THE POWER OF THREES

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In Jewish religious consciousness, the number three has always served as a basic organizing principle. From the three Patriarchs to the three annual pilgrimage holidays and the three daily prayers, threes abound.¹ This may simply be a reflection of a mnemonic strategy that grouping items in threes is relatively easy to remember – beyond that it becomes more challenging. Or, as will become evident in the course of this exposition, threefold constructs so thoroughly permeate Jewish life and thought that they represent a foundational reality.

An early rabbinic formulation of the centrality of the threefold pattern is the following statement: "That Galilean [R. Yose] expounded according to R. Hisda²: 'Blessed is the Merciful One who gave a threefold Torah, to a threefold nation, by means of the third-born [Moses], on the third day, in the third month.'"³

Herein, R. Yose associated the three parts of the Hebrew Scriptures – Torah, Prophets, and Writings – with the "threefold nation" – Priests, Levites, and Israelites. This is then connected to Moses and the revelation on Mt. Sinai, which occurred during Sivan, on the third day of Divinely mandated preparation – On the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder, and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain (Ex. 19:16).

The concepts mentioned by R. Yose received a more expansive treatment in the Midrash Tanhuma, to which we shall presently turn. This will be followed by a consideration of Sefer Yezirah. Each of these classic rabbinic texts offers a myriad of associations involving the number three. Stemming from our analysis of these sources, we will discover an underlying pattern that links the Torah and its letters to the practice of Judaism and ultimately the corporate organization of the Jewish people.

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Embedded in the *Midrash Tanhuma*, a gaonic anthology of earlier rabbinic formulations, is an extended discussion on the significance of threes. It brings together many important facets of the topic and is therefore worth quoting in its entirety. The impetus for the discussion is: Why was the Torah revealed on Mt. Sinai during the third month, rather than at some other time? The Midrash is implicitly based upon the start of the prologue to the Ten Commandments: *On the third moon after the Israelites had gone forth from the land of Egypt* (Ex. 19:1).

This follows from what is written:

*Indeed, I wrote down for you a threefold lore, wise counsel* (Prov. 22:20). R. Yehoshua, son of R. Nehemiah said: This refers to the Torah, whose letters are threefold *[meshulashim] – alef, bet, gimel.* Everything is threefold. The Torah is threefold: Torah, Prophets, and Writings. The Mishnah is threefold: Talmud, Halakhot, and Aggadot. The intermediaries [for the transmission of the Torah] are threefold: Miriam, Aaron, and Moses. Daily prayers are threefold: evening, morning, and afternoon. Kedushah is threefold: Holy, Holy, Holy. The Israelites are threefold: Kohanim [priests], Levites, and Israelites. Moses’ (name) has three letters. [He is] from the tribe of Levi, whose (name) has three letters and is descended from three (ancestors): Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. [The Torah was given] in the third month: Nisan, Iyyar, Sivan. On Mt. Sin (sic!) composed of three letters, as it is stated: *and [they] encamped in the wilderness of Sin* (Num. 33:11). They became purified in three days, as it is stated: *Let them be ready for the third day* (Ex. 19:11).

R. Yehoshua, son of R. Nehemiah said:

The third is always favored. Adam begat three sons: Cain, Abel, and Seth. Seth was favored, as it is stated: *This is the record of Adam's line* (Gen. 5:1) and it is written: *he begot a son in his likeness after his image, (and he named him Seth)* (Gen. 5:3). Noah had three sons, as it is stated: *Noah begot three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japeth* (Gen. 6:10). Even though Japeth was the elder, he did not merit greatness, rather Shem (did). Amram had three children:
Miriam, Aaron, and Moses. It is written: *had not Moses His chosen one* (Ps. 106:23).

In respect to the tribes: Reuben, Simon, Levi . . . Levi (the third son/tribe) was favored, as it is stated: *At that time the Lord set apart the tribe of Levi* (Deut. 10:8). In respect to the kings of Israel: Saul, David, and Solomon, Solomon was favored, as it is said: *And Solomon successfully took over the throne of the Lord as king* (I Chron. 29:23).

