WHO KNOWS SEVEN?

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Among all peoples certain numbers have played more significant roles than others, for reasons we cannot always understand. Such are the numbers three, five, and ten.[1] Preeminent above all others in Semitic life and thought is the number seven. For the Israelites, one has only to recall the seven days of Creation (including the Sabbath), the Sabbatical year, the Jubilee,[2] the Feast of Weeks, the seven days of Passover and Tabernacles, and the seven-branched Menorah. One can easily add the tradition of the seven Canaanite peoples, the seven processions around Jericho, the Seven Species with which the Land of Israel is blessed (Deut. 8:7-8), the Seven Noachian Laws, the seventy years in Jeremiah, the seventy weeks in Daniel, the seven eyes in Zechariah, and countless other instances from the Bible and rabbinic literature.[3]

Since time immemorial, man has ascribed exceptional properties and unusual mystique to the number seven. Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE – 50 CE) held that "Seven has the most various and marvelous attributes."[4]

Why is the number seven so significant? One approach is to view seven as a number deriving its special status from the concept of a week, which was itself derived from dividing the month into quarters. However, months are not evenly divisible by weeks and the beginning of a month was never tied to the start of a week.[5] Nor does the theory provide an answer to the question as to why the number seven in folklore (especially of the Mediterranean region) is associated with prayers for rain, fertility, and wealth.[6] This is even seen in Pharaoh's dream, where the seven cows and seven ears of grain are interpreted by Joseph to foreshadow years of fertility and drought (Gen. 41).

Among the first to suggest an answer to the question was Philo in his *Account of the World's Creation*:

> Now, when the whole world had been brought to completion in accordance with the properties of six, a perfect number, the Creator invested with dignity the seventh day which comes next, extolling it and pronouncing it holy; for it is the festival, not of a single city account or country, but of the universe, and it alone strictly deserves to

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> be called *public* as belonging to all people and the birthday of the world. I doubt that anyone could adequately celebrate the properties of the number seven, for they are beyond all words. Yet the fact that it is more wondrous than all that is said about it is no reason for maintaining silence regarding it. Nay, we must make a brave attempt to bring out at least all that is within the compass of our understanding, even if be impossible to bring out all or even the most essential points.[7]

Based on Philo, it may be that the number seven is associated with fertility simply because this number represents the original creation of all life. However, I believe that a possible explanation can be found in the geographical region occupied in antiquity by the Canaanites and the Israelites, a region governed by a rather unique pattern of climatic conditions. In this region the year consists of two seasons: the dry summer and the rainy winter. Both are approximately of equal duration.

In his book, *Geshem Ve-Ru'ah* ("Rain and Wind"), Professor Pinhas Alpert, a geophysicist at Tel-Aviv University, writes that the climatic conditions that prevail in Israel exist in only one other place on earth, somewhere in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.[8] Alpert doesn't hesitate to conjecture that this extraordinary phenomenon is a sign of the special providence which the Land of Israel merited and finds confirmation in the Pentateuch, where it is written:

> *The land which you are about to enter and occupy is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come. There the grain you sowed had to be watered by your own labors, like a vegetable garden; but the land you are about to cross into and occupy, a land of hills and valleys, soaks up its water from the rains of heaven. It is a land … on which the Lord your God always keeps His eye, from year's beginning to year's end* (Deut. 11:10-12).

The beginning of each of these seasons is marked on the Jewish calendar by a major festival, the beginning of the dry season by Pesah (Passover) and the start of the rainy season by Sukkot (the Feast of Tabernacles). Prayers for dew on Pesah and for rain on Sukkot are a central feature in the liturgy of both festivals. Since the seasons each last for six months, when counting from the beginning of the dry season, Nisan, the rainy season begins in the seventh month, Tishrei. Similarly, when counting from the beginning of the

rainy season, the seventh month begins the dry season. It thus seems reasonable to view the unique climate in the area as the origin of the number seven's significance due to its association with fertility and rainfall.

Following the dry months, the need for rain is critical. Thus, on Sukkot, prayers for rain are accompanied by acts such as the shaking of a bouquet made of willows and myrtles bound to a palm branch *(lulav)* and a citron (*etrog*), all species associated with water and rainfall.[9] One reason given for shaking the bouquet left, right, forward, backward, up and down is to imitate the stormy winds which precede the heavy rain and shake the branches of the trees.[10] On the seventh day of Sukkot, five willows are tied together and whipped on a hard surface until leaves fall to the ground, signaling the end of the dry summer.[11]

The *sukkah* (booth) is likewise rich in symbolism. It is covered in such a manner as to enable its occupants to see the stars through the foliage. This, I suggest, is a symbolic request for the stars to be replaced by rain clouds after a cloudless summer.

