



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Bereishit

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October 29, 2016
Bereishit

How Old is the World?



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

How old is the world – 5,777 years old or 13.7 billion years old?

Answering this question lies in an unlikely source – vintage denim!

What can denim jeans teach us about the age of the universe?

What can jeans teach us about our genes?

Is it a coincidence that Jews invented jeans?

Let us peer into the seams and cuffs of denim, into a fascinating teaching from the Talmud, and into the finely-tailored, hand-sewn words of the lessons learned from this week’s first Torah portion, which speaks about the genesis of the world and is always read right after the rich holiday season.

HOW OLD IS THE UNIVERSE? A LESSON FROM AGED DENIMS

1. The Genes of Jeans

Jews have great genes. And they make good jeans.

Levi Strauss, a businessman of German Jewish descent, founded the first company to manufacture blue jeans. His firm, Levi Strauss & Co., began in 1853 in San Francisco, California, and is today a multi-national corporation employing approximately 16,000 people worldwide.

Jacob Davis, a Latvian Jewish immigrant, was a Reno, Nevada, tailor who frequently purchased bolts of denim cloth from Levi Strauss's wholesale house. After he learned that one of his customers was buying this cloth to mend torn pants, he had an idea to use copper rivets to reinforce the points of strain, such as pocket corners. Davis did not have the required money to purchase a patent, so he wrote to Strauss suggesting that they go into business together.

Strauss accepted Davis's offer, and together they applied for a patent. The rivet was later incorporated into the company's jean design and advertisements.

Contrary to an advertising campaign suggesting that Levi Strauss sold his first jeans to gold miners during the California Gold Rush (which peaked in 1849), the manufacturing of denim overalls began much later. The company created their first pair of Levis 501 Jeans in the 1890s, a style that went on to become the world's best-selling item of clothing.

Today, one of the priciest jeans are those of the vintage variety, which have been manufactured in such a way as to make the denim jean appear to be ancient, with fades and rubs and threadbare treatments.

A 2002 article in *New York Times Magazine*, titled, *Not Fade Away*,¹ explains the process and appeal of vintage items:

¹ <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/12/01/magazine/01JEANS.html?pagewanted=all>.

This is how “vintage” jeans happen: Troy Pierce buys a pair of new Levi’s and wears them six days a week for more than a year. He rides his motorcycle in them, commuting from his place in Williamsburg to work in SoHo. He eats his Subway lunch on them. He works in them, loafers in them, D.J.’s in them. And he washes them, in cold water by hand, but only twice. “They are really gross,” he says. “But that is the whole idea -- I wanted them to be completely natural.”

Then a Levi’s designer from San Francisco, who likes the look of the grimy jeans, makes a copy of them, and therein is the birth of the vintage jean business. A business which makes new jeans look credibly old, which is to say crummy and beautiful.

Time was, vintage jeans happened the old-fashioned way, which is to say by being good and old. Now, “vintage” happens when companies feel like it ... [such as when] Levi’s unveils the Celebration Jean, 501 pairs of which will be sold at \$501 a pop. If the word vintage has come to mean much less, the “vintage” look -- at least in the \$10.5 billion-a-year jeans market and elsewhere -- has come to mean so much more.

As one of the oldest consistently produced items of clothing in the country ... jeans are still one of the most worn. The average American owns eight pairs, and last year more than half of all consumers bought another.

Which brings us to the age of the universe.

2. Exact Age (Joke)

The American Museum of Natural History is sprawled over five blocks along Central Park West in Manhattan’s Upper West Side. The Museum is renowned for its exhibitions and scientific collections, which serve as a field guide to the entire planet and present a panorama of the world’s cultures.

Off from work one Sunday, Moshe decides to pay the museum a visit. He hops on the D train from Boro Park, switches to the B at Columbus Circle, and gets off at 81st Street and Central Park West, right at the museum's entrance.

Upon entering the great entry hall, Moshe comes across a massive dinosaur fossil, suspended from the five story high ceiling, hovering over the museum patrons like a massive blimp.

Moshe, ever inquisitive, walks over to a museum employee and asks in his Brooklyn accent: "Excuse me, sir, but how old is this fossil?"

To which the museum employee replies: "It is seven million years, six months, and three weeks old."

"Wow," exclaims an excited Moshe. "How did you derive such an exact age?"

"Well," says the museum employee. "When I started working here, the fossil was seven million years old - and that was six months and three weeks ago!"

3. Science and Religion: A Contradiction?

Today is *Shabbat Bereishit*, the Shabbat of Genesis, when we begin reading the Torah anew from its beginning, as it says: *In the beginning, G-d created the heavens and the earth*. According to Jewish tradition, this will be the 5,777th *Shabbat Bereishit*, for according to the Torah the world, as of this past Rosh Hashanah, is 5777 years old.

