

# SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

511 Ave. R Brooklyn, NY 11223-2093  
Rabbi Moshe Shamah, Director

718 998 8171 Fax: 718 375 3263  
Rabbi Ronald Barry, Administrator

בס"ד

## On Number Symbolism in the Torah Based on the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon

### I. Introduction

In these studies there have been many references to Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon's interpretation of numbers in the Torah. Following is a brief introduction to this aspect of his work.

Rabbi Sassoon maintained that in the Torah and in certain other books of Tanakh, particularly the Psalms, as the prophetic message utilizes metaphor and figurative expression, it often employs number symbolism. Numbers were generally not intended to be taken strictly literally and played a significant role in the substantive meaning of the passages in which they appeared.

He also contended that virtually the whole Torah and Early Prophets, as well as the Psalms, and probably other parts of Tanakh, were written with straightforward patterns running through them and codes underpinning them. These were based on precise word counts and *gematria* (the traditional system of assigning numerical value to each letter based on its order in the alphabet\*). The codes contributed to the structure and design of the passages and provided insight on the relevant topics.

Although the formulae Rabbi Sassoon uncovered lie beneath the surface and explicate their subjects on an esoteric level, and despite the fact that the patterns are often extremely sophisticated, everything is all there in front of the reader. The text is not manipulated. The reader may count the words and see the pattern. And the text is never trivialized. This should not be confused with other supposed codes roundly criticized by many scholars, approaches that are of a different nature. We will not enter further into that topic given that the purpose of this discourse is primarily to

provide background and helpful information to assist the reader of our studies.

Sophisticated codes and patterns serve a number of purposes. They may beautify the word of G-d and help preserve the integrity of the text as it was subject to the processes of copying and transmission. Recognition of wondrous patterns supported the view of the recipients that the text was a genuine statement from a true prophet. This was especially important in a world that had become an arena of competing ideologies as the ancient Near East most certainly was, where dissenters challenged the authenticity of the great prophets and where false claims of prophecy abounded. Serious observers might conclude that the remarkable systems of word pattern and structure that run through the text, without creating stilted reading, more intricate and difficult to compose than systems that run through other literary artifacts known to man, was the result of true prophetic inspiration.

Finally, Biblical writings often contained meanings that, for various reasons, could not be expressed explicitly. These include the difficulty of the uninitiated to grasp subtle and recondite concepts, the resistance of average people to insights "ahead of their times" and the opposition of entrenched interests that may be criticized or undermined through the message. Through the use of symbolism, which includes number symbolism, and meanings enhanced through textual structure and word patterns that directed the knowledgeable reader to a deeper message, the prophets were able to speak to those prepared to hear the fuller import of their communication while providing a satisfactory message to the others.

Although Rabbi Sassoon often stated that he did not know the meaning or implications of many instances

of number usages or word patterns, their indications often conformed to the substance of other research he did into the meaning of the Torah text. They were also in harmony with certain important aspects of modern scholarly research. (On that note it must be said that he rejected much of the speculative analysis of modern Bible scholars, especially their work that has led to a lack of appreciation of the unity, cohesiveness, remarkability and uniqueness of the text.) He considered classical rabbinical literature to contain echoes of and hints to his discoveries. He subjected his findings to expert statistical analysis and the results were favorable.

In this study we will primarily focus on one aspect of Rabbi Sassoon's work. He demonstrated the ubiquitous and meaningful use in the Torah of the symbolic use of the numbers 8 and 13 and their multiples, particularly decimal multiples. He explained the number 8 as referring to the Covenant between G-d and Israel and implied a linkage with the prophetic dimension, while the number 13 – the *gematria* of אהד (one) – denoted a subject associated with the oneness of G-d, more basic than the concept denoted by 8. The number 21 is used to signify the combination of 13 plus 8. Often, 8 and 13 will be used in tandem. Most, but not all, of the examples here presented are taken directly from the rabbi's work. Many other examples are pointed out in our studies. Rabbi Sassoon would describe all this as “the tip of the iceberg.”

## II. Examples of Symbolic Use of Eight and Thirteen

1. “When Adam had lived 130 years he begot בְּדַמִּיתוֹ (in his likeness, like his image) and named him Seth. Adam's days after he begot Seth were 800 years... All the days that Adam lived were 930 years” (Gen. 5:3-5). These are the only age markers the Torah furnishes for Adam! Rabbi Sassoon explained the 130 – presented as a most significant event in Adam's life's achievement – to be associated with having reached the stage of appreciation of the one G-d (13). We may perhaps add that it refers to transmitting that idea, signified by bearing a son. The 800 years he lived subsequently indicates his having achieved the covenantal level.

