished to convey.

This has happened even with the words of Hashem Yisborach: He stated that He is One and that there is no other; and, in order to remove from our souls the corrupt ideas believed by the Dualists, He clearly stated in this regard, “Hear O Israel, Hashem our G-d, Hashem is One.” Yet the Christians use this very verse as a “proof” that the Alm-ghty is a trinity, and they say, “It says, ‘Hashem,’ and then, ‘our G-d,’ and then, ‘Hashem.’ Behold: these are three Names; and it then says ‘is One’—a proof that they are three and the three are One”!

Rambam, introduction to his *Ma'amar T'chiyyas HaMeisim*

The Rambam wrote the above lines in response to accusations that in his *Mishneh Torah* he denied the principle of *techias ha-meisim*, the future resurrection of the dead. Despite his teaching this very concept as a fundamental of Judaism, some took his statements in other contexts to be “hinting” that he “really” did not believe in it. Some attacked him for this phantom position, while others gleefully cited him as an authoritative source for their *kefira*, their denial of a fundamental doctrine of Judaism. The Rambam reacted by pointing out that even the Torah's clear words cannot escape distortion by those whose agendas contradict the Torah's intended message.

His response comes to mind when one is confronted by the strange interpretations people suggest to avoid the clear premise Hashem sets up for us in the Torah—the premise that the world was created in six days.¹ Hashem details this in *Breishis*. He repeats it in *Sh'mos* 20:11 (“For, six days G-d made the Heavens and the Earth”), and again in *Sh'mos* 31:17 (“Between Me and *B'nei Yisrael* this will be a sign forever, that in² six days Hashem made the Heavens and the Earth...”),³ and *Chazal* have instituted our referring to this fact every Shabbos and Yom Tov. What could Hashem or *Chazal* say to make this intent clearer? Yet despite all this, some suggest that we ignore these clear words in deference to an ever-morphing alternative to Creation.⁴

How The Days of Creation Were Understood by Our Sages

I. A DAY IS A DAY

As we will detail below, our *mesorah* insists that the six days of Creation were six literal days.⁵ One cannot insert the allegedly natural evolutionary process into the *p'sukim* by claiming that the days were actually billions of years, and legitimately claim allegiance to the *mesorah*.

The very idea that Creation was anything less than a totally miraculous process, not conducted through natural processes at all—accelerated” or otherwise—is rejected by the **Maharal** (*Ba'er HaGolah*, p. 83, *Ba'er Four*):

Know that He, May He be blessed, brought out these creations, all of them, to physical reality during the six days of *Breishis* by Himself, in His Own Glory—not by means of an agent, i.e. Nature. Creation was contrary to the way things are after the conclusion of the six days of *Breishis*, wherein *Hashem Yisborach* conducts His world by means of the agent, i.e. *Nature*.”

As the **Rambam** explains in *Moreh Nevuchim*,

We, the community following in the footsteps of Moses and Abraham, believe that the world came into being *in* such-and-such a form, and *became* such-and-such *from* such-and-such (*haya kach mi-kach*), and such *was created after* such. Aristotle comes to uproot our words, bringing proofs against us based upon nature in its stabilized, perfected and active state. We ourselves admit to him [Pines translates: As for us, we declare against him] that this is legitimate after nature's having settled down in its fully developed stage; but in no way does this correspond to something's characteristics at its being brought into existence, and produced out of absolute non-existence (MN 2:17).

And:

None of the things mentioned above [the creation of Eve from Adam, the tree of life, and the tree of knowledge, the history of the serpent and the events connected therewith] is impossible, because the laws of Nature were then not yet permanently fixed (Ibid. 2:30).

The **Maharal** remarks that if anything bothers *Chazal*, it is the *mesorah* attributing the extra steps Hashem took (and time involved) in creating the world through His “*ten ma'a'maros* (declarations”), instead of creating everything instantly and simultaneously in one “*ma'a'mar*” (and in one fraction of a second).^{6a}

Regarding Hashem's intent by His use of the word “day” in the Creation narrative, the **Talmud** (*Chagiga* 12a) sets the record straight:

How The Days of Creation Were Understood by Our Sages

Said Rav Yehudah in the name of Rav: Ten things were created on the first day: Heaven and Earth, *tohu va-vohu* (*Emptiness and Formlessness*), Light and Darkness, Ruach and Mayyim, *middass yom and middas layla* (*the characteristics of day and night*).^{6b}

This talmudic passage clarifies two things regarding our subject:

1. Even if the sun, moon and stars were not yet operating as they do at present, whatever conditions necessary for time passage to occur were already functioning normally the first day (—or certainly for the days following the first), which saw the creation of Heaven and Earth, Earth's condition of *tohu va-vohu*, and Light and Darkness.
2. The characteristic length of day and night was determined and put in effect that first day. Without the Talmud itself expressing any further qualifications, it is obvious that the characteristics of the day and night (beyond the already listed characteristics of Light and Darkness) it refers to include the length of day and night to which we are accustomed (—certainly for the days following the first). Indeed, **Rashi** explains, “the characteristic of day and the characteristic of night”: *24 hours combined*.” (**Ramban** on *Chumash Breishis* 1:5 says that when it says Hashem called the Light, “Day,” it means He created Time and the characteristics of night and day.)

We will see that not only Rashi, but all the classic *mefarshim* understand the Creation days to be 24-hour type days. Whereas in some other instances the word “*yom*” may refer to longer periods of time, the *meforshim* treat such instances as exceptions, and point out when they occur.⁷ They do not do so regarding the days of Creation.⁸

Rabbeynu Saadia Gaon makes clear what the *mesorah* teaches about the length of the Creation process. He states (*Emunos V'Dei'os* 3:8) that if someone professing to be a prophet suggests that Hashem took a *year* to create the world, he is a false prophet!⁹

Sefer Tseyda LaDerech, cited in the KPCH edition of Rabbeynu Saadia Gaon's *Chumash* Commentary, paraphrasing or quoting (it is unclear exactly) Rabbeynu Saadia Gaon, writes:

...*Breishis* teaches... that although you see the heavens possessing vast dimensions, as is proven by the masters of mathematics, do not think that it took a long time to create them. “I called to them and they stood up together” (*Yeshaya* 48:13). This means that [they were created] in the Beginning, *in the smallest amount of time*, without any effort. Likewise it says “He will not tire nor toil; there is no end to His Understanding” (*ibid.*, 40:28). And as it says, “*b'hi-bar'am,*” -- *b'hay bar'am* -- at the beginning

How The Days of Creation Were Understood by Our Sages

of the creation of Time, and *in a short period, the mind being unable to grasp this amount.* ...