This, some people think, does not jive well (or at all) with today's scientific theory of the universe's age. According to today's scientific study, the universe began with the Big Bang, and the Big Bang occurred 13.7 billion years ago, give or take 20 million years.

To reconcile these two ages, should we hone our diplomatic skills and remember the world's birthday but not its age?

As Robert Frost, the great American poet, said: “A diplomat is a man who always remembers a woman’s birthday but never remembers her age.”

At first flush, it would seem as if 5,777 and 13.7 billion are very different numbers. How is it possible for such a massive discrepancy to exist? It’s not like the Torah and science have a difference of two years – it’s a difference of more than 13 billion years!

Some may opt to follow the Torah view and other’s the scientific one. But the truth is that they don’t and should not contradict each other. Because both come from the same source: The same G-d Who gave us the Torah, which is a blueprint for existence,² and tells us the reality of all things as dictated by the Creator of all things, also created the laws of nature, which science attempts to understand. The same G-d also created our minds with the capacity to understand, through the study of natural reality³ based on logic, probability, and experiment, the divine laws of nature.

Since G-d created the universe and the natural laws that govern it, there can be no contradiction between the Creator and His creation. The natural laws of the universe can hardly contradict the blueprint from which they were made! Science is ultimately the human study of G-d’s mind, the search to understand the laws that G-d installed to run the physical universe.

We therefore must say that the age of the universe according to science cannot contradict the Torah’s age of the universe. But how can we reconcile 13.7 billion years with 5,777 years?!

Since science derives this 13.7 billion year number from evidence found in nature, we must say that this evidence exists within creation. The question is where in the Genesis story of creation was this evidence created?

Fret not: the Talmud tells us.

² Bereishis Rabba 1:1. See Zohar II 161a: G-d looked into the Torah and created the universe.

³ See here for the letters of the Lubavitcher Rebbe on the matter.

4. The Talmud's Three Facts about Creation

The Talmud⁴ gives us three ultra-fascinating facts about creation:

All of the work of Genesis, 1) in its full maturity it was created, 2) with its full knowledgeable consent it was created, and 3) in its full unique beauty it was created, as it is written in the Torah: *Now the heavens and the earth were completed and all their host.*⁵ But don't read "their host" (*tzvaam*) but rather read "their beauty" (*tzivyonam*).⁶

The 11th century commentator, Rashi,⁷ explains these three facts about creation as follows:

- "In its full maturity" means that every creation was created completely mature. For example, the moment G-d created the tree, it was ready to bear fruit; it was not a seed, nor a sapling, rather it was a full-blown tree at the peak of its maturity. The same is true of man. Adam was not created as a newborn child that could not walk or talk, rather Adam was created as a full-grown man at the peak of his maturity.

Thus we have the Jewish answer to the famous question: "what came first, the chicken or the egg?" The answer is – both were created together. G-d created a mature universe – He created both the egg and the chicken; both the seed and the full grown tree.

- "With its full knowledgeable consent" means that G-d asked each creation if it wanted to be created and each replied yes.⁸ This suggests that creation is a conscious experience and an interactive, give-and-take between Creator and creation.

⁴ Rosh Hashanah 11a. Chulin 60a.

⁵ Genesis 2:1.

⁶ See Tosafot to Chulin 60a, quoting the Aruch on how exactly these three lessons are derived from the verse.

⁷ To Rosh Hashanah 11a.

⁸ Reconciling this with the Mishnah that states "man was created unwittingly" (Avot 4:29) is a discussion beyond the scope of this sermon.

- “With its full unique beauty” means that every single creation was uniquely and exquisitely tailored. In other words, it was not as if general, unshaped energies and elements were created that only later developed into distinct and unique creations; rather each creature and each granule of sand, and each star was handcrafted (not unlike a fancy handmade pair of jeans) with unique characteristics.

5. Scientist vs. Torah Scholar

Since G-d created a mature universe, it makes total sense that though the creation happened 5,777 years ago, the universe would appear much older.

If you were Adam and Eve standing in the Garden of Eden, just six days after creation, and you would look around, you would see fully grown trees, many looking thousands of years old, stars in the sky, millions if not billions light years away. You would witness a fully mature and functioning universe that empirically appeared as an “old” universe, far older than six days!

And if you, as Adam or Eve, had a scientific mind, your observations, experiments and other data gathered, would lead you to the conclusion that the universe was in place for eons. That is exactly the way G-d created the universe - not as a developing “baby,” but as a full-grown and ripe universe,

Now, fast forward to our present day: A scientist, who is unaware that the Torah ages the universe at 5,777 years old, is left only with the rational assumption that all things originate in an immature state and then develop and evolve over the eons. This scientist will therefore naturally deduce that the universe is 13.7 billion years old, based on his observations of the vastness of the expanding universe, the stars that are billions of light years away, etc. etc. All his evidence points to the conclusion that it took 13.7 billion years for matter to evolve to the present state.