At first glance R. Yehoshua, a fourth generation Palestinian *amora*, is simply providing a preponderance of instances in which threes or a threefold pattern are evident. Upon closer scrutiny, one can see that the Midrash is laying out a framework which connects the Torah, its practice, and the nation of Israel. The first item it mentioned is the most basic – the threefold nature of the letters of the Torah. This is then followed by the tripartite division of the written Torah, forming the Tanakh (Torah, Prophets, Writings). Emanating from the Hebrew Scriptures there is the Oral Torah, which is likewise divided into three aspects. This in turn is related to the daily prayer cycle and finally the Israelite nation and its leaders.

As we have seen, for R. Yehoshua the starting point is the threefold nature of the Hebrew letters, which constitute the building blocks of the Torah. One could also point out that the Hebrew language itself is based upon three-letter roots and accordingly most Hebrew words are formed from three core letters. The term that R. Yehoshua used to refer to this threefold grouping is *meshu-lash*. This is the participial form of the *pual* pattern of verbs. It has a passive connotation indicating something that has been formed into threes and is found in several places in the Torah. The first incidence occurs in Genesis 15, in which Abraham is instructed by God to take three animals and two birds. In response to Abraham's query as to how he can be assured that he will ultimately possess the promised land, God demanded: *'Bring Me a three-year-old heifer [egla meshuleshet], a three-year-old she-goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young bird* (v. 5:9). The modifier *meshulash*, which is applied to all three animals, has been much discussed. Whereas *Targum Yonatan* renders the phrase "a calf that is three years old," *Targum Onkelos* reads instead "three calves." The medieval commentators are similarly divided, with Rashi opting for "three calves" and Ibn Ezra favoring
"three years old." Insofar as all of the animals are listed as singular nouns, "three years old" seems more likely.

The next occurrence of a threesome also pertains to Abraham. This is at the start of Genesis 18 when three "men" suddenly appear before him. We later discover that they are in fact angels on a mission. This text is connected to the conclusion of the Midrash Tanhuma in an interesting way. Recall that the rationale given for delaying the transmission of the Ten Commandments until the third month is to allow the Israelites time to recover from their bondage. Rashi on Genesis 18:1, basing himself on a statement by R. Hama bar Hanina from Bava Metzia f. 86b, notes that it was on the third day after his circumcision that Abraham was visited by God and the angels. This serves as the basis for the traditional Jewish practice of postponing an initial visit to a sick person until the third day. Similarly, in Sotah f. 14a, R. Hama extends God's solicitousness to other issues, such as visiting a mourner, which is associated with God blessing Isaac after Abraham's death (see Gen. 25:11). Similarly, it is customary for those who are not close relatives or friends to delay their initial visit to a mourner until the third day.

Threesomes are also found in relation to Jacob. As soon as he approaches the home of his forebears, he sees a well, beside which there were three flocks of sheep (v. 29:2). Soon after, Rachel approaches with her flock. Note that rachel is Hebrew for ewe. This chapter ends with the birth of Levi's four sons. Of note are Leah's comments upon the birth of Levi, her third son. Again she conceived and bore a son and declared: 'This time my husband will become attached (yillaveh) to me, for I have borne him three sons.' Therefore he was named Levi (v. 29:34). It may only be a coincidence, but Leah, whose own name consists of three letters, uses a three-letter name for her third son. This pattern is not evident in her naming of her other sons. Moreover, it is only in relation to the births of her third and sixth sons that Leah specifies the number of sons that she has borne, as she names them (see also v. 30:20).

SEFER YEZIRAH

Sefer Yezirah [The Book of Creation] is the classic rabbinic treatise on cosmogony, and as such represents what the talmudic sages refer to as maaseh b'reishit, [the Account of Creation]. Although there is ongoing scholarly
debate as to its provenance and date of composition, this can be bypassed for our purposes. Nonetheless, the only individual that is identified in the text is Abraham (Chap. 6:8) and therefore traditionally some have attributed this work to him. Throughout Sefer Yezirah threefold constructs abound. The opening paragraph of the text begins with the assertion that God created the universe by means of "thirty-two wondrous paths of wisdom." It concludes with the assertion that "He created His universe by means of three sefarim – with a book [sefer], a number [sefar] and a narrative [sippur]." The term sefarim is best left untranslated; although normally it refers to books, herein it points to the threefold grouping of the book, number and narrative.

