

CHAPTER 3, MISHNA 23(A): THE TORAH VS. THE COMPUTER - PART I

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Rabbi Elazar ben (son of) Chisma said: The laws of the bird-pair offerings and the beginning of menstrual periods: these are essential laws. Astronomy and the numeric values [of the Hebrew letters] are the spices to wisdom.

This mishna enumerates a number of subjects and evaluates their worth in relation to the Torah. The bird-pair offerings refer to the Temple sacrifices a woman must bring shortly after childbirth (as well as in other situations). Detailed discussions exist regarding the offering of these sacrifices, cases in which the offerings of different women became mixed up, and what types of stillbirths obligate the offering of these sacrifices.

Menstrual periods refer to the calculations necessary to determine the expected start date of a woman's period, as well as the relevant restrictions when her period begins or is expected to begin. This includes what types of blood indicate a menstrual flow, deviations from the normal cycle, off-cycle spotting, blood spots found on clothing, etc. These subjects may be a little less appealing to the budding scholar, but they are essential areas of Judaism crucial for the proper maintenance of the Jewish home.

(In our mishna's words one almost hears echoes of the pagan notion that such "women's laws" are somehow less holy and deserving of rabbinic attention. Such phenomena as menstruation reflect women's innate impurity or their affliction by evil spirits. Our mishna unequivocally rejects such absurdity.)

Astronomy and numeric values, on the other hand, are not Torah per se, but are subjects which complement the Torah -- as does almost every area of wisdom. The area of astronomy referred to here (and most often dealt with in the Talmud) is the calculation of the cycles of the moon and the seasons. Although basically mathematics, this field is essential for formulating the Jewish calendar, whose purpose in a word is to reconcile the discrepancy between the lunar months and the solar year. Each holiday must fall out in its proper season -- Passover in the spring, Sukkos (Tabernacles) at the ingathering of the crops, etc., and so the lunar year (12 months of approximately 29.5 days = 354 days) must continually be reconciled with the solar year of approximately 365.25 by adding days or months to the lunar year.

'Numeric values' ("gematriya" in Hebrew) refer to the assigning of number values to the letters of the

Hebrew alphabet. (I.e., alef = 1, bais (or 'bet') = 2, gimmel = 3, etc. After the tenth letter, yud, the counts increments by tens, and after the nineteenth, by one-hundreds.) Through this, all Hebrew words and phrases can be associated with numeric values. Certain forms of rabbinical homiletic interpretation are based on inferences made from these values, and occasionally, a decision in Jewish law will be based on (or at least corroborated by) such an inference.

Two simple examples follow. The Talmud (Makkos 23b) infers that the Torah contains 613 mitzvos (commandments) based on the verse "Moses commanded us in the Torah..." (Deut. 33:4). The word "Torah", as it appears in the verse, has the "gematriya" of: tes (400) + vuv (6) + raish (200) + hai (5) = 611. Thus, implies the verse, Moses taught us 611 mitzvos. That combined with the tradition that the first two of the Ten Commandments were heard directly from G-d at Sinai gives us a total of 613.

Elsewhere, the Talmud (Nedarim 32a) infers that Abraham first began to comprehend the existence of a single G-d at the age of 3. It derives this from Genesis 26:5: "Since Abraham hearkened to My voice..." "Since" is in Hebrew "aikev" = ayin (70) + kuf (100) + vais (2) = 172 -- implying that Abraham hearkened to G-d for 172 years. Thus, since Abraham lived till the ripe old age of 175, he must have begun at the tender age of 3!

As our mishna states, both astronomy and gematriya have their place in the Torah. "Essential laws" they are not, but in a way they help demonstrate one aspect of the Torah's beauty -- as may be seen from other disciplines -- as well as (in the case of gematriya) illustrating the hidden wisdom of the Hebrew alphabet.

Today we have a modernized approach to the study of numbers in the Torah. It is know as the Torah Codes, or ELS -- the study of Equidistant Letter Sequences in the Torah. The concept is that if one takes the words of the Torah as a long string of letters (without spaces between words) and searches at regular intervals (taking e.g. every 50th letter), he will find significant words and messages hidden within the text.

As a simple illustration, Rabbi Eliyahu Kramer, the Vilna Gaon (of 18th Century Lithuania, universally considered the greatest Torah scholar of his age) was once asked that being that all future events are alluded to in the Torah, where can one find a hint to Maimonides? He pointed to Exodus 11:9: "...in order to magnify My wonders in the Land of Egypt." Now, Maimonides is universally known as "Rambam" in Hebrew (the letters raish - mem - bais - mem), the acronym of Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon. Further, the words quoted above are as follows in Hebrew: "re'vos mofsai b'erez Mitzrayim." If we take the first letter of each word in this phrase we spell -- raish - mem - bais - mem = Rambam! That together with the fact that Maimonides was a wonder who lived much of his adult life in Egypt (as few great Torah scholars did), we have a hidden but discernible hint to the sage in question.

(This is admittedly a slightly different tactic -- taking the first letters of adjacent words as opposed to equidistant letters. However, I wanted to use this example because we will return to it next week, G-

d willing.)

More recently, using computer technology, scholars have discovered that there is no other place in the Torah in which this four-letter sequence appears at the start of adjacent words. Needless to say, the Vilna Gaon was pretty smart!

I would now like to leave the remainder of this discussion for next week. We have a long way to go. However, I'd like to offer an important disclaimer before we close. Many of you probably know that much controversy surrounds the issue of the Torah Codes -- both their validity and their statistical significance. I myself, after having been enamored with the topic years back, have resigned myself to the fact that far and away the majority of statisticians (hopefully most of them sincerely) reject their mathematical basis. They may well indicate something of the Torah's divinity, but I, in my relatively uninformed opinion, cannot imagine ramming them down the throat of the uninformed in order to "prove" that we're right. The Torah has more than enough proofs of its authenticity to the intellectually honest. There is no need to employ shaky methods to further corroborate G-d's infinite wisdom.

Regardless, my readers are welcome to research the topic for themselves on the Web; there are still a few sites out there devoted to the debate. (Old websites almost never go away, though they look very dated.)

In any event, before we continue next week, let me state that I am not writing this piece in an effort to convince anyone of the validity of the Codes or to weigh in with my own uninformed two cents. I am neither great rabbi nor great statistician. The controversy in its time has had its share of acrimony and mud-slinging (rather curious for what ought to be a scientific debate), and people far greater than myself have angrily and vociferously stated their opinions.

However, I would like to approach this issue with a different thought in mind. I feel the Codes touch on an even more fundamental issue to mankind today: Has modern man progressed "beyond" the ancient wisdom of the Torah, however advanced and innovative it was in its time? Has societal and technological advancement made the Torah archaic and irrelevant to modern man? Does the Torah have anything to say to a race which has created computers which effortlessly perform billions of floating point operations every second, which at every moment of the day sends trillions upon trillions of bits of information instantaneously around the globe? Next week, G-d willing, I hope we will shed some light on these issues.

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