But a Torah scholar, who knows that the world was created 5,777 years ago,⁹ knows that the world was created fully mature. This means that on day one of creation the world looked as if it had been alive for whatever number of years it takes to reach full maturity – which today science theorizes is 13.7 billion years.

Thus, not only does it make sense for science to conclude that the world is older than it really is, it would not make sense for it not to, based on the observable data, without the knowledge that the universe was created as a mature entity!

Additionally, science assumes (as it perhaps rightfully should) that the origins of everything was an indiscriminate and undefined general, unshaped energy that only later developed into unique organisms, cells and creatures. According to the Talmud however, G-d created each creature and organism in its full beauty from day one.

And this is where the jeans analogy helps explain this phenomenon:

6. Jeans – Vintage or Worn?

When you look at a pair of jeans, they may appear to you as very old and worn out. But then you discover that this is exactly the way they were manufactured – to look old and worn out! These very jeans may have been just created, but you see them as old.

As in the pair of vintage jeans described in the abovementioned *New York Times Magazine* article. When you see a human being wearing them, they look like they have been worn and torn for a hundred years, thus you assume they are a hundred years old. Then you walk into a Levi's store and realize that you can purchase the exact same pair brand new.

⁹ The number is derived from adding up the generations as listed in the Torah. This matter is discussed at length by R' Saadia Gaon in *Emunos V'Deos*, Maimonides in his *Moreh Nevuchim* (Guide for the Perplexed), and others.

How is this possible?

Simple!

Levi's Strauss & Co. has worked on the material to give the jeans the mature, vintage look before anyone ever wore them, so that you may experience the worn look from day one.

7. Jeans and Genes

Perhaps jeans can help teach us about our genes. They can help us understand how G-d created the universe: He created a fully mature universe, and molded it to fit every creation exactly.

We could say that we (and every creation in the world) were created with vintage genes – that's vintage G-E-N-E-S.

8. Three Lessons

Three lessons may be learned in our everyday lives from the three fascinating facts that the Talmud relates about creation.

- Perfect Mature Stature

Each one of us is created perfectly. We do not have to become something else to be vintage. We are created vintage. Life requires realizing that.

Did you hear the one about the "brilliant" professor who spent most of his life writing a dissertation that would blow away all his colleagues. When he finally presented it to them, they unanimously stated that his work is "both good and original." He was deeply flattered, until they added: "The problem is that the part that is good is not original, and the part that is original is not good!" ...

- Knowledgeable Consent

We are partners with G-d in creation. Sure, there is only one Creator, but that Creator desires that creation should be a conscious, interactive experience, one in which we take active participation in the unfolding drama of our and the universe's destiny.

We were blessed with minds and hearts, with resources and faculties to study and understand G-d and the universe He created. Why? So that we can partner with G-d: G-d provides the resources – the world in which we live, the life each of us was blessed with, so that we, living up to our Divine Image, can transform the material world into a spiritual environment, steered by goodness and kindness.

How do we do this, how do we become knowledgeable consenters? By studying the divine guide book, the Torah, and understanding what it means to be created and what it means to create; what we were charged with to do in this world.

- Perfect Beauty and Uniqueness

Each one of us is created perfectly beautiful. In addition to being complete, each of us is unique in our look, taste, scent and skills. What one does best another can't do and vice versa. Joined together in our uniqueness we comprise a uniquely perfect universe.

9. How Mature Is The World? As Mature as You Make It (Conclusion)

We always read Genesis – Bereishit – right following the rich holiday season. On Simchat Torah we concluded the Torah, and also read the opening verses of the Torah. But today, on *Shabbat Bereishit*, we read the entire first chapter, Parsha.

Because as we come empowered by the holidays – Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Hoshana Rabba, Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah –

we are ready to enter and take on the world anew. To “serve and protect”¹⁰ the world we were given and realize its purpose: to transform this world into a divine home.

We were not given an immature universe, because what would be the purpose of waiting until the universe to “grow up” until we can begin fulfilling its purpose. We were given a mature universe, all ready for us, the human race, to cultivate and develop its matter into spirit.

The world is both 5,777 years old, but looks like billions of years old. We can have an underdeveloped and immature universe that is 13.7 billion years old and we can have a developed and mature universe that is 5,777 years old – it is up to us.

We (and every single creation) has been created with everything we need to fulfill our purpose, which is to develop the true purpose of the world as created by G-d and to reveal the innate maturity that has been instilled from the very genesis of existence.

We do this by realizing how vintage our genes really are and by wearing them with pride.

The Chassidic masters say that the way we establish ourselves on Shabbat Bereishit that’s the way the entire year goes.

May we take this message and power of Bereishit – the beginning – into our entire year, so that it be a year of creation and re-creation. May each one of you have a blessed year, with material and spiritual abundance, all in good health.

Shabbat Shalom! And Shana Tova!

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¹⁰ Genesis 2:15.