hline

The Significance of The [Number](nchart.html) Three

By Rabbi Dr. Hillel ben David (Greg Killian)

hline

In this [study](study.html) I would like to examine the symbolism, significance, and meaning of the [number](nchart.html) three (3).

The [number](nchart.html) three is used in the Torah to mediate between [two](two.html) opposing or contradictory values. The third value mediates, reconciles, and [connects](connection.html) the [two](two.html). Three is the [number](nchart.html) of truth.

[Time](time.html) is divided into three portions: The past, the present, and the [future](future.html). The position in [time](time.html) that is most expressive of the non-[physical](physical.html) is the present, because it is so fleeting and instantaneous. The function of that [time](time.html), the present, is its service as connector. The [number](nchart.html) three expresses [connection](connection.html).

According to [Jewish](gen-jew.html) [law](law.html), once something is done three times it is considered a permanent thing. This is called a “chazakah[[1]](#footnote-1)“. Once we have done something three times, we have connected to it and connected it to this [world](worlds.html).

The [number](nchart.html) three represents permanence. That’s why we do things in threes, since it adds strength to our acts. For example: The [Amida](amida.html) is repeated three times. There are three people [standing](mashal.html) when a sefer Torah is read. The minimum [number](nchart.html) of verses read a a single reader is three. The minimum [number](nchart.html) of readers is three,

## In The [Hebrew](hebrew.html) Alefbet

This mediating or connecting aspect can be readily seen in the numerical value of the [Hebrew](hebrew.html) [letters](letters.html) when divided into groups of three:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ן-700 | ת-400 | ק-100 | ע-70 | מ-40 | י-10 | ז-7 | ד-4 | א-1 |
| ף-800 | ך-500 | ר-200 | פ-80 | נ-50 | כ-20 | ח-8 | ה-5 | ב-2 |
| ץ-900 | ם-600 | ש-300 | צ-90 | ס-60 | ל-30 | ט-9 | ו-6 | ג-3 |

From the above chart we can see that the average of the *values* of א and ג is ב. Thus we can see that the third mediates between the [two](two.html). This same pattern holds true for the entire alefbet, as can be seen from the above chart.

The [number](nchart.html) three [connects](connection.html) the dichotomy of [two](two.html) and shows a common purpose. [Two](two.html) lines may go in different directions; the third line unites them into a single triangle. [Two](two.html) bricks lying side by side share no common goal; the third brick placed on top of them, unifies them in a common effort.

The Maharal tells us to imagine a link chain. When you hold it up, the [first](one.html) link touches the second [one](one.html). The second [one](one.html) touches both the [first](one.html) link and the third [one](one.html). The third [one](one.html) touches the second [one](one.html) and not the [first](one.html). Thus the third link is the [first](one.html) in the series that doesn’t have any [connection](connection.html) to the [first](one.html) link. The [number](nchart.html) three thus symbolizes something [new](new.html), but not disconnected.

The Maharal[[2]](#footnote-2) also says that three connotes a complete unit, by embracing an item, its opposite, and the middle ground between those [two](two.html). To illustrate, three parts make a complete form by joining the end with the beginning.[[3]](#footnote-3) ∆

The [number](nchart.html) three has a unifying element, and can represent a unity. This is why the [thirteenth](thirteen.html) rule of Ishmael is used as a hermaneutic principle to understand Torah: [Two](two.html) verses that seem to contradict [one](one.html) another until a third verse reconciles them.

[**Sivan**](feasts.html)**’s Mazzallot (Constellation)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Nefesh** | **Ruach** | **Neshama** |
| Chessed | Avodah | Torah |
| [physical](physical.html) | emotions | intellect |
| [Avraham](avraham.html) | [Yitzchak](isaac.html) | [Yaakov](israelja.html) |
| [Pesach](passover.html) | [Shavuot](shavuot.html) | [Succoth](succoth.html) |

Each month has a constellation of [stars](mazaroth.html) that expresses its deeper message. The constellation of [Sivan](feasts.html), the third month, is twins. Quite appropriately.

Twins are [two](two.html) separate people, who by their unique nature as twins, share a unity larger than themselves.

That is the exact message of the metaphysical side of three: finding a common theme in the dichotomy of [two](two.html).

The Maharal indicates that three is significant in the written and the oral [law](law.html), as the human condition is seen as tripartite:

1. Mans relationship to himself and the [world](worlds.html) of his mind,
2. Mans relationship to others in the “real [world](worlds.html)” and
3. Mans relationship with [HaShem](hashem.html).

