Eitz Chayim Hee: A Torah Commentary for Environmental Learning and Action

Hebrew/English Source Sheet

Torah Portion of Bo

“Taking Notice in our Time”

by Rabbi Shaul Judelman

The sources are presented in the order they are mentioned in the essay.

Shemot 12:2

This month shall be to you the head of the months; to you it shall be the first of the months of the year.

Exodus 12:2

This month shall be to you the head of the months; to you it shall be the first of the months of the year.

Genesis 1:1

In the beginning of God’s creation of the heavens and the earth.

Rashi Genesis 1:1

In the beginning Said Rabbi Isaac: It was not necessary to begin the Torah except from “This month is to you,” (Exod. 12:2) which is the first commandment that the Israelites were commanded, (for the main purpose of the Torah is its commandments, and although several commandments are found in Genesis, e.g., circumcision and the prohibition of eating the thigh sinew, they could have been included together with the other commandments). Now for what reason did He commence with “In the beginning?” Because of [the verse] “The strength of His works He related to His
people, to give them the inheritance of the nations” (Ps. 111:6). For if the nations of the world should say to Israel, “You are robbers, for you conquered by force the lands of the seven nations [of Canaan],” they will reply, “The entire earth belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He; He created it (this we learn from the story of the Creation) and gave it to whomever He deemed proper. When He wished, He gave it to them, and when He wished, He took it away from them and gave it to us.

In the beginning of God’s creation of [Heb. בראשית. This verse calls for a midrashic interpretation because according to its simple interpretation, the vowelization of the word בראשית, should be different, as Rashi explains further]. It teaches us that the sequence of the Creation as written is impossible, as is written immediately below] as our Rabbis stated (Letters of R. Akiva, letter “beth”; Gen. Rabbah 1:6; Lev. Rabbah 36:4): [God created the world] for the sake of the Torah, which is called (Prov. 8:22): “the beginning of His way,” and for the sake of Israel, who are called (Jer. 2:3) “the first of His grain.” But if you wish to explain it according to its simple meaning, explain it thus: “At the beginning of the creation of heaven and earth, the earth was astonishing with emptiness, and darkness… and God said, ‘Let there be light.’” But Scripture did not come to teach the sequence of the Creation, to say that these came first, for if it came to teach this, it should have written: “At first בראשית ברא אלהים, like בראשית בְּרֹא, in the beginning of creating. And similar to this is, “At the beginning of the Lord’s speaking (דבר) to Hosea,” (Hos. 1:2), i.e., at the beginning of the speaking (דבר) of the Holy One, Blessed be He, to Hosea, “the Lord said to Hosea, etc.” Now if you say that it came to teach that these [i.e., heaven and earth] were created first, and that its meaning is: In the beginning of all, He created these-and that there are elliptical verses that omit one word, like (Job 3:9): “For [He] did not shut the doors of my [mother’s] womb,” and it does not explain who it was who shut [the womb]; and like (Isa. 8:4): “he will carry off the wealth of Damascus,” and it does not explain who will carry it off; and like (Amos 6:12): “or will one plow with cattle,” and it does not explain: “if a man will plow with cattle”; and like (Isa. 46:10): “telling the end from the beginning,” and it does not explain that [it means] telling the end of a matter from the beginning of a matter-if so, [if you say that Scripture indicates the order of creation] be astounded at yourself, for the water preceded, as it is written: “and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the water,” and Scripture did not yet disclose when the creation of water took place! From this you learn that the water preceded the earth. Moreover, the heavens were created from fire and water. Perforce, you must admit that Scripture did not teach us anything about the sequence of the earlier and the later [acts of creation].

Unless otherwise noted, all English Translations from Judaica Press, available online at www.chabad.org

Sources not included:
Likutei Torah, Parshat Behar