

The Significance of Thirty-nine

By Rabbi Dr. Hillel ben David (Greg Killian)



In this paper I would like to understand the meaning or significance of the [number](nchart.html) [thirty](thirty.html)-[nine](nine.html) (39).

The significance of [thirty](thirty.html)-[nine](nine.html) is that it is associated with purification from an undesireable state and the emergence of a [new](new.html) entity.

There are [forty](forty.html) labors, less [one](one.html), corresponding to the [thirty](thirty.html)-[nine](nine.html) lashes,[[1]](#footnote-1) which are not administered on [Shabbat](sabbath.html); they correspond to the [ten](ten.html) curses given to [Adam](adam.html), the [ten](ten.html) curses given to [Chava](file:///D%3A%5CWord%5CNumbers%5Cadam.html), the [ten](ten.html) curses given to the snake, and the [nine](nine.html) curses pronounced on the earth.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The following is an excerpt from Meam Loez:[[3]](#footnote-3)

[Thirty](thirty.html)-[nine](nine.html) is numerically equivalent to the [Hebrew](hebrew.html) word tal – טל, ‘dew’. [HaShem](hashem.html) will [resurrect](techiyat.html) the dead with dew according to the [Talmud](orallaw.html):

***Chagigah 12b*** *Araboth is that in which there are Right and Judgment and Righteousness,[[4]](#footnote-4) the treasures of life and the treasures of peace and the treasures of blessing, the souls of the righteous and the spirits and the souls[[5]](#footnote-5) which are yet to be born, and dew wherewith the Holy* [*One*](one.html)*, blessed be He, will hereafter* [*revive the dead*](file:///D%3A%5CWord%5CNumbers%5Ctechiyat.html)*. Right and Judgment, for it is written: Right[[6]](#footnote-6) and judgment are the foundations of Thy throne.[[7]](#footnote-7) Righteousness, for it is written: And He put on righteousness as a coat of mail.[[8]](#footnote-8) The treasures of* [*life*](file:///D%3A%5CWord%5CNumbers%5Ceternal.html)*, for it is written: For with Thee is the fountain of life.[[9]](#footnote-9) And the treasures of peace, for it is written: And called it, ‘The Lord is peace’.[[10]](#footnote-10) And the treasures of blessing, for it is written: he shall receive a blessing from the Lord.[[11]](#footnote-11) The souls of the righteous, for it is written: Yet the soul of my lord shall be bound up in the bundle of life with the Lord thy God.[[12]](#footnote-12) The spirits and the souls which are yet to be born, for it is written: For the spirit that enwrappeth itself is from Me, and the souls which I have made.[[13]](#footnote-13) And the dew wherewith the Holy* [*One*](one.html)*, blessed be He, will hereafter revive the dead, for it is written: A bounteous* [*rain*](file:///D%3A%5CWord%5CNumbers%5Crains.html) *didst Thou pour down, O God; when Thine* [*inheritance*](inherit.html) *was weary, Thou didst confirm it.[[14]](#footnote-14) There [too] are the* [*Ofanim*](file:///D%3A%5CWord%5CNumbers%5Cangels.html)*[[15]](#footnote-15) and the* [*Seraphim*](file:///D%3A%5CWord%5CNumbers%5Cangels.html)*,[[16]](#footnote-16) and the* [*Holy Living Creatures*](file:///D%3A%5CWord%5CNumbers%5Cangels.html)*,[[17]](#footnote-17) and the Ministering* [*Angels*](angels.html)*,[[18]](#footnote-18) and the Throne of God; and the King, the Living God, high and exalted,* [*dwells*](file:///D%3A%5CWord%5CNumbers%5Cdwelling.html) *over them in ‘Araboth, for it is said: Extol Him that rideth upon Araboth[[19]](#footnote-19) whose* [*name*](name.html) *is the Lord.[[20]](#footnote-20) And whence do we derive that it[[21]](#footnote-21) is called* [*heaven*](heaven.html)*? From the word ‘riding’, which occurs in* [*two*](two.html) *Biblical passages. Here it is written: ‘Extol Him that rideth upon* [*Araboth*](file:///D%3A%5CWord%5CNumbers%5Cheaven.html)*’. And elsewhere it is written: Who rideth upon the* [*heaven*](heaven.html) *as thy help.[[22]](#footnote-22) And darkness and* [*cloud*](important.html) *and thick darkness surround Him, for it is said: He made darkness His hiding-place, His pavilion round about Him, darkness of waters, thick clouds of skies.[[23]](#footnote-23) But is there any darkness before* [*Heaven*](heaven.html)*?[[24]](#footnote-24) For behold it is written: He revealeth the deep and* [*secret*](sod.html) *things; He* [*knoweth*](file:///D%3A%5CWord%5CNumbers%5Cknowledge.html)*, what is in the darkness, and the light* [*dwelleth*](file:///D%3A%5CWord%5CNumbers%5Cdwelling.html) *with Him.[[25]](#footnote-25)*