2. In the Noah narrative the word “berit” (covenant) appears 8 times. The number of people saved in the ark is 8 (Noah, three sons and the four wives.) The sign of the *berit* – specifically pointed out, זֶה אוֹת הַבְּרִית (Gen. 9:12) – is the “qeshet” (קֶשֶׁת, the rainbow), which has a *gematria* of 800. (The word קֶשֶׁת in all forms appears eight times in the Torah and thirteen times in the Early Prophets.)

3. Circumcision for Ishmael was at 13 (years of age), while for Yishaq, and subsequently for Israel, it is at 8 (days of age). The 13 results from the 13-year period of time in Abraham's life from when he begot Ishmael at 86 years of age to when Hashem appeared to him at 99 years of age. It was after that period of 13 that Hashem instructed him regarding circumcision on the 8th day, which was to signify the Covenant that was to be transmitted to his progeny. These age milestones are recorded in consecutive verses (Gen. 16:16 and 17:1).

4. In that Genesis 17 chapter that introduces circumcision the *berit* stem is attested 13 times. The 8th occurrence of *berit* is in the 13th verse and is word number 160 in the passage.

5. At the point that Hashem changes Sarai's name to Sarah (Gen. 17:15), completing the name changes of both Abraham and Sarah, the combined total of both their names in both forms from the beginning of the Torah is 80. Beginning with the next attestation of Abraham's name (v. 17) until the end of Genesis his name appears 130 times. The total number of attestations of his name in the Five Books is 210, that is 130 + 80. The 130th occurrence of his name is at a milestone point signified by an 8 associated with a 13, as pointed out in the following item.

6. Abraham's brother Nahor had 8 sons from his wife and 4 sons from his concubine. The Torah relates this information to provide background regarding Ribqah, the daughter of Nahor's 8th son, Betuel (Gen. 22:20-24). Since in that context the begetting of Ribqah is the only mention of a grandchild, this constitutes a unit of  $8+4+1=13$ , corresponding to ט-ה-א, which indicates that the family of Nahor was an appropriate one from which a wife for Yishaq may derive. Upon mention of Ribqah's birth and within the attached statement that “these 8 Milca bore to Nahor the

brother of Abraham” is the 130th attestation of Abraham’s name (including Abram) from the beginning of the Torah.

7. In the self-contained section that narrates of Abraham’s servant finding a suitable wife for Yishaq, which concludes with consummation of the Yishaq-Ribqah marriage (Gen. 24), Ribqah’s name appears 13 times while Yishaq’s name appears 8 times.

8. When Esav gets married at 40 years of age (Gen. 26:34), a milestone that is Biblically understood as a son separating from father and mother (עַל כֵּן יַעֲזֹב אִישׁ אֶת אָבִיו וְאֶת אִמּוֹ וְדָבַק בְּאִשְׁתּוֹ, *ibid.* 2:24), Yishaq is 100 years of age. From that point on (living without Esav “attached” to him) he lives 80 years. It may also be significant that Yaaqob was born when Abraham was 160 years of age (80 x 2).

9. Yaaqob has 12 sons and one daughter, a total of 13.

10. When Hashem changes Yaaqob’s name to Yisrael, the last attestation of his name Yaaqob before the change, but within the name-change context – “שָׂקֵךְ יַעֲקֹב,” (Gen. 35:10) – is the 130th occurrence of Yaaqob’s name in the Torah. When the angel had previously informed him of the forthcoming name change, the last attestation of his name Yaaqob just prior to mention of the change but also within that context – “וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב” (32:27-28) – is the 80th occurrence of יַעֲקֹב in the Torah when it is counted in the “pure” form, that is, without prefixes attached to the name. (The reversal of the usual 130-80 sequence is apparently because we are dealing with a consecutive count; usage of the non-prefixed form of the name appears to be to enable the lower total.)