To the scientists of the past, the fact of the vastness of the Heavens conclusively "proved" that it took a long time for them to be created. *Breishis* told us not to be deceived by such alleged evidence; and it tells us not to be deceived by any other alleged evidence indicating that Hashem took longer than six plain days to create the universe.

Rabbeynu Yehudah HaLevy, in *HaKuzari* (Book One) as well, states clearly that Judaism has always known that the length of time involved in the production of the world's features and inhabitants was relatively short. In opposition to claims that there are places and buildings millions of years old (see Book One, par. 62, cited later in this essay), he states:

(43) The Rabbi: ... Our prophet ... revealed the hidden things, and told how the world was created...

(44) The Khazar King: It is astounding, too, if you have a clear counting from the creation of the world!

(45) The Rabbi: With it we count, and no Jews exist from Hodu to Cush who contest this.

(46) The Khazar King: And what is your count today?

(47) The Rabbi: 4,500 years....

Ibn Ezra:

"*Yom echad*" is a reference to the turning of the sphere ...

Even the **Ramban**, renowned *kabbalist* that he was, indicates impatience toward any tampering with the meaning of the word "day" in the Creation account (*Breishis* 1:3):

Know that the days mentioned in *Ma'aseh Breishis* were, in the creation of the heavens and the earth, literal days, composed [not of years and millennia, but] of hours and minutes, and they were six, just as are the six days of the work-week,

Again, in *Parshas B'Har* (*Vayikra* 25:1), the **Ramban** says he joins the **Ibn Ezra** (*ibid.*) in maintaining that awesome severity of the punishment for not letting the land rest every seven years is to teach the fundamental fact that the earth's entire lifetime is 7,000 years. This could not be possible if the earth's first days are to be interpreted as periods lasting billions, or even thousands, of years.

How The Days of Creation Were Understood by Our Sages

Even those commentators who do not directly explain the length of the Creation days in their comments on the verses mentioning those days **do reveal their assumption (no doubt based on *p'shat* and *Chazal*) that they were 24-hour type days** when they deal with another issue. The question arises: If, as a simple reading of the verses indicates, Hashem first created the sun on the fourth day, how could there have been three days beforehand? Without a sun, what determined the first three days, and how could they be measured? Defending the *mesorah* that the first three days of Creation, just as the last four, were regular days as we know them, the *mefarshim* offer solutions:

Several *mefarshim* explain that G-d actually created everything, *ex nihilo*, all on the first day, including whatever was necessary to enact and measure the passage of time. The other days consisted of further miraculous extracting, forming and positioning of those things, or allowing them to become perceivable from earth. (This is following one view in the Talmud. The competing opinion in the Talmud is that G-d created things *ex nihilo* each of the six regular days.)

Rambam, (*Moreh Nevuchim*, 2:30) posits this as follows:

If [as appears from the *p'shat*] there were [as yet, before the fourth day] no [celestial] sphere and no sun, how was the period of the first day measured as such?

... The foundation of the entire Torah is that Hashem brought the world into being from out of nothingness. [This was] not “at the beginning of Time,” because Time [itself] is a created thing. For, time depends upon the movement of the [celestial] sphere, and the sphere itself is one of the things that were created ...

[Now, although the Torah speaks, for example, of the sky emerging on the second day and the sun emerging on the fourth day], our Sages have explained that ... all things [including the celestial sphere actually] were created together [with heaven and earth on the first day], but were [merely] separated from each other successively.... According to this undoubtedly correct interpretation, the difficulty ...is removed, which...consisted in the question as how the periods of the first day, the second, and the third were determined. [ZL: I.e. the 24-hour revolution of the celestial sphere or, in our parlance, the 24-hour rotation of the earth, was in effect from the moment of Creation.] [Indeed,] in *Breishis Rabbah*, our Sages, speaking of the light created on the first day according to the Scriptural account, say as follows: these lights [of the luminaries mentioned in the Creation of the fourth day] are the same that were

How The Days of Creation Were Understood by Our Sages

created on the first day, but were only fixed in their places on the fourth day. And so this approach has already been used as the explanation.

Rashi—whom we already cited regarding the Talmud’s declaration that the 24-hour length of day was established on the very first day of Creation—in his *Chumash* commentary on 1:14 (see also on 1:6, and *Sifsei Chachamim ad loc*) and 2:4, follows the Rambam’s approach. He too explains that although Hashem brought out, fashioned, positioned and/or perfected each created thing on the day He designated for such, He had actually created everything in incomplete or potential form or placement on the first day.¹⁰

Rabbeynu B’chaya gives the same answer:

“Evening” is the declining of light, and “morning” is the shining of light. Yet the Torah speaks of the first three days experiencing evening and morning, even though “Let there be light-bearers in the Firmament” was not stated yet. This is because regarding the first three days, “evening” and “morning” were not spoken of in the aspect of light, but in the aspect of the rotation of the sphere. But from the fourth day and on, when the light-bearers (the sun, moon and stars) were created, it speaks of “evening” and “morning” with the [effects of] light in mind.

Ralbag’s (first of two answers [Breishis 1]) is the same:

How was the period of the first day, second day, and third day measured, since the light-bearers [sun moon and stars] were not in existence until the fourth day? The answer is clear according to the first explanation [I had given, that all was actually created the first day]: The diurnal sphere was in existence the first day, and each revolution it made lasted about one day’s time.

Abarbanel offers another explanation, which still illustrates the presumption that the days spoken of are 24-hour type days:

How were the first days’ periods timed, if there was still no revolving celestial sphere? [The answer is that] that first Light was an entity spread through space through the will of the Creator, for an allocated time, in which was the day; and it disappeared an allocated amount of time, which was night; and that Light came in gradations of morning and evening and noon. Through this, then, were the days timed in hours and minutes [not years and decades and millennia--ZL] just as the latter, natural days were [later] timed by the revolution of the celestial sphere. (Malbim gives the same explanation.)

