

PLURALISM

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

An anonymous reader asked:

The us in that verse it the heavenly beings please explain. I am including a previous class which touched on this point.

The Meaning is Clear

At first Elokim (The Almighty) created the heavens and the earth. (Bereshith 1:1)

God's name "Elokim" appears in the plural grammatical form, which raises a basic question: does this form imply some sort of plurality about God even though it is a fundamental principle of Jewish faith that there is only one God, and He is a Being of indivisible unity?

This apparent contradiction can be resolved when we consider that the use of the plural form is a grammatical device in the Hebrew language to express an attitude of respect. The Torah uses it freely, unconcerned that anyone will be misled by the mistaken impression it might convey.¹

Although such application of the plural form to express a singular concept is accepted grammatical usage, still we might think that it would have been more in the spirit of pure truthfulness for the Torah to have avoided the use of this particular name. Not so. The Torah makes full use of Hebrew grammatical standards without demur, for the name Elokim shows extreme reverence, and there is no element of falsehood in it. In the same way, in speaking Hebrew, when talking to a person to whom respect is due, one may address him in the plural form, as a sign of esteem.²

In many instances, the Torah uses words and phrases in ways that cannot be understood in their literal sense. There are a number of very obvious examples of this in the narrative of the Creation, for the metaphysical events that took place at that time were far removed from the natural order of the world we know today. They could not have been accurately described in ways that we can understand, or in language that we can relate to. For example, the Torah tells us how God brought the world into being through speech, when in fact He created the world through a form of thought. When the Torah describes God's thought process as speech, it makes it easier for us to grasp the idea on our own level.³

Similarly, although the Torah describes the world as having been "empty and desolate" prior to Creation, it does not apply that same expression to the condition of the heavens at the time, although that was in fact the case. Since the heavens are viewed as the "Place of God's Habitation,"

the Torah omits any reference to anything that might create a negative impression in describing them. There is no lack of truthfulness in this omission.⁴

1. *Rashi on Bereshith 1:26.*
 2. Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 2a.
 3. Rosh Hashanah 21b, according to the commentary of the Maharitz Chayoth.
 4. Pirkei Avoth 2:7.
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Almighty said, "Let us make adam (man) in our image and our likeness." (Bereshith 1:26)

God said, "Let us make man" while consulting with His Heavenly Court.¹ In fact, every Divine decision follows the same protocol. God will not declare a decision to be "emeth" until it has first been discussed with His Heavenly Court.²

God's omniscience renders any advice useless. What can He be told that He does not already know? Yet God has decided not to finalize any judgment without first consulting with His creatures. The lesson for us is clear: people can not expect to arrive at correct decisions without consulting with others beforehand.

King Solomon once demonstrated that through his wisdom he could reach a true decision without the aid of others. Two women approached him, each of whom just given birth to a baby boy. One mother told the king that her own baby was alive and her friend's baby had died, while the second woman said that her friend's baby was dead, and that her baby was alive. King Solomon detected from the order of the second woman's statement that her main concern was that the other woman's child was still alive. In order to prove that the first woman was the true mother, he ruled that the baby should be cut in half, each woman receiving half. When the second woman agreed to this, it was clear that she had been lying.

After this tremendous display of human insight, King Solomon asked God that he be permitted to make judicial rulings by himself, without the aid of witnesses. A heavenly voice proclaimed that his request had been refused. Only after taking council with others can one hope to arrive at true decisions.³

Why is it so important to ask for advice? Human perspective is limited, especially since humans are often afflicted by bias. Since each person has their unique perspective on any given situation, another person's view can catch what one's own eyes missed. As our Sages taught, "The more advice one seeks (from people who are qualified to offer it), the more understanding one will have."⁴

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