

The Historical and Social Meaning of the word *Beri'ot* (Creatures) in Tannaitic Literature

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The paper examines the use of the term *beri'ot* (תוירב) in Tannaitic literature and considers the historical background of the incorporation of the term into the Hebrew language. The discussion begins with a survey of the sources in which the term appears, presented in accepted chronological order: first and foremost in the Mishnah, where the term refers only to Jewish society, and later in the Tosefta and halakhic exegesis, where use of the term is significantly expanded, at times to include the entire human race and even animals. The socio-historical use of the word is then analyzed. It is posited that the Rabbis used the word *beri'ot* to address individuals in society and to channel their thinking and daily conduct, in the effort to strengthen social solidarity and influence its morals and value system in accordance with the way the Rabbis wished to shape them. In terms of historical context, the changing use of the term *beri'ot* reflects a period in which political changes in the Land of Israel caused Jewish society to undergo a metamorphosis from extended multi-generation family units to nuclear family units. As a result, individuals in society were empowered, but this came at the expense of social solidarity. The term *beri'ot* thus served as a 'propaganda technique' which the Rabbis used to reinforce community values: it symbolized the importance of social identity and the kinship among the individuals that comprise it.