Seforno combines the two ideas:

How The Days of Creation Were Understood by Our Sages

Even though He separated the Light and the Darkness, so that that they would serve at different times without means of the sphere's revolution, He still separated them in such a way so that between them there would be a time of evening [gradually] developing into night, and a time of morning [gradually] developing into [full] daylight.

Rabbeynu Ovadiah MiBartenuro answers in a way that, contra the Rambam, presumes time as a reality independent of the movement of objects:

“And there was morning and there was Evening--One Day.”—The causes of day and night is the movement [or, as we would say, the *apparent* movement—ZL] of the sphere. But since the sphere was not created [until the fourth day], how could the Torah state [already on the first day], that there was a morning and an evening? Answer: Hashem told Moses that the amount of time over which this took place was *the same amount of time that [the passage of] morning and evening takes nowadays*.

Ralbag's second answer is the same:

And it is not bizarre to suggest that it was known to Hashem the measurement of time without the sun and stars. And this is self-explanatory.

Certainly, by now, one perceives the spirit in which our *mesorah* approaches the Torah's description of Creation. All the commentators, while they certainly agreed that there are deep secrets and humanly incomprehensible aspects to *Maaseh Breishis*, still understood that the Torah *does* reveal that the creation of heaven and earth and its flora, fauna and first human beings was a meta-natural phenomenon that took place in the period of one week. (Again, in the words of the *Kuzari*: “Our prophet ... revealed the hidden things, and told how the world was created.” See also Ramban's words in the final paragraph of this essay.)

Yes, “not *all* of the Creation Account can be taken literally.” But one must not be naive and overextend this principle. All the commentators agree that we must of course properly understand anthropomorphisms expressed throughout the Torah. (“The sound of Hashem going through the Garden” refers to the traveling of the sound Hashem created, not to the sound of Hashem walking.) There is debate over precisely to what part of the heavens the words “*shamayim*” and “*rakiah*” refer. Some attribute, to the terms Earth, Heaven, Wind and Darkness, the four elements. As we have seen, many *meforshim* adopt the talmudic view that creation *ex nihilo* of all the universe took place the first day, and that the next days of the week did not witness additional creations. First-glance impressions are sometimes modified (as when treating the subject of whether the creation of “the heavens and the earth” means that the heavens were created before the earth, rather than after; or the meaning most *meforshim* prefer, simultaneously;). But, as we have seen, no talmudic statements or biblical commentators reinterpreted “days” in the Creation account as periods lasting longer than ordinary days, and

they accept the basic chronology of events as presented.¹¹ We can therefore anticipate how the *mesorah* understands the Torah's meaning of the state of things between Breishis 1:1, which reports that Hashem created the earth, and the following verses that speak of the earth's state of *tohu va-vohu* (*emptiness and void*), the creation of Light and everything else.

The **Ramban** (*ibid.* 1:4) rejects the suggestion of "some commentators" that the declaration of "Let there be Light," took place *before* the first day, and that this original Light initially shined bright for one moment, immediately waned to produce a twelve hour night, and then shined for twelve hours (to explain the sequence of "Let there be Light," and then, "And there was evening, and there was morning..."). This was **Rabbeynu Yehuda HaLevy's** explanation in *HaKuzari*. The Ramban rejects it "because they would be adding an additional, albeit short, day, onto the specifically six days of Creation." The appearance of light and then its absence would constitute an additional, although short, morning-and-evening day, contradicting the Torah's report of the creation lasting just one week. All the less would he tolerate the suggestion that there were billions of years of days of evening and morning before the first 24-hour evening and morning period of Day One. (We have already noted that he explains that the creation of the Light marked the creation of Time itself.) Certainly, he would object to the proposal of millennia of days and nights witnessing physical landscapes and creatures preceding the six 24-hour type days of Creation.

II. DURING *TOHU VA-VOHU*

So much for the issue of the length of the Creation week and its events. Some have suggested that our *meforshim* allow us to understand the eons of time and its events described by current academia to have taken place before the six 24-hour days, during the period of *tohu va-vohu*. However, this is not tenable.

First, all *meforshim* agree that the *tohu va-vohu* period existed after, not before, our earth's creation. Second, the *meforshim* agree that *Tohu va-vohu* was an activity-less state of the earth *upon* its creation *ex nihilo*. And The origins of our vegetable, animal and human life did not appear until after the *tohu-va-vohu* period, those forms thereafter reaching full development, and permanent area of placement, within the proceeding six regular days. Their explanations void the suggestion that the period of earth's state of *tohu va-vohu* experienced the creation of landscapes and creatures and prehistorical histories in millennia untold, *preceding* the rest of creation over the six 24-hour type days.

Rabbeynu Saadia Gaon (*Emunos v'Dei'os*, 3:6) dealt with strained readings of the *tohu va-vohu* verse used by some in the past to conform to a form of the Platonic idea of an eternal matter, from which G-d formed the universe. (The strained reading was: "And the earth had been [something else, originally, namely:] *tohu va-vohu*."). They used that reading to defend the view of academia

How The Days of Creation Were Understood by Our Sages

of their day that was confident of the eternity of an elemental air and water in existence from which G-d formed the Earth. (Today, some would use it to defend the idea that before *this* world's inhabitants' creation, there was an eons-long period of "simpler forms of life" of swamplands and dinosaurs.) He attacked this interpretation:

They think water and air always existed, because they imagine "and the earth was *tohu va-vohu*" is describing what the earth was *before* it was created [the word "created" being used in the sense of being *formed int its present state* —ZL]. But one who interprets so is talking utter foolishness. For the Torah's statement, "And the earth was..." comes after it already stated "In the beginning He created [...the Earth]," which means that the Earth, composed of earth, water and air was [already] created [*ex nihilo*, *before* the state of *tohu va-vohu*, not after and from *tohu va-vohu*].

In a later generation, **Hizkuni** dealt with a similar misinterpretation:

This is not to be explained as meaning that before its [earth's] creation, it [the universe consisted of matter that] had been [in a state of] *tohu va-vohu*.

