YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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**TALMUDIC AGGADA**

**By Rav Yitzchak Blau**

The htm version of this shiur is available at:

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**DAYS OF DELIVERANCE: ESSAYS ON PURIM AND HANUKKAH

by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik**

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**Shiur #17: Meaning in the Details: Talmudic Numbers**

Last week’s class began exploring the meaning of details in aggadic stories. I suggested criteria for determining when details have deep symbolic significance and when they simply flesh out a story. Are the details necessary to the basic story line or extraneous? Do the details resonate with associations to other Jewish texts? This class will apply the same questions to numbers in aggadic stories.

Commentaries locate profound significance in numbers. In one story, a man who is zealous regarding the commandment of *tzitzit[[1]](#footnote-1)* resists sinning with a prostitute. She then turns her life around, converts to Judaism, and eventually marries him. Towards the beginning of the story, we hear that she charged him four hundred coins for the appointment (*Menachot* 44a). R. Yitzchak from Karlin (*Keren Ora*) connects these coins with the four hundred coins Avraham pays for Sara’s burial plot.

*Keren Ora* does not explain the significance of this connection, but it works beautifully with R. Eliezer Berkovits’ interpretation of the story. R. Berkovits contrasts the male/female interaction in the two parts of the story. Initially, the man and woman do not speak to each other, and she does not even know his name. Her attendant refers to him simply as “the man who sent you four hundred gold coins.” After he declines her services, a conversation begins, and she wants to know about his identity. This conversation conveys the main point of Torah’s sexual ethics – to promote authentic human relationships in place of utilizing other people as objects for pleasure or profit. According to Berkovits’ approach, we can understand *Keren Ora’s* connection between this story and Avraham’s devotion to Sara’s burial. The *gemara* alludes to the marriage of Avraham and Sara as a paradigm of a more noble and refined union. Avraham’s dedication to Sara after death indicates that the relationship was about much more than physical satisfaction.

A different Talmudic tale also inspires *Keren Ora* to find meaning in numbers. R. Gamliel and R. Yehoshua embark on a sea voyage, but only the latter brings sufficient food, because he realizes that a star that emerges every seventy years will confuse the sailors and prolong the journey (*Horayot* 10a). R. Yitzchak contends that seventy years represent a human life, as in the verse: “The days of our lives are seventy years” (*Tehillim* 90:10). In his reading, the Gemara alludes to those who know how to use time well during the journey of life. Such people resist the distractions of stars, which symbolize material enticements.

One final example will suffice before beginning our analysis. After Reish Lakish passes away, R. Yochanan is disconsolate. Not only does he miss his brother-in-law and study partner, he also feels responsible for Reish Lakish’s death, since he refused to pray on Reish Lakish’s behalf. The rabbis attempt to console him by sending R. Elazar ben Pedat, who cites supporting texts for everything R. Yochanan says. R. Yochanan informs R. Elazar that he has no need for someone to cheer him on and affirm all of his ideas. In fact, he misses Reish Lakish, who raised twenty-four objections to his words, forcing him to respond with twenty- four answers (*Bava Metzia* 84a).

Maharsha locates the number forty-nine in this story by adding together R. Yochanan’s one original idea, the twenty-four objections, and the twenty-four answers. Based on the assumption that each Torah principle has forty-nine angles, Maharsha explains that this kind of Talmudic interaction enables one to appreciate all facets of a given intellectual inquiry. Scholars who just agree with one another fail to achieve this result; those who engage in fruitful debate come to understand ideas with all their nuances and complexity.

Where do we stand regarding these interpretations? On the one hand, each of the above interpretations claims to find resonance with existing Jewish texts. Four hundred coins remind us of a biblical land purchase, seventy alludes to a verse in *Tehillim*, and two twenty-fours are intended to get us to the known quantity of forty-nine. On the other hand, there may be far simpler explanations for the chosen numbers.

The Bible already uses some numbers, such as seven and ten, to mean many. When Yaakov accuses Lavan of changing his salary ten times (*Bereishit* 31:7) and when God says that the Jewish people tried him in the desert on ten occasions (*Bemidbar* 14:22), ten means many, rather than a precise number. Both Rashbam and Ibn Ezra interpret the number ten in this fashion, although Rashi does enumerate ten trials. The same applies to the number seven, such as when God promises to punish sinners sevenfold (*Vayikra* 26:18) or when a righteous person gets up after falling seven times (*Mishlei* 24:16).