11. When appearing before Pharaoh, Yaaqob states that he is 130 years of age (*ibid.* 47:9), while Moshe, when in front of Pharaoh, is described in the narrative as being 80 years of age (Ex. 7:7), an obvious juxtaposition of these two key numbers. At no other point during their lives are the ages of these personages given! (Rabbi Sassoon thought that the Torah narratives clearly indicate that Yaaqob was actually at the covenantal stage of 80 when in front of Pharaoh. However, in accordance with the principle אַל תִּתְהַדָּר לְפָנַי מֶלֶךְ (“Do not glorify yourself before the king,” Prov. 25:6), he refrained from mentioning it to

the king. He limited himself to the more modest wisdom achievement of recognizing the one G-d, symbolized by 130.) The only other case in which the Torah specifies an individual’s age when in front of Pharaoh is that of Yosef, which we will address in the next entry.

12. The only three age notices given for Yosef are 17, 30 and 110. These delineate the two significant periods of his life that lie between the markers as reflected in the narrative, that is, a 13-year period followed by one of 80 years. Yosef is 30 in front of Pharaoh, having attained the level of 13 and eventually achieves the level of 80.

13. Regarding the age notice given for Sarah at the time of her death, the introductory clause speaks of her life in plural תַּיִי שָׂרָה and the numbers are given as “100 years, 20 years and 7 years” (Gen. 23:1). The unusual literary formulation in dividing her years into three portions may be hinting at two periods of life, the differences between the age markers, 100–20=80 that followed a 20–7=13.

14. In the Torah’s most expansive passage concerning Shabbat, which explicitly speaks of Shabbat’s linkage with the Covenant, the number of attestations of the ה-ב-ש stem is 8 (Ex. 31:12-17). From the first *sh-b-t* attestation in that passage until its 8th there are 80 words.

15. A sacrifice is only acceptable from the 8th day onwards (Lev. 22:27).

16. In both the Year 2 and Year 40 censuses (the only two detailed in the Torah), the individual numbers of the 12 tribes, as well as their grand totals, do not contain a single number 8. The only individual grouping in which an 8 appears is in the Levite branch of Qehat, the carriers of the Ark of the Covenant, in the count of its one-month-old and over members. The grand total of the Levites, servitors of the sanctuary, also contains an 8.

17. Deuteronomy’s heading contains 79 third-person words, making Moshe’s first word – Y-H-V-H – the 80th word, beginning the Book with a Covenant symbol at the Tetragrammaton. Moshe’s first person talk continues through 4:40 and resumes after a 130-

word interposition (beginning with *אָז יִבְרָךְ לְמִשָּׁה*), consistent with the symbolism of 8 and 13 working in tandem. The last 7 of the 130 words follow a textual break (5:1), making Moshe's first word of his resumption (*וְשָׁמַע*) the 8th word of that new section. He continues without a third person break through 26:15, at which point he proclaims the G-d-Israel covenant relationship. That proclamation's first word (*הַיּוֹם*) is the 8000th word of Moshe's discourse that began in 5:1 word 8 (*וְשָׁמַע*). From the first word following the proclamation of the Covenant passage – *וַיְצַו* of 27:1 – through the last word of the Blessings and Curses – “qoneh” of 28:68, which clearly concludes a section – is 1300 words.

18. In the most expansive passage dealing with repentance and return, in a context linking them with Covenant renewal, the key stem *ב-ש* is attested 8 times (Deut. 30:1-10).

19. In Shemuel's anointing of David to be king, it is dramatically emphasized that he is the 8th son of Yishai. (See further on this in the following section.)

20. In King David's census, the northern kingdom count was 800,000 while that of Judah was 500,000, a total of 1,300,000 (2 Sam. 24:9).

21. In our standard Masoretic Text of the Torah there are 79,982 words. Rabbi Sassoon was of the opinion that the original word count was 80,000. A difference of 18 words is not surprising given the following considerations concerning slight variants in the text. Some prominent ancient texts as well as Talmudic quotations differ from our Masoretic Text in a number of instances; the Sages claim there were a number of *tiquneh sofrim* (scribal emendations) whereby slight changes were made in the text, and there is evidence from the *Targumim*, the Septuagint and the Dead Sea Scrolls that point to additional *tiqune sofrim*-type variant readings of several words. The Sages attest that there were some variant readings in early Second Temple times among the authoritative *Sifre Torah* in the Temple precincts, which were resolved by “majority” readings (see *Masekhet Sofrim* 6:4), and that Ezra was doubtful regarding the accuracy of some words and phrases in his Torah text and placed markings on them. (Based on his codes, Rabbi Sassoon thought the original text of the people's

response to the *arurim* declarations in Deuteronomy 27:15-26 was not a single “amen” but a double amen, similar to the case in Numbers 5:22 and to the many instances in Psalms and elsewhere of the double amen, thus accounting for twelve words. Also based on his system, he considered the original text of Genesis 4:8 to have included the words *וַיִּצְרַח הַשָּׂדֵד*, as in many ancient versions (*Targumim*, Septuagint, Samaritan and others).