(*Hizkuni* instead explains the verses as follows: "**In the beginning, G-d created**"—before all created things, the Creator created the heavens and the Earth.... "**And the Earth was *tohu va-vohu***"—the earth that is now in full form had been *tohu*. When it was first created, it "**was *tohu va-vohu***"—meaning, desolate and empty, [meaning] that there was no grass, man, beast and animal, bird and fish, crawling creature, darkness, light and *ruach*...for water covered the entire face of the earth....Or, he adds, it may be explained this way: Before the earth's creation, the place that the earth was to occupy in the future had been totally empty.) In both explanations, the *Hizkuni* is rejecting the Platonic idea of eternal matter.)

The **Rashbam** explains the point of the verses as follows:

Do you think that this world has always been endowed as you see it now—full of all goodness? No, it was not [always] so. [Rather, the Torah teaches,] *B'raishis bara Elokim, etc.*"—at the beginning of the creation of the heavens and the earth, i.e. at the time the heavens above and the earth [that you see now--ZL] had already been created—*then*, whether for a long or short time, the world was *tohu va-vohu*, meaning that there was absolutely nothing on it...it was desolate, with no inhabitants....

Whatever the "long or short time" was between the beginning of "*tohu va-vohu*" and "*Yehi Ohr*," the Rashbam negates the idea that this period witnessed millennia of evolutionary processes, leaving physical evidence of plant and animal development which evolutionists have discovered. For the Rashbam, along with all the others, defines "*tohu va-vohu*" as a phenomenon that experienced no

How The Days of Creation Were Understood by Our Sages

developments: *Tohu Va-vohu* means that there was absolutely nothing on earth...it was desolate, with no inhabitants.....”)

The Abarbanel makes the same point:

After Scripture clarified the fact of the creation of the heavens and the earth, it comes to clarify how their situation was *now, in their being created* ... and regarding this it says that the earth was *tohu*...

—**as does Rabbeynu B’chaya:**

And all these great *ikkarim* (fundamental principles) are clarified from this *parashah*: It tells us first, that the world is created *m’chudash, ex nihilo*. After its first being *tohu va-vohu*, He created all the existing things in six days, and on the sixth day He created Adam....

—**and Seforno** on Breishis (1:2) “and the earth was *tohu va-vohu*”:

And *that earth created then* was a thing composed of [*tohu va-vohu*]. (I.e., *tohu va-vohu* was the first state of the universe upon the universe’s creation. It is not a description of a situation existing prior to the earth’s creation. No time passed between “*Breishis bara*” and “*V’ha’arets hayssa so-hu va-vohu*.”)

—**and Ibn Ezra:**

The meaning is that *at the beginning of the creation of the sky and the land*, the earth was uninhabited.

Three strands intertwine among the commentators: the Torah teaches that the physical world was created less than 6,000 years ago; the first steps of earth’s development of vegetable and other life immediately followed a *tohu va-vohu* period of earth’s emptiness and unproductivity; and the “days” of Creation are regular 24-hour type days. Each of the *meforshim* explicitly states one or more of these ideas, and implicitly vouches for all of them.

Thus, all the commentators speak plainly, if not pointedly, of the absence of any vegetation or animal life before the first of the six days, and of six days in a natural sense. There is no basis to suggest that they would accept the *p’sukim’s* words mean anything other than a normal day. There is no basis to suggest they would accept that *the tohu va-vohu* state consisted of millennia filled with evidence-leaving, aging, physical entities, wherein existed swamps and evolving dinosaurs and other forms of. And all agree that and that the origin of the life-forms we have today are with life-forms that were immediately created fully-formed. Contortions of the biblical text to make them consistent with current evolutionary descriptions of the earth’s’ past do violence against both its letter and spirit, and contradict the conventional sense presumed and accepted by our *meforshim*.

III. PRIOR WORLDS? HOW LONG AGO DID THE WORLD COME INTO BEING?

There is yet another approach used to explain evidence of existence of things on earth longer than 6,000 years that does enjoy some support from Torah sources. There are *talmudic* and *midrashic* passages that, on their face, refer to other physical worlds preceding ours. Some have therefore proposed that even if G-d formed *this* world and its inhabitants within six regular days, He only did this following His original creation *ex nihilo* of prior worlds, remnants of which still remain—thereby explaining the alleged evidence of billions of years of past activity on earth.

The **Rambam** sees such statements as predicated on the view of the world being eternal, and consequently rejects them on the grounds that they contradict a fundamental principle of Judaism, despite their authorship. We shall see that most *rishonim*, if not rejecting the statement altogether, at least reject, shy away from, or are hesitant about, taking these statement to be referring literally to physical worlds.

Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi bar Eliyahu, an early contemporary of the *Beis Yosef*, is an exception. He suggests that these statements mean Hashem created a previous world *ex nihilo*, and thereby brought time into existence, then destroyed it, and then created our world (*Sefer Maasei Hashem, Cheilek Ma'asei Breishis*, chaps. 3 and 13). However, although his goal is to defend these statements against the Rambam's rejection, he does not address the Rambam's principle that time is dependent upon the concurrent motion of an existing thing, nor Rabbi Avahu's referring to more than one previous world.

Another *rishon*, **Rabbeynu Chasdei Crescas**, hesitantly offers these statements as one way to explain why an eternal G-d would have aberrationally created one world at an arbitrary point in eternity. He speculates, using these statements as a basis, that G-d has actually been creating and destroying worlds for all eternity. He speculates that G-d has been either literally destroying each one before the creation of the next, or—and this is what may be used to explain alleged remnants of existence of things over 6000 years ago—that He has been forming each world, including ours, as a more advanced “outgrowth” of the previous one. He then adds that whether this world will also be replaced by a more advanced one, or will last forever, is indeterminable, and concludes, “החקירה נעולות, והדברים כי בזה דלתי,” “עתיקים למקבלי האמת.”

ספר אור ה' - מאמר ג ח"א כלל א - פרק ה

אלא שהאמת הגמור כפי מה שבא בקבלה. והוא, שהשם יתברך חדשו והמציאו בעת ידוע, כאמרו (בראשית א, א), "בראשית ברא" וגו' וכל הפרשה כולה.

אלא שכבר תשאר השאלה, למה המציאו בעת ידוע, אחר שהיחס - אם מצד הפועל ואם מצד המתפעל - אל כל העתים, אחד?