The Sages of the [Kabbala](file:///D%3A%5CWord%5CNumbers%5Corallaw.html) explain that [HaShem](hashem.html) possesses [*thirteen*](thirteen.html) attributes of mercy. [*Thirty*](thirty.html)*-*[*nine*](nine.html) represents a [three](three.html)-fold expression of these qualities. Thus, both [numbers](nchart.html) are associated with purification from an undesireable state and the emergence of a [new](new.html) entity.

Flogging stimulates a similar process of renewal and purification of a sinner’s soul. Before flogging a man is called ‘[wicked](wicked.html) – רשע’, After flogging, a man is called ‘your brother - אחיך’. אחיך is numerically equivalent to [thirty](thirty.html)-[nine](nine.html).

Why did the Torah choose to [teach](teacher.html) me that a person receives [thirty](thirty.html)-[nine](nine.html) whips in such a strange way. If the Torah means [thirty](thirty.html)-[nine](nine.html), why does it say [forty](forty.html). After all, [one](one.html) should say what he means and mean what he says. The Maharal deals with this intriguing point as follows. The reason he explains a person is sentenced with [forty](forty.html) lashes is because [HaShem](hashem.html), we [know](daat.html), takes [forty](forty.html) days to create the embryo. Seeing as [HaShem](hashem.html) troubled himself for [forty](forty.html) days with the “Yetzirat Havlad”[[26]](#footnote-26) and the person by sinning undid the purpose of his [creation](bara.html), it is befitting that he should be whipped [forty](forty.html) times, [one](one.html) for each of those [forty](forty.html) days. The Maharal adds that in creating the embryo, for [thirty](thirty.html)-[nine](nine.html) days [HaShem](hashem.html) creates the [body](body.html), the Guf, and on the fortieth day blows in the soul-the Neshama. As far as sentencing is concerned the whole person sinned and therefore the whole unit consisting of the Guf and Neshama has to be punished. However, the Maharal continues, when it comes down to the whipping itself, [one](one.html) by [one](one.html), representing day by day, when we come to the [thirty](thirty.html)-[ninth](nine.html) day the Guf has been totally [atoned](file:///D%3A%5CWord%5CNumbers%5Catonemen.html) for. What remains is only the Neshama. The Neshama is pure. The Neshama did not [sin](sin.html), so it need not be punished.

The significance of [thirty](thirty.html)-[nine](nine.html) is that it is associated with purification from an undesireable state and the emergence of a [new](new.html) entity.

# In Our [Tzitzith](tzitzith.html)

Our [tzitzith](tzitzith.html) ([fringes](tzitzith.html)), which we wear on a [four](four.html)-cornered garment, also model the meaning of [thirty](thirty.html)-[nine](nine.html).

The [two](two.html) sets of strands ([four](four.html) in [one](one.html) strand and [three](three.html) in the other strand) are knotted together twice, and then the shamash (a longer strand) is wound around the remaining [seven](seven.html) strands a [number](nchart.html) of times (see below). The [two](two.html) sets are then knotted again twice. This procedure is repeated [three](three.html) times, such that there are a total of [five](five.html) knots, the [four](four.html) intervening spaces being taken up by windings numbering 7-8-11-13, respectively. The total [number](nchart.html) of winds comes to [thirty](thirty.html)-[nine](nine.html), which is the same [number](nchart.html) of winds if [one](one.html) were to tie according to the [Talmud’s](orallaw.html) instruction of [thirteen](thirteen.html) windings of [three](three.html) winds each. Furthermore, the [number](nchart.html) [thirty](thirty.html)-[nine](nine.html) is found to be significant in that it is the gematria (numerical equivalent) of the [Hebrew](hebrew.html) words: [*HaShem*](hashem.html) *Echad* - יהוה אחד (“God is [One](one.html)”), from Devarim (Deuteronomy) 6:4.

