

## Jewish triads

In this week's Torah portion, *Yitro*, God gives the Torah to the Jews. We read:

In the third month... it came to pass on the third day... that Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with God... [Ex. 19:1, 16-17]

In commenting on this passage, the Talmud says:

A Galilean scholar lectured before Rabbi Chisda: "Blessed be the Merciful One who gave a three-fold Torah [consisting of the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings] to a three-fold people [consisting of Priests, Levites and Israelites] through a third-born [Moses, born after Aaron and Miriam] on the third day in the third month." [Shabbat 88a]

That's a lot of triads! And when you think about it, the number three is all over the place in Judaism. In the Torah itself, we learn that there are three patriarchs. Abraham was visited by three angels, three days after his circumcision. God told him to sacrifice his son Isaac at a place three days away. Adam had three sons. Noah had three sons. The prophet Balaam beat his donkey three times. Joseph's fellow inmates told him of their dreams involving three branches and three baskets. The priestly benediction, *birkat kohanim*, is a threefold blessing.

The Covenant between God and Israel is sealed by three things: Shabbat, circumcision and *tefillin*. The injunction not to seethe a calf in its mother's milk is repeated three times. We are commanded not to eat the fruit of a fruit tree for the first three years of its life. [Lev. 19:23]

The prophet Jonah spent three days inside the whale. There are three daily prayers, three Shabbat meals, and Shabbat ends when you can see three stars in the sky. In the *Amidah*, we ask God for three things: *Channenu meitcha deah, binah ve-haskel* -- Grant us knowledge, understanding, discernment. We call God "holy" three times in the *Amidah*: "*Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh Hashem Tzevaot*". We must recite *Ashrei* three times a day.

There are three Pilgrimage Festivals (Pessah, Shavuot and Sukkot), three *matzot* on the Seder table, and you must explain three things at the seder: *Pessah*, *matzah* and *maror*. There are three weeks of mourning between the fast of the Seventeenth of Tammuz and Tisha B'Av. There are three major commandments that must not be broken even to save a life: those against idolatry, sexual immorality and murder. A Jewish boy gets his first haircut at age three. A Jewish court of law (a *Bet Din*) consists of three judges. There are three ways to earn atonement on Yom Kippur: *Teshuva*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah* -- Repentance, prayer and charity. [Gen. R. 44:12] Candidates for conversion must be turned away three times to make sure they are sincere. Hebrew words have three-letter roots. In Jewish mysticism, the soul has three parts: *neshamah*, *ruach* and *nefesh* (breath, spirit and repose). In Jewish law, when something is done three times it is considered a permanent thing. This is called a "*chazakah*." As we say in the vernacular: "The third time is a charm".

And I am sure you all are familiar with many Jewish quotes that begin with "three things", "*shloscha devarim*", in particular from the Mishna in Pirkei Avot, such as:

*Al shloscha devarim ha-olam omed: Al ha-Torah, ve-al ha-avodah, ve-al gemilut hassadim.*

The world stands on three things: On the Torah, on worship, and on deeds of lovingkindness. [Avot 1:2]

*Al shloscha devarim ha-olam omed: Al ha-din, ve-al ha-emet, ve-al ha-shalom.*

The world stands on three things: On justice, on truth and on peace. [Avot 1:18]

Three things... are above you: An eye that sees, an ear that hears, and all your deeds written in a book. [Avot 2:1]

[Rabbi Eliezer] said three things: Let the honor of your friend be as dear to you as your own; do not be easily provoked to anger; and repent one day before your death. [Avot 2:10]

Apply your mind to three things and you will not sin: Know from where you came, where you are going, and before Whom you are destined to account. From where did you come? From a putrid drop. Where are you going? To a place of dust, worms and maggots. Before Whom are you destined to account? Before the King of the Kings of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He. [Avot 3:1]

So I asked myself: How many times does the phrase "three things" -- "*shloscha devarim*" -- appear in the main Jewish sources: Tanach, Talmud,

Midrash Rabbah, and Zohar? My trusty CD-ROM quickly gave me the answer: A whopping 245 times! Now, it is not surprising that small numbers should appear a lot in life -- there aren't enough of them to go around! But the question is: Does "3" appear more often than the others? How often does the phrase "one thing" or "two things" or "seven things" appear in our sources? Here are the answers:

- one thing: 149 times
- two things: 109 times
- four things: 51 times
- five things: 43 times
- six things: 44 times
- seven things: 24 times
- eight things: 6 times
- nine things: 1 time
- ten things: 30 times

So "three" is indeed head and shoulders above the other numbers! Three must somehow be special. What's so special about the number three in Judaism?

Well, three legs is the minimum number of legs for the stability of a table or a chair. That's why the quotes say "The world stands on three things". The Book of Ecclesiastes says:

A cord of three strands is not easily broken. [Eccl. 4:12]

So three is the beginning of strength.

"One" represents unity, agreement, simplicity. "Two" represents tension, opposition, conflict: A thing and its opposite, good and evil, right and wrong, life and death, day and night, left and right, north pole and south pole. Some might add: male and female, Republican and Democratic. The second day of creation is the only day about which God did not say "It was good" -- because he had to separate the waters above the sky from the waters below -- separate the physical from the spiritual, always in conflict. God had to mediate between the two, as it were. On the other hand, the THIRD day of creation is the only one God said was "good" not once but TWICE -- because the land, the sea and the sky had begun to work in harmony to produce vegetation, the first manifestation of life. So "three" stands for harmony and peace, completeness and stability -- different things working together towards a common goal.

Now, let's not go overboard. I am aware of the fact that our neighbors have elevated the number three to the stratosphere. We did not go quite that far. But we still gave the number three a place of honor in our tradition.

Three cheers for the number three!

Shabbat shalom.