והנה הספק הזה, ואם הוא עצום מאד, הנה התרו באחד משני פנים. אם שנאמר, שכבר גזרה חכמתו, לסיבה ידועה, שיהיה לו התחלת הויה מחודשת; ולא תשאר בו השאלה למה המציאו בעת הזאת, למה שהחדוש בכל העתים יחס אחד.

ואם שנתיר לעצמנו מה שנמצא בקצת מאמרים לחכמינו ז"ל, הביאם הרב המורה, ולא ראינו חולק עליהם. אמרם (ב"ר פ"ג), "מלמד שהיה בונה עולמות ומחריבן". ומהם אמרם, "מלמד שהיה סדר זמנים קודם לכן". הכונה מהם לפי מה שיראה - החידוש התמידי; אלא שהיו היום בעת ידוע ונפסדים בעת ידוע, [1] אם בהתהוות האישים והפסדם, [2] ואם להיות כל אחד מהם הולך מהאחר מדרגת השלמות. ואפשר שזה שאנחנו בו ישאר נצחי, ואפשר שיפסד ויבוא אחריו עולם אחר, הולך מזה מהלך השלמות, כמדרגת החי מהצומח. כי בזה דלתי החקירה נעולות, והדברים עתיקים למקבלי האמת.

It is however noteworthy that Rabbeynu Crescas' own disciple, **Rav Yosef Albo** (*Sefer Ikkarim* 2:18) discusses the statement about a *seder z'manim* (program of time-periods) before Creation, but insists that the kind of time spoken of is only imaginary and conceptual, not actual. He is also conspicuously silent both about the statement of worlds being built and destroyed, and his teacher's thesis, above.

In any case, as already mentioned, even taken literally, these statements about prior worlds do not conform to the model of processes over time espoused by current academia. For one thing, according to Crescas' hypothesis, growth of vegetation and animals still began anew after creation of our stage of the world, not as descendants of previous beings. In whatever sense these talmudic passages can be taken to be envisioning this world as an "outgrowth" of a previous one, they still agree that the present plant life, animal life and human life were forms that began their development during the six days of the creation of this world—development immediately preceded by a *tohu va-vohu* period during which the earth was empty of all life—and are not biological offsprings of things whose existence stretched to eons before. So, even if one takes these *midrashic* passages literally, the resultant scenario in no way conforms to current academia's portrayal of continuous evolutionary development of our present animal, vegetable and human species. They are hardly consistent with the current views of academia.)

Constructing a scenario of prior worlds interrupted by empty periods—with the biological ancestors of earth's current inhabitants first appearing less than 6,000 years ago—that would not be as ridiculed by academia as is a 6,000-year-old world, would be a daunting task, if at all possible. Also daunting and problematic for someone loyal to Torah methodology is the prospect of using the said *maamarei Chazal* to support such a hypothesis, in face of the overwhelming majority of *rishonim* who are most reluctant to take these sources literally,

altogether. They see taking the sources as literally speaking of physical worlds and real time as a support of the thesis of eternal matter and/or other concepts foreign to the Torah's presentation of *Maasei Breishis*. And they reject doing so.

The **Rambam's son, Avraham** (*Sefer Milchamos Hashem*, ed. Margolios, *Mosaad HaRav Kook*, pp. 57-58 and 59) writes:

[*Reason*, which compels us to accept the tradition that G-d is not a physical entity, is a prerequisite to understanding Torah. Indeed, G-d created man with *reason* even millennia before He gave man the Torah.] The Torah was given to Israel twenty-four hundred years after the creation of the world¹². And if anyone mumbles to you, "Haven't the *Chachamim darshonned* that the Torah was created a thousand years before the world?"—you should answer him: That drash needs many *payrushim* to answer it (*l'taretz osso*), and it is impossible that it should be understood literally. And even if it *were* meant literally, the subject under discussion is when it [the Torah] was given [and not when it was created].

Now, accepting the thesis of the existence of prior worlds would leave open the possibility that Hashem did deliver the Torah to some *seichel*-less beings. This would demolish Avraham ben HaRambam's proof that *seichel* is a prerequisite to understanding Torah.

Yet, neither the *Aggadta* about the Torah being created before the world, nor the *Aggadta* about Hashem creating and destroying worlds, led the Rambam's son to think that *any* of *Chazal* held that whatever was initially created *ex-nihilo* had physically existed in any form any longer than 2,488 years before *Mattan Torah*. He did not consider, as a viable explanation, the possibility that even a minority opinion could have posited the existence of any literal, physical world before ours within which the Torah could have existed.

We also see that the Rambam's son *l'fi tumo*—incidentally—spoke of the world's creation *ex-nihilo* with the specific date of 2448 years before *Mattan Torah*. This incidentally illustrates that despite *midrashic* passages that indicate otherwise, he held fast to the idea that the creation *ex nihilo* occurred 2488 years before *Mattan Torah*. (I'm assuming that, like his father, he would insist on a non-literal meaning—or downright rejection—of *Midrashim* that speak of prior worlds and Time before Creation, just as he here insists on a non-literal meaning of the passage about Torah [and Time] existing before Creation *ex-nihilo*.)

He later states:

Behold, their [the philosophers'] belief is that that world is old (*yashan*),¹³ and that it has no beginning. And we disagree with them, through the *emunah* of the Torah, and we can present *teshuvos* and establish many

How The Days of Creation Were Understood by Our Sages

proofs to make the Torah *emunah* clear, that the world is new (*chadash*), and created; and nothing exists that is *rishon* and *acharon* except for *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*.

Note that Avraham ben HaRambam rejects not only the thesis that the universe is eternal (vs. *created*), but also that it is ancient (*yashan* vs. *chadash*). (“Behold, their [the philosophers'] belief is that that world is old (*yashan*), and that it has no beginning. And we [say]... that the world is new (*chadash*), and created”)

One cannot claim that the *meforshim* were unaware of these sources, and had they been aware of them, would not have taken the stand they did. We see that, on the contrary, the Rambam’s son—and later, we shall see Rabbeynu Yehuda HaLevy as well—*acknowledged* the esoteric teaching that if taken literally would posit time and things preceding our world; but they both did so only reluctantly and went out of their way to hold themselves aloof from it as a mainstream *mesorah* literal, physical depiction of history.