### III. Regarding Seven and Twelve

In the ancient Near East, dating back to centuries before the Torah, the number 7 was considered most prominent, representative of completion and perfection. It is also employed as a number of significance in the Torah. This is illustrated with creation of the world in 7 days, the attendant symbolism of 7 inherent in Shabbat, the post-Diluvial world being comprised of 70 nations (Gen. 10) and the 70 members of the incipient nation of Israel that descended to Egypt. However, in the Torah the number 7 and its multiples appear to be signifiers of the “old order,” the system in place prior to the new system of the Covenant which was represented by the number 8. This is a transition that is frequently pointed to in the Torah, perhaps we may say that it was an ongoing transition.

The first mention of Covenant in the Torah is with Noah. His father Lemekh (son of Metushelah) lived to 777 years of age (Gen. 5:31), indicating that he was an extraordinary man, having achieved completeness in the previous order. He begot Noah at 182 years of age (7 x 2 x 13), a multiple of both seven and thirteen, pointedly hinting at his unique spiritual distinction. This is consistent with his naming his son Noah and with his declaration upon his birth – for whom, presumably, he diligently prepared through prayer and spiritual refinement – that he should be of great benefit to mankind (5:29). In Noah, as we pointed out in the previous section, the transition was made to the Covenant and the number 8.

The combined attestations of the names of Abram and Sarai through the last verse in Genesis 16 before the name changes are 70. The latter verse mentions that Abram was 86 years of age at the time of the birth of Ishmael and is followed in the next verse with

mention of Abram being 99 years of age (at which time the covenant linked with the birth of Yishaq is contracted), a 13-year span. Subsequently, there is extensive linkage to 8 (see the previous section).

*Shemini Asseret* is an 8th day festival added to the 7 days of Succot. Its distinctiveness from the preceding Succot festival is marked by the day's *`olah* sacrifices of bulls. During the seven days of Succot, the number of *`olah* bulls offered daily begin, significantly, with 13 on the first day and diminish by one each day until 7 were offered on Day 7. On the 8th day, *Shemini Asseret*, only one bull is offered for *`olah*, highlighting the unique significance of the day.

In the sacrificial service of *Rosh Hodesh*, all the days of *Pesah*, *Shabu`ot*, *Rosh Hashanah*, *Yom Kippur* and *Shemini Asseret* (as prescribed in Numbers 28-29), the *`olah* offering includes seven lambs and one ram. The latter, as an animal of the same species and gender as the lamb (given that all *`olot* are male), but more mature and more prominent, transformed the group of seven into a Covenant-connoting unit of eight. (The ram was especially suited for this purpose as it recalls the ram that Abraham sacrificed in place of Yishaq.) The 7 *Succot* days each has a double amount, or fourteen lambs and two rams daily. Perhaps the "extra" daily portion is related to those 7 days serving a purpose beyond being their own festival, that is, being a "pedestal" for the 8th day.

The Leviticus 23 discussion of *Succot* and *Shemini Asseret* (vv. 34-36; 39) treats them in an unusual manner, reflecting the fact that the 8th day is attached to the 7 but possesses its unique significance as an 8th day.

The *Shabu`ot* festival is emphasized as transforming units of 7 into an 8: "You shall count...7 complete weeks shall they be, until the morrow of the 7th Sabbath, count 50 days" (Lev. 23:15-16). It is being highlighted that the occasion is the day that begins the 8th series of 7. Significantly, verse 16 continues: 'לה' תִּקְרְבוּם מִנְחָה תְּדַשָּׁה לָהּ, "you then offer a new tribute to Hashem." (In this passage the sacrifices prescribed for *Shabu`ot* are slightly different than those prescribed in Numbers 28; however, the total number of animals it specifies is 13.

The Jubilee year is presented in a similar manner: "You shall count seven sabbaths of years, seven years seven times...and sanctify the year that is Year 50" (ibid. 25:8-11).

The Tabernacle dedication was on day 8, following 7 days of prescribed initiation (Lev. 9:1 ff.). In the Exodus instructions for Tabernacle dedication there is no mention of the 8th day ceremony, only of a 7-day initiation program. The 8th day ceremony was apparently added in conjunction with restoration of the Covenant, which had been broken with the golden calf apostasy.

