

Gematria

Introduction to Gematria

- Assign a number to each Hebrew letter, in order. By tradition:
 - 1=Aleph; 2=Bet; 3=Gimel; 4=Dalet; then 5,6,7,8,9,10
 - Then 20,40,50,60,70,80,90,100; then 200,300, 400=tav.
 - Some include the final form of the letters, others don't:
 - 500=final Kaph, 600, 700, 800, 900=Final Tsadi;.
- Thus:
 - "Ha-i" = alive = $8+10 = 18$
 - Whence: make charitable contributions in multiples of 18
 - "YHVH" = God = 26
 - "Sha-l-o-m" = $300+30+6+40=376$
- When two words or phrases have the same number (the same "gematria"), they have connections; one can speculate on what those might be
 - Example: In Genesis 42:2, Jacob tells his sons "Go down to Egypt". "Go down" is "Redu", and "Re-d-u" adds up to 210. On the other hand, we know that the Israelites stayed in Egypt for 210 years. So we conclude that this was foretold in 'Redu'!
- Two gematriot that differ by 1 are considered the same. ("Close enough").
 - "From where do we know that gematrias which differ by one are considered equal? We learn this from Yaakov's statement that Ephraim and Menashe (gematria of 726) are equivalent in his eyes to Reuven and Shimon (gematria of 725). And when did Yaakov say that? On the occasion when he reversed his right and left hands." (Bnei Yissaschar)
 - [Source: The LEKET YOSHER (in his introduction) and the SHIBOLEI HA'LEKET (#212), as quoted by the BIRCHAS PERETZ (in his introduction to the Parpera'os section).]
- Widely used in Jewish mysticism

Role in Judaism

- Commentators are either in favor of or neutral to gematria. They said:
 - Cannot extract halacha or rabbinic rulings from gematria
 - Can't say, e.g., "The name of this product has the same gematria as the word "kosher", therefore the product is kosher"
 - Ramban: Gematria cannot be used to tell future
 - It's only a mnemonic device

Examples of Gematria (separately by Bruce Kaplan)

My objections to Gematria

1. A method for extracting meaning from Torah must be applied consistently or not at all. You can't apply it when it suggests associations that make you feel good, and decline to apply it when it suggests unpalatable associations.

Examples:

-Number: 376

=Shalom (peace)

=Esau

-Connected? A stretch! Yet some say...

-"...If not for his name, which means peace, Esau would have destroyed the world." (Baal HaTurim, Bereishit 25:25)

- "Always be first to greet a person with "Shalom", even if he is a gentile." (Baal Ha Turim, Bamidbar 6:26)

-There is no peace for Israel (Yaakov) if there is no peace for Esau. (Leibowitz, Seven Years of Discussions of the Weekly Parasha, p. 110) – nice homiletic!

-Number: 26

YHVH: God's name.

But what do the following have to do with God:

=B-ya-di-y: in my hand. [The Egyptian chief butler telling his dream to Joseph]:... (And Pharaoh's cup was in my hand... (Gen. 40:11)

=V-ha-ya-h: It shall (come to pass)... (Gen. 44:31) ['...when he sees that the lad is not with us...' Judah talking to his brother Joseph]

=He-y-te-v: Diligently. (Then shall you inquire, and make search, and ask diligently -- Deut. 13:15) (...and, behold, if it is true, and the thing certain, that such abomination is done among you; 16. You shall surely strike the inhabitants of that city ' Moses to Israel)

-Number: 86

=Elohim, the other main name of God

=Ha-teva: nature.

-Is God the same as nature? Should we all become pantheists?

-Number: 210

-Again, in Genesis 42:2 Jacob tells his sons "Go down to Egypt". "Go down" is "Redu", and "Re-d-u" = 210. The Israelites stayed in Egypt for 210 years, so this was foretold in 'Redu'!

-But earlier, God told Abraham 'Lech lecha' -- Get yourself out...

(Genesis 12:1) -- ...from your country...to a land that I will show you...

Le-ch is $30+20=50$. Le-ch le-cha = 100. If final chaf is 500, then it's $530+530 = 1060$. Did the Jews spend only 50 years in Israel? 100? 530? 1060? None of the above.

-So why apply notion in one case and not the other?

-Age of patriarchs:

Abraham lived to $175 = 5 \times 5 \times 7$; note that $5 + 5 + 7 = 17$

Yitzchak lived to $180 = 6 \times 6 \times 5$; note that $6 + 6 + 5 = 17$

Yaakov lived to $147 = 7 \times 7 \times 3$; note that $7 + 7 + 3 = 17$

$17 = t-o-v$ (good)

$5 + 6 + 7 = 18 = chai$ (alive)

$7 + 5 + 3 = 15 = ya-h$ (YH -- first two letters of God, and alternate name of God)

Objection: A factorization is done with prime numbers. 6 is not prime: $6 = 2 \times 3$. If 6 is replaced by 2×3 , observations are invalidated.

2. *Principle: Two gematriot that differ by 1 are considered the same.*

-So if they differ by two they are also the same (transitivity)

-So they are all alike

-So anything can be interpreted to mean anything

3. *Many practitioners of gematria confuse "finding a deep connection", which is hard, with "putting the two words in the same sentence", which is easy.*

Can always "make up" a connection. But is it compelling? Are we manufacturing "teachings" out of thin air – foreordained teachings that we resonate to and that do not require gematria "validation" to begin with?

Conclusion: Gematria is a game whereby, if you know the answer in advance, you can look around until you see numbers that give it to you. If you don't know the answer in advance, it is useless.