According to the Maharal, this is the meaning of the three pillars in ***Avot 1:2,*** *The* [*world*](worlds.html) *stands on three things:*

1. *Torah*,
2. *Avodah* (Service of God), and
3. *Acts of Kindness*.

✡ ✡ ✡

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |  |
| Dayah | Nefesh | Pshat | Torah |
| Binah | Ruach | [Remez](remez.html) | [Mishna](orallaw.html) |
| Haskil | Neshama | Drash | [Talmud](orallaw.html) |

**Many Threes**

The [Zohar](orallaw.html) points out that the Torah was given in the third month of the Biblical year, to a threefold people ([Priests](priests.html), Levites, Israelites), through the thirdborn - Moses, who was the third child in his family (after Miriam and Aharon).

✡ ✡ ✡

We have the three Patriarchs: [Avraham](avraham.html), [Yitzchak](isaac.html), and [Yaaqov](israelja.html).

✡ ✡ ✡

The three [mitzvot](cmds613.html) of the [seder](haggada.html) (the lamb, [matzah](chametz.html), and maror).

✡ ✡ ✡

The Torah lists three animals that chew their cud but are unkosher because they do not have split hooves:

1. The camel, it says in the *present* tense, “its hoof is not split.”
2. The hyrax, it says in the [*future*](future.html) tense, “it will not split its hoof.”
3. The hare, it writes in the *past* tense, “it did not split its hoof.”

✡ ✡ ✡

The [Gemara](orallaw.html)[[4]](#footnote-4) rules that if someone is offered the ultimatum to violate [one](one.html) of the prohibitions in the Torah or be killed, that person has the duty to violate that [law](law.html) and [save](salvation.html) his life. This rule applies to all the prohibitions in the Torah with three exceptions. The three exceptions are:

1. The prohibitions of [idol](idolatry.html) worship,
2. Illicit sexual relations and
3. Murder.

✡ ✡ ✡

The three means of gaining [atonement](atonemen.html): Teshuva (repentance), tefillah ([prayer](prayer.html)), and tzadakah (charity).

✡ ✡ ✡

The Torah says that if you plant a tree, all fruits which grow during the [first](one.html) three years are “orlah[[5]](#footnote-5)“ -- off-limits.[[6]](#footnote-6) Just as orlah fruit is off-limits for three years, so too we leave a child’s [hair](hair.html) alone during the [first](one.html) three years. What’s the [connection](connection.html)? In various places, the Torah compares a person to a tree:

***Devarim 20:19*** *“A person is like the tree of a field...”*

***Yeshayahu 65:22*** *“For as the days of a tree, shall be the days of my people.”*

***Yeremyahu 17:8*** *“He will be like a tree planted near water...”*

Therefore, like orlah, we leave a child’s [hair](hair.html) alone during the [first](one.html) three years.

The term “orlah” appears in three different references in the Torah, regarding:

1. Fruits (Vayikra 19:23),
2. [Brit Mila](circumcz.html)h (Bereshit 17:11), and
3. The [heart](body.html) (Devarim 10:16).

✡ ✡ ✡

The three items in the Holy of the [Temple](temple.html): The table of showbread ([twelve](twelve.html), [one](one.html) for each [tribe](tribes.html)), the menorah (representing wisdom and Torah), and the golden altar (for a *pleasing odor before* [*HaShem*](hashem.html)), etc.

Kabbalists, such as the Vilna Gaon, tie this back to the three aspects of the soul discussed in the [Zohar](orallaw.html): the nefesh, the life-force we share in common with animals (do not consume the [blood](body.html) [of the animal], for the [blood](body.html) is of the nefesh); the ruach (lit wind), the unseen mind which causes change and motion; and the [spiritual](physical.html) neshamah.

✡ ✡ ✡

The proscription against taking interest appears in the Torah three times (Vayikra 25:35-37, Shemot 22:24, and Devarim 23:20), to indicate how serious a matter it is.

✡ ✡ ✡

We have three pilgrimage [festivals](festivals.html): [Pesach](passover.html), [Shavuot](shavuot.html), and [Succoth](succoth.html).