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# Forbidden [Shabbat](sabbath.html) Labors

We fulfill the “safeguarding” aspects of [Shabbat](sabbath.html) by refraining from [thirty](thirty.html)-[nine](nine.html) categories of “*melacha*” (creative activity), which the [Jews](gen-jew.html) had to perform on weekdays in order to build the [*Mishkan*](mikdash.html). We also refrain from other activities, which may be [*halachically*](file:///D%3A%5CWord%5CNumbers%5Cwalking.html) permitted, but are not fitting or appropriate on this special day.

There in an opinion in the [Yerushalmi](file:///D%3A%5CWord%5CNumbers%5Corallaw.html)[[27]](#footnote-27) that says that the [thirty](thirty.html)-[nine](nine.html) Melachot (labors) correspond to the [number](nchart.html) of times it mentions the words “Melachah” and “Avodah” in the description of the building of the [Mishkan](mikdash.html). According to this, the [first](one.html) opinion in the [Gemara](orallaw.html) is not only giving the source for *what* the Melachot are, but also for *how many* Melachot there are. The [Talmud Bavli](orallaw.html) also speaks about these labors:

***Shabbath 49b*** *Again they[[28]](#footnote-28) sat and pondered: Regarding what we learnt, The principal categories of labour[[29]](#footnote-29) are* [*forty*](forty.html) *less* [*one*](one.html)*,-to what do they correspond?[[30]](#footnote-30) -Said R. Hanina b. Hama to them: To the forms of labour in the* [*Tabernacle*](mikdash.html)*.[[31]](#footnote-31) R. Jonathan son of R. Eleazar said to them, Thus did R. Simeon b. R. Jose b. Lakonia say: They correspond to [the words] ‘work’ [melakah], ‘his work’ [melakto], and ‘the work of’ [meleketh], which are [written]* [*thirty*](thirty.html)*-*[*nine*](nine.html) *times in the Torah.[[32]](#footnote-32)*

THE 39 *MELACHOT* - *Lamed-Tet Melachot*

Here is the list of the 39 *Melachot* (main activities) prohibited on [Shabbat](sabbath.html)*:*

1. *Zoreah* - Sowing (seeding)

2. *Choresh* - Plowing

3. *Kotzair* - Reaping (cutting)

4. *M’amair* - Gathering (bundling sheaves)

5. *Dush* - Threshing

6. *Zoreh* - Winnowing

7. *Borer* - Sorting (selecting, separating)

8. *Tochain* - Grinding

9. *Miraked* - Sifting

10. *Lush* - Kneading

11. *Ofeh / (Bishul)* - Baking/cooking

12. *Gozez* - Shearing

13. *Melabain* - Whitening (bleaching)

14. *Menafetz* - Disentangling, Combing

15. *Tzovayah* - Dyeing

16. *Toveh* - Spinning

17. *Maisach* - Mounting the warp (stretching threads onto loom)

18. *Oseh Beit Batai Neirin* - Setting [two](two.html) heddles (preparing to weave)

19. *Oraig* - Weaving

20. *Potzai’ah* - Separating (removing) threads (Unweaving)

21. *Koshair* - Tying a knot

22. *Matir* - Untying a knot

23. *Tofair* - Sewing

24. *Ko’reah* - Tearing (unsewing - ripping)

25. *Tzud* - Trapping

26. *Shochet* - Slaughtering (Killing)

27. *Mafshit* - Skinning

28. *M’abaid* - Salting/tanning process [1]

29. *Mesharteit* - Tracing (scratching) lines

30. *Memacheik* - Smoothing / scraping

31. *Mechateich* - Cutting (to shape)

32. *Kotaiv* - Writing [two](two.html) or more [letters](letters.html)

33. *Mochaik* - Erasing [two](two.html) or more [letters](letters.html)

34. *Boneh* - Building

35. *Soiser* - Demolishing

36. *Mechabeh* - Extinguishing (putting out a flame)

