Seven

The Power of Numbers

by

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Numbers have power and significance. Some numbers have greater significance than others, often due to their properties as primes or unique, or their role in anchoring our numbering system. The number one is unique. It is the identity number. It is, by definition, singular. “Who Knows One?” goes the Passover song. “One is our G-d Who is in the Heavens and on Earth.” The number two defines the concept of evenness. Three, an ideal balance, whether in geometry or the world. Ten is the basis for our numbering system. These numbers resonate in our consciousness and our world but no number has the power and significance of the number seven.

It is the perfect number. More than that, it is Judaism’s most sacred number. Seven is completeness and wholesomeness. My uncle, Rabbi Alexandre Safran Z’L , concludes his prolific discussion of “Jewish time /Sabbath time” in his *Israel in Time & Space* by noting that, the number seven thus joins for all eternity the Creator and His Creation, God and His people; and the hyphen uniting them, is the holy Shabbat.” For, as we know, the Sabbath is the seventh day. *Shemittah*, the seventh year. *Yovel*, the culmination of seven cycles of seven years.

Rabbi Shraga Simmons underscores the power of seven when he considers Shavuot. He finds “Shavuot” – literally, “weeks” a curious name for the holiday. While the name does highlight the seven-week period between Passover and Shavuot in which we count each day (and week) in anticipation and preparation for re-living the Sinai revelation, he remains troubled by the name. “Why not call the holiday ‘Torah,’ or ‘Sinai,’ ‘Commandments,’ or ‘Tablets’?”

He asks a good question.

He goes on, “Time contains many different entities. Nearly all of them are related to natural phenomena. Days, nights, months, seasons and years are all directly determined, in some way, by the constellations. There is one exception – the week. The formulation of a week seems to be totally arbitrary. Who needs it? Let one day just follow the previous one. And why seven days?

“The concept of a week and its constitution of 7 days is one that is strictly God-invented and human-adopted. While we may quibble about creation -- how, when, by whom, why – the world has consensually agreed to the concept of a week. And whenever a week is completed it is yet another reminder to mankind (or should be) that God created the world in seven days. (Only six days were required to manufacture the physical structures, but the process was not complete until the spiritual realm, Shabbat, was added.)

Call it the ‘week link.’”

The significance of “seven” is woven throughout our lives and experience. The seven branches of the Temple *Menorah*. The sprinkling of blood seven times in the Temple. The seven days of *shiva*. The seven days of celebration for *chatan* and *kalah*. Seven *aliyot*. Seven mitzvoth required on Sukkot. Seven major days of celebration in Jewish calendar. Seven days of *nidah…* and on and on.

Seven completes a cycle fully and wholly. *Brit Milah,* which lifts the newborn son from a mere physical existence into meaningful, goal-oriented Jewish life, takes place on the eighth day. Why *eight* days? Rav Hirsch explains that this is because the “young being must pass through a full period of seven days as a creature perfect in body; and only on the eighth day must the seal of Israel be impressed upon him.”

Rav Kook finds in *Shemittah* and *Yovel* a completeness of life’s spiritual qualities. Too soon, the fruit is not ripened. Too late, it is overripe and rotted. At its time… Without the fullness of “seven” there is an emptiness, an unripeness, still awaiting its time. “Quality of life can be improved through the affording of a breathing space from the bustle of everyday affairs… What the Sabbath achieves regarding the individual, the Shemittah achieves with regard to the nation as a whole.” *Shemittah* and *Yovel* are not mere mechanisms of ensuring equality, freedom from poverty and slavery. More importantly, they are a means of attaining a fullness and wholeness, of attaining holiness complete.

In *Nitzavim,* the Parasha read on Shabbat *Shuva* or the Shabbat prior to Rosh Hashanah, the word *shuv*, “to turn or, to return” occurs seven times in various forms, all underlining the theme of repentance, of *teshuva* (itself, a form of *shuv*). This speaks to the deep relationship between the number seven, connoting completeness, to *teshuva*, repenting and returning.

The Torah source of *teshuva*,“You shall then return to G-d your Lord, and will obey Him,” is one of these seven verses.

Because man has free will and has the choice of attaining wholeness and completion or remaining incomplete, the Rambam writes, he “should strive to repent” of all sins, as well as investigate and repent of any evil disposition. “Great is repentance, for it brings man near, back to the Divine Presence.”

*Teshuva* turns back to completion, to a state of wholeness and completeness. To perform *teshuva* is to arrive at one’s full potential and real self. Without *teshuva*, one’s life is lived as a series of discrete moments, with good and evil, success and failure intimately related. Without *teshuva*, the week is seven days, not a grand march toward the glory of Shabbat.

Seven.

Marriage is nothing but a cohabitative partnership without the fulfillment of the *sheva* (seven) *brachot* ideals. Faith, without the completeness of the seven mitzvoth enunciated in the *Shema*, an empty proclamation. Agriculture is backbreaking labor without the peace and tranquility of the *Shemittah* year.

The Zohar teaches that twenty six generations before the creation of the world, the twenty two letters of the alphabet descended from the Crown of G-d whereon they were engraved with a pen of flaming fire. They gathered around G-d and each entreated that the world be created through him. The *resh* was rejected, for it introduces the words *ra* and *rasha* –evil. The *mem* was rejected, for it is the first letter of *mehuma,* confusion. Each letter, in its turn, presented itself as the one worthy to be the vessel through which the world would come into being. All fell short until finally, the *aleph* was selected. Why? It modestly made no claims at all.

While *zayin,* numeric equivalent to seven, argued that it should have been chosen because it begins the verse [*zachor*] which ordains the observance of the Sabbath, G-d said, no. “You may not help me in the work of Creation, for *zayin* is the word for weapon.”

Seven. The perfect number. The most sacred number. Whole. Complete. The quality and value of seven is found in Shabbat, *Shemittah*, and *Yovel*. Seven. It calls us to holiness. Each one of us is endowed with the free will and inner strength to attain that completeness and holiness. But, like the letter *zayin*, we not only have the potential for holiness but also for evil. Each day, each moment, we do battle with the *zayin* weapon.

Our lifetime is made up of these battles. We fight with ourselves and with others. Even the seven Noachide laws no longer hold sway.

If we entered our battles with *zayin* only with our free will and animal strength, we would be crushed as the dust. But we are gifted with *teshuva*. *Teshuva*, called for seven times, so that each of us can find our path to “return to G-d… and obey Him.”