

## Is HaShem “The Place” of the World?

Yonason Noach Ben Avraham

[www.tumms.org](http://www.tumms.org)

**Bereshis Rabbah 68:9** “R. Chuna said in R. Ammi's name, “Why do we give a Changed Name to the Holy One, blessed be He, and call Him ‘the Place’?” [The answer:] “Because He is the Place of the world.” R. Yose b. Halafta said, “We do not know whether God is the place of His world or whether His world is His place, but from the verse, ‘*Behold, there is a place with Me*’ (Shemos 33:21), it follows that **the Lord is the place of His world, but His world is not His place.**”

R. Isaac said, “It is written, ‘*The eternal God is a dwelling place*’ (Devarim 33:27): now we do not know whether the Holy One, blessed be He, is the dwelling-place of His world or whether His world is His dwelling-place. But from the text, ‘*Lord, You have been our dwelling-place*’ (Tehillim 90:1), it follows that **the Lord is the dwelling-place of His world but His world is not His dwelling-place.**”

R. Abba b. Yehudah said: “He is like a warrior riding a horse, his robes flowing over on both sides; **the horse is subsidiary to the rider, but the rider is not subsidiary to the horse.** Thus it says, ‘*You do ride upon Your horses, upon Your chariots of victory*’ (Chavakkuk 3:8)<sup>1</sup>.”

This Midrash has been understood literally (physically) by many Jews, and this literal/physical understanding is most certainly problematic. The concept, **שׁוֹמֵר**, is an important part of the correct understanding of **the Rambam’s First Principle – Belief in the existence of the Creator, be He blessed**, which reads, “...there is a ‘Being’ ... [Who] is the Primary Cause of existence of all that exists ... And though we should entertain the thought of all existence, other than His own being null and void, the existence of the Creator, be He blessed, would not be nullified, nor would it be diminished ... And all else that exists, such as the purely intellectual beings – that is, the Angels – and the heavenly constellations and all that they contain, as well as all that exists below them, are all dependent for their existence on Him...”

**שׁוֹמֵר** is understood by the Ramban (another Kabbalist!) in his commentary to *Bereshis* 1:1 as follows: “Now listen to the perfectly clear and correct interpretation of this verse in its simplicity. **The Holy One, blessed is He, created all that exists from utter nothingness. There is not word in the Hebrew language which refers to the bring forth of matter from nothingness, other than the word בָּרָא – He created** ... The Ravad (*Mishnah Torah, Hilchos T’shuvah* 3:7), citing *Bereshis Rabbah* 1:12 ... observes that an individual who claims that the Almighty did not create the world from nihility, but only formed it from other substances, is a מְרִיב – a heretic ... The Rambam (*Moreh Nevuchim*, Part II, *perek* 13, 30a) writes, “The understanding of everyone who believes in the Torah of Moshe Rabbeinu הַעֲלֵה, is that **the world in its entirety, that is, everything that exists besides the Creator, was brought into existence by G-d after having been entirely non-existent, and that G-d Himself existed, and nothing else beside Him** – no Angel, or heavenly sphere, nor anything which is within the heavenly spheres – and then He brought into existence everything that exists ... from nothingness” ... Rabbeinu Bachya (another Kabbalist) on *Bereshis* 1:1 reads, “The meaning of this chapter is that the heavens and the earth and all that they contain were created on the first day from absolute nothingness and from utter nihility...” ... Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (*Bereshis* 1:1) writes, “**בָּרָא אֱלֹקִים**” expressed the fact that nothing preceded G-d’s creation, that heaven and earth came into existence solely

<sup>1</sup> This analogy offered to give us a clue that we not understand this Midrash literally. According to the Rambam’s 3<sup>rd</sup> *Ikkar*, HaShem has no form. Yet the Midrash likens Him to a rider on a horse, which cannot be taken literally lest the reader associate a form with HaShem. So, too, we cannot take the first two examples (the parts of the Midrash that suggest that HaShem is the physical Place of the World) literally, but rather figuratively, and in approaching the words of our Sages thusly we can come to the correct teaching that our Sages were trying to get across.

by the creation of G-d. This affirms creation out of nothing – ׀ׁאז ׀ – a fact that forms the foundation-stone of the understanding which G-d's Torah wishes to build up in us.”

Those who hold that G-d “retracted” (*tzimtzum*) [that He is “***the Place of the world***” (*Bereshis Rabbah* 68:9)] so that there was a “physical place” for the universe, and who go further suggesting that the crated universe is really just Him, have to contend with the words of the above quoted Sages: “...from utter nothingness .. from nihility ... from non-existence ... out of nothing...” and reconcile that our Sages would have had to use these words to describe HaShem/*Elokim* – Who, of course – is the Ultimate SOMETHING, not “utter nothingness.”

The correct understanding of the Midrash in question is found within the teachings of the Rambam. In *Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah* 2:10 the Rambam writes about HaShem, ‘**He is the Knowledge and the Knower... and this is not within the power of any man to comprehend clearly....**’” Thus the concept of all creation is contained with the Mind of HaShem, and understood this way HaShem's Mind is the Place of the World. Any other understanding borders on pantheism or panentheism.