Throughout the festival, seven biblical luminaries called *ushpizin* (guests) are invited to visit the *sukkah*: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph and David. The merit of these Seven Shepherds of Israel[12] will hopefully hasten an abundant rainfall.[13]

On the seventh day of Sukkot, known as Hoshana Rabba, prayers for rain are chanted as the worshippers complete seven circuits around the reader's desk at the center of the synagogue, just as the priests encircled the altar seven times in the Temple. A total of seventy bulls were sacrificed during the course of the seven-day feast of the seventh month.[14]

In his book, *The White Goddess*, Robert Graves notes that in antiquity,

> Egyptian priests did seven circumambulations around the shrine of Osiris. According to Plutarch, the reason for these circuits was the yearning of the goddess for the water of the sun god Dionysus.[15] In Morocco, in time of drought, a black cow was led seven times around a shrine to bring on the rain. In Kurdistan, Jerusalem and Safed, during a drought, graves were encircled seven times by seven old men after ashes were put on their heads or sprinkled on seven Torah scrolls.[16]

The drought during the reign of King Ahab, vividly described in the Bible,

came to an end after the prophet Elijah sent his servant seven times to the peak of Mount Carmel (I Kgs. 18:44). Another example of the number seven's association with rainfall in the Bible was the unforgivable sacrifice of the sons of King Saul, whom King David handed over to the Gibeonites. The seven victims were brutally impaled at the beginning of the barley harvest, which coincided with the onset of the dry season. Their bodies were not taken down *until rain from heaven dropped upon them* (II Sam. 21:10).

During the period of the Second Temple, on the Sukkot festival, a golden flagon was filled with water from the Siloam Pool every day and carried to the Temple in a joyful procession. The vessel was delivered to the officiating priest, who then emptied it into a silver pitcher and poured the water over the altar. This ceremony, known as *nissukh ha-mayim* (water libation), and the festivities of *Simhat Bet ha-Sho'evah* were intended to bring fertilizing rain, without which all plant life withers and the land remains arid.[17] Rain water is needed to sustain both human and animal life. An estimated 97 percent of the water that fills the oceans is non-potable. A further two percent is trapped in icebergs, leaving only one percent of potable water available for drinking and cooking.

At the conclusion of the Feast of Tabernacles, pilgrims were given fourteen days (twice seven) to return home. On the fifteenth day, coinciding with the seventh day of Marheshvan, the words *Ve-ten tal u-matar li-verakkhah* ("Bestow dew and rain for a blessing") were inserted in the daily *Amidah*.[18] Even the name of the month when reciting this prayer begins, Marheshvan, is traditionally associated with rain – based on the idea that the Hebrew word *mar* can mean a drop of water (as in Isaiah 40:15).[19]

Following a rainstorm it is not unusual for a rainbow to appear in the sky. Sir Isaac Newton, influenced by the special significance of the number seven, identified seven colors in the rainbow: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet.[20]

Moreover, the number seven extends beyond the blessings of fertile land, since it is also associated with the fertility of man and beast. As procreation is considered a primary purpose of the marital union, it is not surprising that the bride circles the bridegroom seven times at the wedding ceremony. The Sev-

en Blessings (*Sheva Berakhot*) recited under the bridal canopy are repeated at every wedding feast for the ensuing seven days.[21] The number seven, which appears in customs followed by barren women to induce pregnancy and give birth to viable offspring, were known and practiced by Jewish women in Cyprus,[22] Salonika,[23] and classical Greece.[24]

The act of taking an oath in the Bible can likewise be traced to the number seven and fertility. The Hebrew term for an oath, *shevu'ah,* is cognate with *sheva* (seven). In the Bible, a solemn oath was taken by placing one's hand under the thigh of the man administering it. The proximity of the thigh to the seat of the male generative power made non-fulfillment of the oath a reason for trepidation.[25] *Sheva* also denotes multiplicity, while its derivatives – *shefa* and *sova* – connote abundance, plenty, fullness and satiety.