Apparently, the Sages use a parallel approach with numbers such as six hundred thousand, four hundred, three hundred, and twenty-four. Regarding three hundred, one Talmudic example explicitly makes this point:

It was taught there: “There was a pile in the middle of the altar. Sometimes, there were three hundred Khor of ashes.” Rava said: “This is an exaggeration” (*Chullin* 90b).

This *gemara* cites a *mishna* in *Tamid* emphasizing the large volume of sacrifices and the significant amount of ashes those offerings generated. Rava does not deny that the pile was large, but he asserts that “three hundred Khor” is an exaggeration. The number “three hundred” repeatedly comes up in situations where the Gemara wants to convey a large quantity, which suggests that the Gemara usually employs this number in an exaggerated fashion.

The same recurring pattern occurs in reference to large quantities of food. Chanania ben Chizkiya brings three hundred bottles of oil up to the attic, where he resolves contradictions between *Yechezekel* and the *Chumash* (Pentateuch)(*Shabbat* 13b). Yochanan ben Narbai’s desert consists of three hundred calves and three hundred bottles of wine (*Pesachim* 57a). R. Chiyya bar Ada, a teacher of children, was three days late for his lessons, because he was cutting three hundred clusters of grapes from his vineyard each day (*Ketubot* 111b).

Talmudic sources use this number when describing extended lists of *halakhot* (Jewish laws). Yehoshua forgets three hundred *halakhot* when Moshe dies (*Temura* 16a). R. Eliezer declares that he knows three hundred *halakhot* regarding a type of leprosy and another three hundred regarding magic incantations for planting cucumbers (*Sanhedrin* 68a). Doeg Ha’edomi taught three hundred *halakhot* about a tower suspended in midair (*Sanhedrin* 106b).

It seems highly unlikely that the same number actually happened in each of the above scenarios. The Gemara uses three hundred to indicate a large amount, not to communicate a precise number. Indeed, Rashbam (*Pesachim* 119a) notes that the Gemara uses this number in an inexact fashion. R. Tzvi Hirsch Chajes (1805-1855), a Galiacian scholar who staunchly defended Orthodoxy, while appreciating aspects of the *Haskala* (Jewish Enlightenment)*,* penned a work entitled *Mavo Ha-talmud* containing a number of significant chapters on the nature of Aggada (see chapters 17-32). Chapter thirty analyzes the Sages’ use of such numbers and echoes Rashbam’s approach.

 Chajes and Rashbam’s understanding of the Gemara’s use of numbers seems to undermine the interpretations with which we began. If four hundred is a standard number employed to mean a large quantity, we have less reason to associate it with the purchase of *me’arat hamachpela* (Sara’s burial place). Four hundred coins come up in other contexts as well. Two fellows wager four hundred coins on getting Hillel angry (*Shabbat* 31a), the Boethusians hire false witnesses for the same amount (*Rosh Hashana* 22b), and a suitor offered that amount of money for R. Bibi’s comely daughter (*Shabbat* 80b). The more standardized the amount, the less justification for seeing a particular resonance or association.

 The same argument applies to the number twenty-four. For example, the Gemara conveys R. Shimon bar Yochai’s intellectual development using that number. At first, R. Pinchas ben Yair would give twelve answers for questions raised by R. Shimon. Later, R. Shimon offered twenty-four answers to the queries of R. Pinchas (*Shabbat* 33b). *Ketubot* 77b and *Eikha Rabba* 1 use this number in analogous fashion. These examples provide grounds for doubting Maharsha’s interpretation in which the two twenty-fours help create an allusion to the number forty-nine.

 On the other hand, a standard number can take on added meaning in a particular context. Moreover, these interpretations have great worth even if we categorize them as *derash* (an interpretation that aims to get at some meaning extrinsic to the text itself) rather than *peshat* (the simple meaning of the text).

1. Fringes on four-cornered garment that Jewish men are obligated to wear according to Jewish law. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)