37. *Ma’avir* - Kindling (making a [fire](fire.html))

38. *Makeh B’Patish* - Striking the final blow (Finishing an object)

39. *Hotza’ah* - Transferring (transporting) from domain to domain (carrying)

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# [Thirty](thirty.html)-[nine](nine.html) days To The [Omer](omer.html)

On their [thirty](thirty.html)-[eight](eight.html) day of the [exodus from Egypt](thebirth.html), the Bne Israel were counting the [thirty](thirty.html)-[ninth](nine.html) day to the [Omer](omer.html). On this very significant day, there were [three](three.html) very important [events](feasts.html):

1. Israelites [eating](eating.html) quail for [thirty](thirty.html) days – Day 1.[[33]](#footnote-33)
2. Israelites [camp](stages.html) at [Rephidim](stages.html) (baluster place) in 2448 AM. This is [camp](stages.html) 10, day 1.[[34]](#footnote-34)
3. Moshe smote the [rock](rock.html) to provide water for the people.[[35]](#footnote-35)

On this day the Bne Israel were sent quail to [eat](eating.html) in response to their complaint regarding meat. As a result of this quail, many would die. The remaining souls would have learned the danger of complaining abount the manna.

On this day, the Bne Israel would arrive at [Rephidim](stages.html). In this place they would be attacked by [Amalek](amalek.html).

***Shemot (***[***Exodus***](exodus.html)***) 17:8*** *Then came* [*Amalek*](amalek.html)*, and fought with Israel in* [*Rephidim*](stages.html)*.*

This is highly significant because the [command](cmds613.html) to inflict [thirty](thirty.html)-[nine](nine.html) lashes for the transgression of a negative [commandment](cmds613.html) was given in the same parasha.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Finally, on this day Moshe will strike the [rock](rock.html) to bring forth water and this act will prevent him from entering the [Promised land](file:///D%3A%5CWord%5CNumbers%5Ccity.html). Now water always means Torah.

***Ta’anith 7a*** *R. Hanina b. Ida said: Why are the words of the Torah likened unto water-as it is written, ‘Ho, everyone that thirsteth, come ye for water’? This is to* [*teach*](teacher.html) *you, just as water flows from a higher level to a lower, so too the words of the Torah endure only with him who is meekminded.*

***Baba Kama 82a*** *‘That the* [*law*](law.html) *be read [publicly] on Mondays and Thursdays.’ But was this ordained by Ezra? Was this not ordained even before him? For it was* [*taught*](teacher.html)*: ‘And they went* [*three*](three.html) *days in the wilderness and found no water, upon which those who expound verses metaphorically said: water means nothing but Torah, as it says: Ho, everyone that thirsteth come ye for water. It thus means that as they went* [*three*](three.html) *days without Torah they immediately became exhausted.*

Chazal, Our Sages, [teach](teacher.html) that [Amalek](amalek.html) came because the Bne Israel were lax in their [Torah study](study.html). Rashi [teaches](teacher.html) the following:

Rashi to Devarim 25:18

**all the stragglers at your rear** Those who lacked strength on account of their transgression. [And because these [Jews](gen-jew.html) had sinned,] the [cloud](important.html) [of glory] had expelled them [thereby leaving them vulnerable to [Amalek](amalek.html)’s further [attack](attacks.html)].[[37]](#footnote-37)

**you were faint and weary** faint from thirst, as it is written, “The people thirsted there for water” (Exod. 17:3), and [immediately] afterwards it says, “[Amalek](amalek.html) came [and fought with Israel]” (verse 17:8).[[38]](#footnote-38)

***Targum Pseudo Jonathan for B’midbar (***[***Numbers***](nchart.html)***) 33:14****.* [*Rephidim*](stages.html)*, where, because their* [*hands*](fourteen.html) *were (raphin) neglectful of the words of the*[*law*](law.html)*, there was no water for the people to drink;*

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# The [Number](nchart.html) [forty](forty.html)

This meaning of [thirty](thirty.html)-[nine](nine.html) is particularly interesting when we compare it to the meaning of [forty](forty.html)!