Several observations can be made about this passage. In the second paragraph the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet are divided into three distinct groups: three matres or mother letters, seven doubled letters, and twelve simple letters. Thus the three categories are headed by a three-member group, consisting of the letters alef, mem, and shin, representing the beginning, middle and end of the alphabet. Three aspects of first sefirah are immediately presented: voice, spirit, and speech.

In the third chapter, the three mother letters are said to have generated three fathers "from which everything was created." These three fathers are therein identified as the three primal elements: ether/air, water, and fire. The linguistic connection between the mother letters and these elements is made more explicit in the next section: "The three mothers alef, mem, shin are manifest in the universe as avir [ether], mayim [water], esh [fire]." Thus, the essence of the name of each of the primal elements stems from one of the mother letters. Although many classical systems identify a fourth primal element – earth – Sefer Yezirah maintains its threefold grouping with the assertion that "the earth was created from the water."

This section of the text has also introduced the reader into another triplet; that the three mother letters manifest themselves, by means of the three fathers, in three distinct realms: the universe [olam], the annual cycle [shanah], and the individual [nefesh]. As quoted previously, the mother letters are revealed in the universe in the form of the primal elements. In terms of the annual cycle, the elements manifest themselves as the three seasonal states: hot from fire, cold from water, and temperate from the ether. They also are
represented in the individual's head stemming from fire, belly from water, and torso from the ether. In all three, the ether acts as a balancing force.

PRIESTLY BENEDICTION AND TEMPLES

Having examined how both Midrash Tanhuma and Sefer Yezirah emphasize threefold patterns, we can now consider a central liturgical formulation of the Torah, namely the priestly benediction. Significantly, it is referred to in the daily Amidah prayer as follows: "Bless us with the threefold blessing of the Torah." The sources of the benediction are the three verses in Numbers 6:24-26: The Lord bless you and protect you . . . . These passages constitute an interesting numerical progression. The initial verse consists of three Hebrew words, followed by five and then seven. The fifteen words of the priestly benediction correspond to the fifteen steps in the Temple from the courtyard to the Women’s Court and are alluded to in the fifteen Psalms of Ascent [Shirei Maalot – literally Song of the Steps] – Psalms 120-134 that were performed by the Levites, while standing on those very steps. Paralleling the three-verse priestly benediction are the three lines from Hosea 2:21-22, which begin I will espouse you forever. These verses are traditionally recited while one wraps the tefillin straps around the fingers and hand during morning prayers. Similar to the priestly benediction, the first of these three lines from Hosea consists of three Hebrew words.

Not only is the priestly blessing threefold, but both the First and Second Temples in Jerusalem consisted of three parts. The terms for these areas in the First Temple, that is Solomon's Temple, were Ulam, Heikhal, and Devir. In the Second Temple they corresponded to the porch/hall, sanctuary, and Holy of Holies. King Solomon also incorporated this threefold design into his royal palace in Jerusalem. It consisted of three halls: Hall of Pillars, House of the Forest of Lebanon, and Hall of the Throne (of Judgment). Additionally, although both the First and Second Temples have long since been destroyed, it is the traditional Jewish expectation that during the final redemption a Third Temple will be built.

TANAKH AND JEWISH LEADERSHIP

The final topic that will be addressed concerns the configuration of the Tanakh and its implications for the history of Jewish religious leadership. Di-
viding the Hebrew Scriptures into three parts is certainly ancient. An early witness is found in a non-canonical Jewish work written by Shimon b. Yeshua b. Eleazar b. Sira, who lived somewhere in Israel around 170 BCE. This book was transported to Alexandria and translated into Greek by his grandson in 132 BCE. Known by various titles, including the *Wisdom of Ben Sira*, *Sirach*, and *Ecclesiasticus*, it was written in the tradition of the Book of Proverbs. In his prologue, the grandson mentions that his grandfather "had devoted himself to the reading of the Law and the Prophets and the other books of our ancestors." A few lines latter, this threefold characterization is reiterated with the phrase "even the Law itself, the Prophecies and the rest of the books." This tripartite division was also accepted by the rabbis of the Talmud. For example, therein one finds an Aramaic reference to: *oraita, neviei, u-khitivei* [Torah, Prophets, and Writings].

