

Bereishit

BEGINNINGS

Genesis 1:1

In a beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

Mishnah Hagigah 2:1

The Work of Creation may not be taught to more than one student at a time.... Whoever contemplates these four questions, it would have been better for him not to have come into the world: What is above the world? What is below? What is before? What is after?

Bavli Eruvin 13b

For three years, there was a dispute between the School of Shammai and the School of Hillel, the former claiming: The law is in agreement with our views. And the latter claiming: The law is in agreement with our views. Then a voice came out of heaven and said: Both of these views are the words of the living God, but the law goes according to the School of Hillel's rulings. But if both are the words of the living God, why is the law set according to School of Hillel? Because they behaved modestly and like *mensch*s. They studied Shammai's rules as well as their own and even mentioned Shammai's words before they said their own.

Discussion Questions

1. The first word of the Torah, *b'reshit*, is generally translated “In *the* beginning.” Strictly speaking, however, it means “In *a* beginning”. How does this change your understanding of this verse?
2. Do you agree with the Mishnah’s assertion that questioning the mechanics of Creation is an invasion of God’s privacy? Does God have some secrets that shouldn’t be explored? Do you feel entitled to your secrets? Does having secrets make you distant from your loved ones? Does keeping secrets sometimes allow you to be closer to them?
3. It appears, from this passage of the Bavli, that God speaks in many voices and that there may be many correct answers. This should lead to tolerance and humility. Do you think you could practice this intellectual discipline in your own life...thinking that God’s truth is everywhere and that success goes to those who act like gentlemen?