

Defining the Boundaries of the First Day

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<http://www.reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/breishit/gift-gods-first-creation>

A few years ago at my in-law's congregation, I sat in the pew pondering the art and architecture that surrounded me. I've been inspired to do this more often, due to a great podcast called [99% invisible](#), whose core premise is uncovering "... all the thought that goes into the things we don't think about — the unnoticed architecture and design that shape our world."

On the walls of the synagogue are seven murals, each listing a day of Creation. What intrigued me was that unlike the Torah text for every other day of Creation, the text for the first day where "God divided the light from the darkness" doesn't say "the first day." (see Genesis 1:4-5). Many translations of the Bible do say "the first day," however, the Hebrew tells a different story. The Hebrew text says *yom echad* literally "day one," not *yom rishon* the Hebrew phrase for "Sunday" and the "first day." Why the discrepancy? For every other day of Creation it follows the ordinal numbers second, third, and so on, until we get to the seventh day, which is just called Shabbat. But on the first day we see the cardinal number: why?

Ramban, the 13th century Sage, offers a compelling explanation in his commentary on verse 1:5: "... it is not possible to say, "the first day," since the second one has not yet been made. As 'the first' is before the second in counting ... [only] when they both exist ..." Ramban here suggests that God created something else when God left day one and moved on to the second day: the possibility of linear time.

Like darkness and light, time provides perspective, it offers us the opportunity to see the world differently. Today we take this perspective of time for granted, yet as Thomas Cahill put it in his book "The Gift of the Jews" this was a radical change brought about by Judaism: "Since time is no longer cyclical but one-way and irreversible, personal history is now possible and an individual life can have value," (Cahill, *The Gift of the Jews* [NY: Nan A. Talese/ Anchor Books, 1998], p. 98). This small difference opens the doorway to a linear view of time, and reminds all of us as we begin this new year, the importance of that gift in our own lives.

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