Dividing the Hebrew Scriptures into three parts is more than simply an organizational tool – it also reflects a fundamental perspective on Jewish religious leadership and its evolution. The threefold division of the Israelite nation into Priests, Levites, and lay Israelites is well known and preserved until today in the assigning of *aliyah* honors during the Torah reading. Significantly, Jeremiah and Ezekiel offered a different construct: *[F]or instruction [torah] shall not fail from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor oracle from the prophet* (Jer. 18:18) and *They shall seek vision from the prophet in vain; instruction shall perish from the priest and counsel from the elders* (Ezek. 7:26). Both of these prophets identified three types of leaders: priests, prophets, and the wise/elders.

It is easy to see how each of these types of leaders is connected to a different part of the Tanakh. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel associated the priests with instruction, that is, *torah*. This would also apply to the Torah as a text. It is not coincidental that the central book of the Pentateuch has been given the title Leviticus. Indeed most of its regulations pertain to the levitical clan and their sacramental duties. Elsewhere, Ezekiel makes a broad-ranging assertion concerning the role of the priests as exclusive guardians and arbiters of the Torah:

*They [the Zadokite priests] shall declare to My people what is sacred and what is profane, and inform them what is clean and what is unclean. In lawsuits, too, it is they who shall act as*
judges; they shall decide them in accordance with My rules. They shall preserve My teachings [torotai] and My laws regarding all My fixed occasions; and they shall maintain the sanctity of My sabbaths (Ezek. 44:23-24).

According to Ezekiel, the Zadokite priests (of which he was one) were responsible not only for preserving the integrity of the Temple worship, but also all aspects of Israelite religious life – private and public. This included the correct observance of the Sabbath and Festivals, as well as purity laws.

Throughout the First and Second Temple periods, the priests were the principal interpreters of the Torah. It is for this reason that after the Babylonian Exile it was Ezra, a priest whose lineage is traced back to Aaron, who was responsible for transmitting the Torah to the returnees in Jerusalem. It was on the first day of the seventh month, this is, Rosh ha-Shanah, that the entire people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the scroll of the Teaching [torat] of Moses with which the Lord had charged Israel (Neh. 8:1). Thereupon, Ezra gave a public reading of the Torah from the first light until midday (Neh. 8:3). The Jewish apocalyptic text known as IV Ezra, which stems from the decades immediately following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., even has Ezra receiving a Moses-like revelation on "the third day" from a bush. At that time, he requests that the Holy Spirit be sent to him "and I will write everything that has happened in the world from the beginning, the things that were written in your Law." 

The second section of the Tanakh, Neviim [Prophets], is explicitly connected to the activity of the Israelite prophets and does not require further substantiation. The third section of the Tanakh, Ketuvim [Writings] appears to be a miscellaneous anthology. One of its clearly identifiable characteristics is that it highlights all of the Jewish wisdom texts that became incorporated in the Hebrew Scriptures. Proverbs and Job are positioned second and third respectively and later on one also finds Ecclesiastes. Even Psalms, which is located first in the Ketuvim opens with a psalm that echoes the ethical concerns of Proverbs. Accordingly, it is reasonable to associate the third type of religious leader, the sage, with this section of the Tanakh.

Although both Jeremiah and Ezekiel indicate that the three types of religious leaders were all active simultaneously, each enjoyed periods of ascen-
dancy. Initially, the priests were supreme. Eventually, they were succeeded but not totally displaced by the prophets. It is worth noting that of the three major literary prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, the latter two are specifically identified as priests. Although Isaiah’s status is open to debate, it is nonetheless significant that his commissioning as a prophet (which is recorded in Isaiah 6) takes place in the Temple in Jerusalem, which may indicate that he is of priestly descent.