Rabbaynu Saadia Gaon (*Sefer Emunah V'Dei'os*, end of first chapter) is very clear about his understanding of how long the universe has existed:

And the third opinion [is] the opinion of the fools... [who] say, 'How can the intellect accept that the world has existed for only 4,693 years?' And we will answer [in defense of that] that once we establish that the world was created, it is impossible for it not to have had a beginning...[be it 200 years ago or 4,693 years ago]."

Rabbeynu Yehudah HaLevy, in *HaKuzari* (Book One) as well, states clearly that Judaism has always considered the world to have existed merely thousands of years. We will repeat the short quote from the *Kuzari* we cited before, and continue with his further statements:

(43) The Rabbi: ... Our prophet ... revealed the hidden things, and told how the world was created...and the years of the world from Adam until now.

(44) The Khazar King: It is astounding, too, if you have a clear counting from the creation of the world!

(45) The Rabbi: With it we count, and no Jews exist from Hodu to Cush who contest this.

(46) The Khazar King: And what is your count today?

(47) The Rabbi: 4,500 years....

(60-62) The Khazar King: Does it not weaken your belief if you are told that the Indians have places and buildings which they consider to be millions of years old?....And what will you say of the philosophers (read: scientists--ZL) who, as a result of their careful researches, agree that the world is without beginning? This is not a matter of tens of thousands of years, nor even millions of years, but of something that has no beginning or end at all!

(63) The Rabbi: The philosophers—we can't blame them. Being Grecians, they inherited neither wisdom nor Torah....

(64) The Khazar King: Does this obligate us not to rely on Aristotle's philosophy?

(65-67) The Rabbi: Yes. Since he did not possess a *kabbala* through the reporting of a person he could trust, he exerted his mind, deliberated about the beginning and end of the world, and found it difficult to envision it [both as] having a beginning as well as it being infinite. However, through his unaided thought processes, he concluded by accepting his logical structures that inclined towards the theory of a world with an infinite past. He did not see fit to ask about the correct count of years from anyone who came before him, nor about the chronology of the human race. Had the philosopher lived among a people possessing widely known traditions, which he would be unable to dismiss, he would have applied himself with his logic to strengthen the viewpoint that the world came about through Creation.

...Heaven forbid that the Torah would contain anything that actual proof or demonstration would be able to contradict! But the Torah does record, in its account of Creation, the occurrence of miracles and different behaviors in nature, and the changing of one thing to another, to demonstrate that the Creator of the world is able to accomplish what He wants, when He wills it. The question of eternity and creation is deep; the [philosophical] arguments for both claims are of equal weight; but the prophetic tradition of Adam, Noah and Moses—which is undoubtedly more reliable than logical arguments—settles the issue in favor of Creation [vs. the eternal existence of the universe].

And if a Torah-person would find himself compelled to believe and concede that matter is eternal, and [to believe in] the existence of many worlds prior to this one, this would not be an impairment to his belief. For he would [still] believe that *this world* was created from a certain time, and that Adam and Eve were the first human beings.

How The Days of Creation Were Understood by Our Sages

Again, we see that Rabbeynu Yehuda HaLevy, similar to the Rambam's son—*acknowledged* the esoteric teaching about time and worlds preceding our world; but both did so only reluctantly and went out of their way to hold themselves aloof from it as a mainstream *mesorah* literal, physical depiction of history.

The last paragraph as translated from the Arabic by Rav Kapach even more clearly portrays Rav Yehuda Halevy as far from endorsing the idea of prior worlds:

ורחוק הוא שיזדקק הדתי להניח ולהודות בהיולי קדום ועולמות רבים לפני העולם הזה. ואין בכך פקפוק באמונתו שהעולם הזה מחודש מאז זמן מוגדר.

And it is far-fetched [to say] that a religious person would be forced to accept and concede to [the belief in] a past-eternal prime matter and many worlds [existing] prior to this world. And [anyway] there is nothing in this that should shake his belief that this world was created in the past at a certain, definite time.

Rabbeynu Saadia Gaon, the **Rambam**, (*Moreh Nevuchim*), the **Ramban**, and **Rav Yosef Albo** (*Sefer Ikkarim*), all make it clear that as a rule one must not interpret *Aggadic* statements in a sense that contradicts the *p'shat* and/or reason. When it comes to *Aggadta* whose simple sense assigns the concept of physical time to “before” Creation, the *ba'alei mesorah* all explain them in a way consistent with the simple understanding that all physical activity involved in our world's formation, from the empty state of *tohu va-vohu*, began and ended within seven literal days.¹¹ (And, as mentioned, the Rambam himself therefore even goes so far as to reject the statement altogether, without even attempting to give it a non-literal reading.)

Maharal (*Gevuros Hashem*, chap. 70, p. 322; *Derech Chaim* chap. 2, p. 76; *Nesivos Olam* II, p. 227; *Chidushei Aggados*, II, p. 14; III p. 76; IV p. 12), like the Rambam (MN 2:30) and many others, teaches that Time could not exist before creation. The reason he and they give is that Time is dependent upon the revolutionary motion of things that are themselves created. (The earth-centric view of academia in their times that they embraced envisioned celestial spheres; in the modern view, we envision the earth's rotation relative to the sun).

All this is of course referring to Time and things in the physical sense relevant to our issue—the sense in which they interacted in the original development of the physical world. One would therefore anticipate that the *Maharal* too explains that the talmudic and midrashic statements about things and worlds “existing” during “a time before Creation” are referring only to esoteric, conceptual types of Time and things. And one would be correct, as can be seen in *Maharal's Tifferes Yisroel* p. 12a regarding the Torah's “creation 974 generations before the world's” [*Zevachim* 116a] and in *Ba'er HaGolah*, *Amud* 82-3, *Ba'er HaR'vi'vi* regarding *Nedarim* 39b's list of things created before the world.