Every [time](time.html) [one](one.html) finds the [number](nchart.html) [forty](forty.html) in Torah, its inner meaning is the ascent from [one](one.html) level to the next higher [one](one.html). We get a [new](new.html) mission at [forty](forty.html). But the attainment of a higher level can come only after [first](one.html) reaching and fulfilling all aspects of the previous level, and then making an emptiness in the middle to allow for the emergence of something entirely [new](new.html).

\* \* \*

[Yosef](joseph.html) was [thirty](thirty.html)-[nine](nine.html) when [Yaaqov](jacob.html) brought all his family to [live in Mitzriam](file:///D%3A%5CWord%5CNumbers%5Cthebirth.html).

\* \* \*

Although the [Jewish](gen-jew.html) People approach [Yom Kippurim](kippur.html) with dread, it is also a happy day, on which our people finds rapprochement with [HaShem](hashem.html). After [thirty](thirty.html)-[nine](nine.html) days of repentance and [prayer](prayer.html), we take solace and confidence in the Biblical promise that [HaShem](hashem.html) will always receive

His children with open [arms](body.html): *For on this day He will* [*atone*](file:///D%3A%5CWord%5CNumbers%5Catonemen.html) *for you, to* [*purify*](purity.html) *you. From all your* [*sins*](sin.html) *before* [*HaShem*](hashem.html) *you will be cleansed*.

\* \* \*

Moshe according to tradition died on the [7th of Adar](feasts.html) while the manna ceased on the 16th of [Nisan](feasts.html), a difference of [thirty](thirty.html)-[nine](nine.html) days. The explanation seems to be[[39]](#footnote-39) that though the manna in fact ceased to fall after Moses’ death, the children of Israel continued for [thirty](thirty.html)-[nine](nine.html) days to [eat](eating.html) of that which had been [gathered](gather.html) on the day of his death.

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1. Administered to one who has deliberately violated a negative mitzva. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Tikunim 48 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Torah Anthology, MeAm Lo’ez, by Rabbi Shmuel Yerushalmi, translated by Rabbi Eliyahu Touger, page 90. Moznaim Publishing Company. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Heb. צדקה, which implies righteous actions and is often used in the sense of charity. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rashi explains that either ‘spirits’ and ‘souls’ are synonymous, or else ‘spirit’ means the soul that has bodily form (ectoplasm?). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. E.V. ‘Righteousness’. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Tehillim Psalm) 89:15. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Yeshayahu (Isaiah) 59:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Tehillim Psalm) 36:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Shoftim (Judges) 6:24. Rashi renders: He (the Lord) called it (peace) unto Him. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Tehillim Psalm) 24:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 1 Shmuel (Samuel) 25:29. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Yeshayahu (Isaiah) 57:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Tehillim Psalm) 68:10. The verse refers to the Revelation at Sinai, when, according to the Midrash, the souls of the children of Israel momentarily left their bodies, but God with His bounteous rain or dew of resurrection revived them. Cf. Cant. Rab. to Cant. V, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Lit., ‘Wheels’, i.e., wheel-like angels; v. Ezek. 1:15f. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. V. Isa. VI, 2; in Rabbinic literature they are understood to be angels of fire, cf. Deut. Rab. s. 11. But v. B. D. B. s.v. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. V. Ezek. I, 5f. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Apparently distinct from those dwelling in Ma’on (v. p. 70). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. A.V. ‘upon the heavens’; R.V. ‘through the deserts’. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Tehillim Psalm) 68:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. I.e., Araboth. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Devarim (Deuteronomy) 33:26. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Tehillim Psalm) 18:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. I.e., God. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Daniel 2:22. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The creation of the embryo. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Yerushalmi Shabbat 7:2 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. The Rabbis maintained above. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Forbidden on the Sabbath; for aboth, lit., ‘fathers’, v. supra 2b. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. On what basis are they selected? [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Every form of labour necessary in the Tabernacle was regarded as a principal category of work forbidden on the Sabbath. This is learnt from the juxtaposition of the commands concerning the Sabbath and the erection of the Tabernacle, Shemot (Exodus) 35:1-3;4 seq. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Lit., ‘forty times minus one’. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Meam Loez Shlach [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Seder Olam 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Exodus 17:6, Seder Olam 5    [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Devarim (Deuteronomy) 25:3 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Tanchuma 10 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. v. Mah. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)