The *musaf* (additional) offering on Shabbat required two lambs for *`olah*. These were besides the two lambs for *`olah* of the daily morning-afternoon *temidim* service, making a weekly total of 8 + 8. This may be a case of subsuming the 7-day week into the Covenant. As mentioned in the previous section, in the *Ki Tissa* Shabbat passage, which greatly emphasizes the Covenant, the *sh-b-t* root appears 8 times.

Following the death of Qorah and his immediate circle for contesting the prophetic authenticity of Moshe and Aharon, when people complained regarding their deaths, basically identifying with the rebels' position, 14,700 die in a plague (Num. 17:14). It appears that they represented the old order, those who refused to change to be committed to the new covenantal system. The same may be the case with the seventy thousand who died in the pestilence in David's day, after the count of Israel and Judah is given as 1,300,000 and that of Israel alone was 800,000 (2 Sam. 24).

When G-d had Shemuel anoint David king, the text makes a major point of Yishai having first presented his seven older sons: "Thus Yishai had seven sons pass before Shemuel and Shemuel said to Yishai, 'Hashem has not chosen these'" (1 Sam. 16:10). Only when the prophet asked if there was another son was David, the eighth and last, brought forth, as he was obviously not thought to be a contender.

Somewhat analogous to the case of 7 and 8, the number twelve represented a full measure of blessing and fruitfulness in the ancient Near East. In the Torah, it was supplanted in some respects by the spiritual

connotation of thirteen, referring to those who connected with the belief in one G-d. This latter principle may very well be behind Jacob's granting Joseph a double portion in tribes, transforming the tribes of Israel from the original twelve to thirteen.

#### **IV. From Ronald Benun's Upcoming Book on the Psalms**

Since before Rabbi Sassoon's passing away in 1985, Ronald Benun has been working on applying and extending the rabbi's principles regarding 8, 13, *berit* and other concepts and related matters to understanding the structure and meaning of the Psalms as well as other portions of Scripture. Some selections concerning the structure of the Book of Psalms follow:

1. The 1300th verse from the beginning of Psalms is the last verse of Psalm 78. The 1300th verse from the end of Psalms is the last verse of Psalm 77. Thus, Psalm 78 is enveloped by the overlap of 1300 verses going both ways. Psalm 78 has 72 verses. Verse 36, one of its two center verses, is verse 1264 in Psalms, the exact center verse of the 2527 verses of Psalms.

2. Psalm 79 contains 13 verses. Thus, Psalm 80 begins after exactly 1313 verses.

3. Primarily based on the Aleppo Codex, from the beginning of Psalm 80 until the end of Psalms there are 8888 words. Thus, the Book of Psalms comprises 1313 verses followed by 8888 words.

4. There are 21 (13+8) attestations of "berit" in the Psalms. Two of these appear in Psalm 78. The first of these two (in v. 10) is the 8th occurrence of "berit"

from the beginning of Psalms while the second (in v. 37) is the 13th from the end of the Psalms. Excluding superscription, "berit" is word number 88 in the psalm.

5. The 21 attestations of berit in the Psalms are found in exactly 13 psalms. The 8th occurrence (in Psalm 78) is in the psalm that is 8th from the last of these 13 psalms. The 13th occurrence is in the psalm that is 8th from the beginning of these 13 psalms (Ps. 89 v. 35).

An extensive and compelling example of how Rabbi Sassoon's system of number symbolism contributes to understanding the content of the material in which it appears, indeed, provides the necessary key, is now available. See Ronald Benun's article "Evil and the Disruption of Order: A Structural Analysis of the Acrostics in the First Book of Psalms" in the Journal of Hebrew Scriptures volume 6 article 5 ([www.JHSONline.org](http://www.JHSONline.org)). The author addresses the problem of the four alphabetic acrostics in the first book of psalms (9/10, 25, 34, and 37) that are all lacking verses that begin with certain letters of the alphabet. He demonstrates that these disruptions are an original feature of these psalms purposefully placed as part of a sophisticated literary structure.

#### **Endnote**

\* Thus, the first letter of the alphabet has the value of 1, the second letter, 2, and so on, the tenth letter equals 10, the eleventh letter, 20, and so on, the 19th letter equals 100, the 20th letter equals 200, and so on for the final two letters.

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