There is archeological evidence indicating that the significance of the number seven was already recognized and emphasized along the Mediterranean coast in Neolithic times. Records from Mesopotamia, where seven appears as a sacred, formulistic number, are not documented in writing until the Bronze Age. In all probability, the distinct significance of the number seven was not at first known in Mesopotamia, arriving there later from the Mediterranean coast.[26]

We can now gain a better understanding of the following passage from the Midrash:

> That which comes seventh in order is most loved. For example: 1) the seventh heaven, 2) In the sequence of the generations the seventh after Adam is Enoch . . . 3) Of Jesse's sons David is the seventh, 4) During the Sabbatical year there is a remission of debts and the land shall lie fallow, 5) The year concluding the seventh of the seven-year cycles is most loved, for it is followed by the Jubilee year, 6) In the succession of days, the seventh is most loved (also blessed and holy), 7) In the succession of months, the seventh is the one most loved.[27]

This tells us how number seven acts as a facilitator of manifold blessings, but it does not explain why "seven has the most various and marvelous attributes" and why it is considered holy, pure and most loved. The reason is that at its core, seven represents rainfall and fertility, and is thus the source of all blessing. So much so, in fact, that the number seven was even associated

by Philo with God Himself, "Of Him seven may be fitly said to be a symbol."[28]

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NOTES

1. See Edwin Radford and Mona A. Radford, *Encyclopedia of Superstitions* (Kessinger Publishing, 1949) p. 183; and Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* (New York: Atheneum, 1984) pp. 118-120.
2. TB *Nedarim* 61a records a dispute between R. Judah and the Sages as to whether the Jubilee year is the 49th (7 x 7) year itself or the year following the 49th. In any event, the Jubilee is linked with the concept of seven.
3. Robert Gordis, "The Heptad as an Element of Biblical and Rabbinic Style," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 62:1 (March 1943) pp. 17-26. See there for examples from the Apocrypha and New Testament as well.
4. Philo, *De Opificio Mundi*, translated into English by F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker. (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1929-1953), §§ 30-43.
5. See Allen Friedman, "Unnatural Time: Its History and Theological Significance," *The Torah U-Madda Journal*, 15 (2008-2009) p. 96.
6. See, for example, Anthony Bonanno, ed., *Archaeology and the Fertility Cult in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Malta: University of Malta Press, 1986) pp. 228, 231.
7. Philo, op .cit., p. 73.
8. Pinhas Alpert, *Rain and Wind*: *Meteorology and Weather in Jewish Tradition and Modern Science* (Jerusalem: Reuven Mass Publishing, 2011) pp. 28-31 (Heb. *Geshem Ve-Ru'ah*).
9. See Arthur Schaffer, "The Agricultural and Ecological Symbolism of the Four Species of Sukkot," *Tradition*, vol. 20(2) (Summer 1982) pp. 136-139.
10. TB *Sukkah* 37b, *Tosafot*, *be-hodu*, based on I Chron. 16:33-35.
11. See Bryna Levy, *Waiting for Rain: Reflections at the Turning of the Year* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2008) pp. 192-3.
12. Micah 5:4.
13. Adin Steinsaltz, *The Life of a Year* (Jerusalem: Israeli Institute for Talmudical Publications, 5768) pp. 104-8 (Heb. *Hayyei Shanah*).
14. Num. 29:12-34.
15. R. Graves, *The White Goddess* (New York: Creative Age Press, 1948) p. 174.
16. Y. Bergman, *Jewish Folklore* (Jerusalem: Reuven Mass Publishing, 1953) pp. 34-35 (Heb. *Ha- Folklor Ha-Yehudi)*.
17. Mishnah *Sukkah* 3:1. See also Schaffer, pp. 133-6.
18. Mishnah *Ta'anit* 1:3.
19. *Arukh Ha-Shulhan*, *Even Ha-Ezer* 126:17.

20. Patricia Fara, *Science: A Four Thousand Year History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) p. 5.
21. Bergman, op .cit. (note 16).
22. I. Hadjicosta, *Cyprus and its Life* (London: 1943), p. 24.
23. M. Molho, *Birth and Childhood among the Jews of Salonica*, *Edot*, vol. II (1947).
24. O. Seiffert, *Dictionary of Classical Antiquities* (New York: 1956), s.v. marriages.
25. Gen. 24:2, 9; 47:29.
26. Otto Schnitzler, "The Particularity of the Number Seven," *Folklore Research Center Studies,* vol. 1, (1970) pp. 73-80.
27. *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* (New York: Mandelbaum edition, The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1987) pp. 343-4.
28. Philo, op. cit., p. 81.