How The Days of Creation Were Understood by Our Sages

In view of the above, it is not surprising that later authorities were quite vehement against understanding the statements about prior worlds to be speaking of physical worlds, and/or previous physical stages of this world, and/or a method to interpret the Torah as consistent with the theories of billions-of-years-existing earth accepted by modern academia. It is a questionable effort to reconcile the two. Perhaps it's a clever *kiruv* tactic by which to calm down those not yet schooled in Torah methodology. It may be useful for *kiruv* personnel to use such approaches while winking at each other and hoping that their charges will outgrow their feelings of inferiority of the mesorah to current academia. However, when it turns into something that they themselves actually believe, it is tragic. (It is reminiscent of when heterodox movements begin as leniencies for those who find it hard to take regular *halachic* standards upon themselves, but end up insisting that the leniencies are the true ways, and criticizing those who avoid them.)

The *mesorah* we have is a reliable, historical transmission from Adam, Noach and Moses of the factual account of how the world came to be. It is more reliable than speculations based upon the assumption that nature always ruled, always acting as it does now.

Indeed, *Midrash Shemos Rabbah* (30:9) records Onkelos' marveling the fact that *the youngest Jewish children know "how the Holy-One-Blessed-be-He created the world.—They know what was created the first day and what was created the second day, how much [time] there is since the world was created, and what [good deeds] sustain the world. And their Torah is true."* And the Ramban cites this *Midrash* to illustrate that "the Torah 'opens one's eyes,' for it reveals to us the secret of the Formation, the subject of *Maaseh Breishis*, the Creation and Formation of the Universe."

May our eyes be opened to the truths taught by the Torah.

How The Days of Creation Were Understood by Our Sages

ENDNOTES

¹ The literature of Jewish Torah thought, including **Rabbeynu Saadia Gaon's** *Emunos V'dei'os* and **Rav Yosef Albo's** *Sefer Halkarrim*, teaches us that a word's primary conventional meaning is the proper way to initially understand a given word in the Torah. Only if contradicted by sensory perception, logic, or other verses—*data available to the reader since the time of the Torah's revelation*—are we to understand the Torah's intent by the word in a less conventional usage. Thus, as will be demonstrated in this article, Chazal and the commentaries all understood the word “*yom*” in our context to be a 24-hour type day.

² Actually, the word “in” is omitted in the Hebrew, indicating the *drash*-level *kabbalistic* teaching that Hashem created the world to last beyond the moment of Creation for six millennia, with each future millennium's history represented in the six 24-hour days of creation. Nevertheless, the commentaries (Ibn Ezra on *Tehillim* 45:5 and 3:8; *Daas Zekeinim* on *B'midbar* 10:33; Rabbeynu Bachaye on *Sh'mos* 20:11) explain that the *peshat* of the *posuk* teaches the fact that Hashem created the world in six days. The word “in” is to be understood, as is the case in other verses.

³ Note that the testimony we are commanded to declare is focused not on the implicit Creation-from-nothing, but on the time period of six days.

⁴ They fail to recognize the circular nature of their thinking: Evolutionary explanations of how the world came into existence are propelled by a discipline which, in principle and by self-definition, arbitrarily refuses to accept the possibility of a meta-natural (outside-of natural, i.e., miracle-based) explanation of the world's origins. But meta-natural processes are the very bedrock of the six-day Creation our testimony, as explained by our *mesorah*.

⁵ And the *mesorah* is not beginning its count just from the time of Adam's creation, a suggestion some have made in order to permit an insertion of millennia of our world's existence before his creation. Nor, in a rather odd interpretation sometimes touted, is it beginning its count just from Adam's “ensoulment,” after his having been a soul-less creature born from a millions-of-years-old line of creature ancestors. For “all of creation was created fully formed.”—At *ma'aseh b'raishis* the ox was created not as a calf but as an adult [Rashi in *Rosh HaShonna* 26a s.v. *shor sheh-hu par*]; and Adam was likewise created as an adult, the Talmud reports, within the same 24-hour period—standing erect.

^{6a} *Pirkei Ahvos* (5:1). The Rambam, however, interprets this differently, as referring to the number of statements through which the Hashem depicted His step-by-step Creation.

^{6b} See *Brachos* 12a and end of *Rashi* וכו' דאמר ר' אלעזר on use of term מדת הלילה.

⁷ For example, Maimonides' son, Avraham, comments on the verse (*Breishis* 2:4) reading “...the day Hashem fashioned the Heavens and the Earth.” He says that here the word “day” cannot be taken in its conventional way, because the fashioning of the Heavens and Earth took place over a period lasting six days, not just one. (Needless to say, if he thought the six days of Creation were themselves not meant as conventional days, the contradiction would not have arisen.)

The Ralbag is an exception, in that he understands “days” of Creation to be “categories.” But one must bear in mind that by saying this he *shortens* the duration of Creation. And even more important, one must bear in mind that his interpretation is a result of loyalty to *Chazal*, who make specific statements he understands to mean that all of the creative acts (besides vegetation production) were performed at one moment simultaneously, and instantaneously produced the results in fully-developed form. It would be discombobulating to interpret “days” as categories whose events took eons.

How The Days of Creation Were Understood by Our Sages

⁸ The Ramban elaborates on the first created thing, the “*tohu*,” being the equivalent of the formless matter of Greek fame. He assigns no time frame to the phase of “*tohu*,” but there is no basis to suggest that he disagrees with the Gemora that explicitly includes the “*tohu*” phase among those things created within the first day (of 24 hours), as the *poshut* reading of the *posuk* implies.

⁹ The phrase in the Arabic is *פי סנה בלא תאוויל*. My translation follows Rabbi Kapach's. Ibn Tibbon renders the sentence, “If the person claiming to be a prophet says “He made it known to me that He created the heaven and earth in his sleep without consciousness,” he is a false prophet.”

Rabbi Yaakov Winselberg of Miami (translator of Rabbeynu Avraham ben HaRambam's Arabic ספר המספיק לעובדי ה') quoted by Rabbi Shapiro (JewsWithQuestions.com, (posted 24 November 2011 - 08:59 AM), writes:.