It is also instructive to consider what happened in 622 BCE, when Hilkiah, the High Priest, was instructed by King Josiah to restore the Temple, which had fallen into disrepair during the lengthy reign of Josiah’s idolatrous grandfather Manasseh. During the refurbishing of the Temple, Hilkiah made a momentous discovery: ‘I have found a scroll of the Teaching [Torah] in the House of the Lord’ (II Kgs. 22:8). After the Torah was read to Josiah and he realized how errant the Israelites had been, he ordered that a prophet be approached to ascertain the Divine will. This resulted in a consultation with the prophetess Huldah. She informed Josiah that although the people would be punished, it would not occur during his lifetime. Thus we see that a prophetess was considered to be the ultimate adjudicator, even more so than the High Priest of the time.

Eventually, the age of the prophets came to an end. The section of the Neviim concludes with Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. The Talmud asserts that these three individuals represent “the end of prophecy.” In the post-prophetic age, the sages came to the fore. It is not a coincidence that the term that is frequently used to refer to rabbinical authorities is hahamim [sages]. Today it is ubiquitous when citing a passage from the Talmud or other classical rabbinic texts to refer to its formulators by the acronym Hazal [our sages, may their memory be for a blessing]. Among Sephardic Jews it is the convention to refer to the rabbinic authority by the honorary title Haham [sage]. Among Ashkenazic Jews, if someone wants to acknowledge another person's erudition and mastery of rabbinic literature, they will be referred to as a talmid haham [literally, a sage’s disciple].

Not only do the books of the Ketuvim highlight wisdom literature and the role of the sage in Israelite society, but also this culminating part of the Tanakh crystallized during the period of the sages. A noteworthy example of the tangible relationship between the sages and the Ketuvim section of the Ta-
nakh is evidenced in the structure of many of the midrashim, the marvelous collections of rabbinical homilies on the Torah. For example, if one scrutinizes *Bereshit Rabba*, the seminal rabbinic midrash on Genesis, one discovers that virtually every section begins with a quote from the *Ketuvim*, which is presented in order to elucidate a verse in Genesis. Thus, it was not a coincidence that the lengthy passage from the *Midrash Tanhuma* that we analyzed at the beginning of this essay likewise began with a quote from Proverbs.

In conclusion, we have seen how pervasive the power of threes is in Judaism. Groupings of threes abound and are evidenced throughout the Tanakh and the history of the Jewish people. From the very letters of the Torah to the way that the Hebrew Scriptures are structured, there is a dynamic process at play. Of particular interest is the organic relationship between the three parts of Tanakh and the three types of Jewish religious leaders. The connection between the priests, prophets, and sages with the different sections of the Tanakh is not only intimate but even symbiotic. Their relative importance was also an indicator of the role of that part of the Tanakh in shaping Jewish consciousness and society of the time.

NOTES
All translations from the Talmud, Midrashim, *Sefer Yezirah* and other rabbinic writings are by the author unless otherwise noted.

1. In R. Moshe Sabar’s *Mikhlol ha-Maamarim ve-ha-Pitgamim*, (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1962) pp. 1781-1811, approximately 1,000 pithy rabbinic statements are found that are based on the number three. Among them is the well-known statement from *Pirkei Avot* 1:2 by Simon the Just: "Upon three things the world stands: on the Torah, on [Divine] service and on acts of kindness."

2. The phrasing "according to R. Hisda" would explain why there is a language shift from R. Yose's preceding statements in Hebrew to the Aramaic of this formulation. Rashi renders this ambiguous passage as "in the presence of R. Hisda." Given that R. Hisda was an important third-generation Babylonian *amora*, who was active 150 years after R. Yose, a second-generation Palestinian *tanna*, this formulation is chronologically problematic.


4. The names for each of these letters consist of three consonants, as is the case for the names of virtually all of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet.

5. Here in the sense of the Oral Torah.

6. The Kedushah or doxology is derived from Isaiah 6:3.


8. The identity of the "three men" is somewhat more complicated and depends upon how one
reconciles this expression with the involvement of God in the storyline. Insofar as only two
angels proceed on to Sodom, it is conceivable that God is to be counted as one of the three.

22. I am indebted to my teacher, Professor Frank Talmage, of blessed memory, for this insight.