*There are two phrases here: *פי סנה* and *בלא תאוויל*. I will start with the second one, because it is a fairly common term. The word *תאוויל* refers to an allegorical way of explaining a text, as opposed to the literal sense. Since it is *בלא תאוויל*, that is the same thing as saying *דברים כפשוטן*. I don't read this as *בלי מחשבה* or “thoughtlessly,” because that would refer to Hashem's thought. The word *תאוויל*, though, is not used for thought in general, but about interpreting a text or a *nevu'ah*. So I think this can only be explained according to the first version you brought, which is “כפשוטן,” or even better, the way he [Rabbi Kapach] writes it in footnote 58.*

*The first phrase is not as simple. The word *פי* means “in.” The word *סנה* is usually “a year,” but it could also be “sleep.” The Arabic is close to the Hebrew here, with both meanings *שנה* and *שינה* possible. I prefer “year,” though, for two reasons: If it was “while He was sleeping,” it should say something like “in His sleep,” not “in sleep.” In other words, it wouldn't say *סנה* alone, but *סנתה*, or something like that. Also, Rav Saadiah Gaon in Chumash for *שינה* doesn't use the word *סנה* but the word *נום*, related to the Hebrew *תנומה*. So here too, I prefer the first reading, *במשך*, *נום*, but I see why the one might write wrote [sic.—ZL] “while asleep” and the like.*

I would add that the context of Rav Saadia's statement is regarding claims that differ from points that biblical verses explicitly make. The other examples given are the claim to permit adultery or theft, and the claim there will be another [global] flood. Therefore, it is obvious that the “*shana*” refers to a “year-duration of Creation,” a contrast to the explicitly stated six days, not to any notion of G-d sleeping during Creation as opposed to being awake—a weird issue not entertained in the verses at all. He means that a prophet who claims Hashem took a literal year to create the universe is as false as one who claims that Hashem will once again bring a global flood. Rabbeynu Saadia Gaon has a very entertaining passage where he ridicules allegorizing the mitzvos and narratives of the Torah by showing the absurd conclusions that one could reach by such methodology.

One should also note that the allegorizing RSG entertains regarding the professed prophet's claim of a year-long duration of Creation is on the *prophet's* part. I.e., the alleged prophet would be safe if he makes it clear that his reference to a “year” is only an allegory, or a poetic flourish, in reference to what were actually six days. (Needless to say, if RSG thought six creation days can mean six epochs or six pairs of months, why would he accuse this poor man of being a false prophet?)

Also noteworthy is the comment in *Sefer Tseyda LaDerech*, cited above in our text.

¹⁰ Some have made much ado about Rashi's comment on verse 1:1, where he states that we must say that the *mikreh* is not describing the chronological order of events. They translate “*mikreh*” as “Scripture [in general]” and take Rashi to mean that throughout the entire account of Creation, Scripture does not intend to describe the chronology. This posits the absurd idea that when Scripture says one thing happened on day two, and another on day one, it does not mean to tell us the order of occurrence, and it may really have happened in a different order. The Rashi on 1:14

How The Days of Creation Were Understood by Our Sages

shows this is wrong. “The light-bearers [sun, moon and stars] were created from the first day, but on the fourth He commanded them to be hung in the sky. Likewise, all the *tolodos* of the heavens and earth were created back on the first day, and each one was set in its permanent state on the day decreed for it. This is why [when describing their creation on the first day,] “*ess*” is written before the word *shamayim* and before the word “*ha-aretz*”— to include their “offsprings.”

Rashi’s comment about the *mikreh* not describing chronological order is in reference to the *first verse* (see *Radak Breishis* 1:1: “**הַפְסוּק** בזה הבריאה סדר לזכור בא שלא בא לזכור סדר הבריאה”). The focus of this *mikreh*, this verse, is not to tell you the chronology of the creation of the earth in its narrow sense (i.e., *sans* water and the other elements) in relation to heaven or the elements. Rashi holds that, based upon grammar and information we have from *Midrashim*, the first verse must be read not, “The first thing G-d created [before water or fire or Light or the vegetation and creatures] was the heavens and the earth.” It must be read, in conjunction with the following verse, “*During* the start of G-d’s creating heaven and earth...G-d said, ‘Let there be Light!’”

¹¹ As we noted in endnote 7, the **Ralbag** understood *Chazal* to be maintaining that Hashem created virtually everything simultaneously and instantaneously on the first day, all in their fully developed form, with the exception of the growth of vegetation of the fifth day. This means that—except for the vegetation—there was no creative or formative activity remaining to be done following the first day. Thus, he concludes, *Chazal* were telling us that the report of events on the ensuing days, until Shabbos, is not meant literally, but is meant to relay the hierarchical relationships between all created things.

Some have understood the Ralbag to be saying that this was the Rambam’s view as well, but this is untenable. The Ralbag himself states that none of his fellow *rishonim* before him “realized” that this was what *Chazal* were saying. (And he demonstrates he was well acquainted with the Rambam’s writings on the subject.) We also noted in the text that the Rambam in *Moreh Nevuchim* (2:30), just as other *rishonim* [such as *Rashi*—see note 10], cites the *Chazal* teaching that most things created the first day still needed to be extracted, more fully formed and permanently positioned on the following days. There he also invokes the fact that Nature was not yet fixed on the sixth day, in order to defend the possibility of so many events occurring on that one day.)

However, at any rate, the Ralbag’s position (dismissed by the Abarbanel and other commentators) would not be helpful to those who would like to extend the existence of the world to billions of years. On the contrary, according to the Ralbag the world and all its inhabitants were created in full form instantly and simultaneously, and have therefore existed six days *less* than the time stated by the other commentators! (Although he also maintains that the created vegetation did not begin to grow above ground until a chronological third day.) And, as just demonstrated, the approach of the Ralbag is to build the understanding through the teachings of *Chazal*, and not through rejecting them on the basis that they differ with the science of the day.

¹² Rabbeynu Avraham ben HaRambam is talking about time since the beginning of Creation, not just from its climax with Adam HaRishon. Had R. Avraham ben HaRambam found it acceptable to think that thousands of years had passed between the initial creation of the world and the appearance of Adam, what would have been his problem with the idea that the Torah was created 2,400 years before Adam? Obviously, by “Creation,” Rabbeynu Avraham is talking about the initial creation, and he understands that the Torah was given 2,400 years after that.

¹³ Note that, as in the *Kuzari*’s citing allegations of ancient civilizations and their buildings, combating the claim of the world’s being “*yashan*” (old—versus “*chadash*,” new/young) is an additional concern of the *rishonim* to that of the world’s being “*kadum*”(the philosophical term for “eternal,” versus “created”).