✡ ✡ ✡

“For it was [taught](teacher.html): ‘And they went three days in the wilderness and found no water (Shemot 25:22)’. Upon which those who expound verses metaphorically said: Water means nothing but Torah, as it says: ‘Ho, everyone that thirsts should come for water (Yeshayahu 55:1)’. It thus means that as they went three days without Torah they immediately became exhausted.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

✡ ✡ ✡

The Torah was read in a [triennial](shmita.html) [cycle](cycles.html) of three and a half years during [Temple](temple.html) times.

✡ ✡ ✡

According to R. Yehudah, [HaShem](hashem.html) Himself studies the Torah for the [first](one.html) three hours of every day.[[8]](#footnote-8)

✡ ✡ ✡

The Torah is read in public on three different days of each week. It is read on [Shabbat](sabbath.html) morning and afternoon (at the Shacharit and Minchah services), Monday morning (at the Shacharit service) and on Thursday morning (again at Shacharit). Thus there is never a gap of more than three days between public readings of the Torah.

✡ ✡ ✡

The Shulkhan Aruch and Mishnah Berurah indicates that each oleh[[9]](#footnote-9) to the Torah must read at least three pesukim (verses).

✡ ✡ ✡

The TaNaK (or Tanach) has three sections:

1. Torah (the [Law](law.html)),
2. Nevi’im (the Prophets), and
3. Ketuvim (the Writings)

[Shabbat](sabbath.html) casts on the both the past and following week. The week is made up [six](six.html) workdays. The [first](one.html) three days are an extension of the past [Shabbat](sabbath.html). During these days the holiness and influence of the past [Shabbat](sabbath.html) are still felt. The last three workdays of the week are a preparation for the following [Shabbat](sabbath.html). During these three days the holiness of the upcoming [Shabbat](sabbath.html) can be felt.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Third day of the  S  H  A  B  B  A  T | Second day of the  S  H  A  B  B  A  T | [First](one.html) day of the  S  H  A  B  B  A  T | S  H  A  B  B  A  T  The 7th  day | Erev    S  H  A  B  B  A  T | [Fifth](five.html) day of the  S  H  A  B  B  A  T | [fourth](four.html) day of the  S  H  A  B  B  A  T |

This idea has ramifications in [Halacha](walking.html) as well. If [one](one.html) forgot or was unable to recite *havdalah* at the conclusion of [Shabbat](sabbath.html), he is permitted to recite *havdalah* until Tuesday. This is because the influence of the past [Shabbat](sabbath.html) remains until the Tuesday of the following week. Likewise, if [one](one.html) is planning to [travel](mashal.html) a great distance and his [travel](mashal.html) arrangements conflict with [Shabbat](sabbath.html), if he begins his trip more then three day before [Shabbat](sabbath.html) he need not be concerned. When [Shabbat](sabbath.html) arrives he will make arrangements the best he can. However if he plans to set out within three days of [Shabbat](sabbath.html) he must be sure to arrange his trip so that there will no conflict with [Shabbat](sabbath.html) whatsoever. This is because within three days of [Shabbat](sabbath.html) [one](one.html) is obligated to prepare for [Shabbat](sabbath.html).

✡ ✡ ✡

We find in the Torah three [*mitzvot*](cmds613.html)that are referred to as a “[sign](signs.html)“ or “[covenant](covenant.html)“ between [HaShem](hashem.html) and the [Jewish](gen-jew.html) people:

1. [Shabbat](sabbath.html),

2. [Brit mila](circumcz.html)h, and

3. [Tefillin](tefillin.html)([phylacteries](tefillin.html)). [Tefillin](tefillin.html) (Tosafot) is used three times in the Torah:

1. Shemot ([Exodus](exodus.html)) 13:16;

2. Devarim (Deuteronomy) 6:8,

3. Devarim (Deuteronomy) 11:18

## In The Human [Body](body.html)

The human [body](body.html) is divided into many sets of three: The [head](body.html) which is not clothed, the upper [body](body.html) [connects](connection.html) the [head](body.html) to the lower [body](body.html) and is clothed, and the lower [body](body.html) which is also clothed but is divided from the upper [body](body.html) by a belt or a different kind of cloth.

The [head](body.html) is then subdivided into three parts: The right [brain](brain.html), the left [brain](brain.html), and the mid-[brain](brain.html) which [connects](connection.html) the left and right brains to the [body](body.html).

The upper [body](body.html), like the [head](body.html), is also subdivided into three parts: The right arm, the left arm, and the torso which [connects](connection.html) the left and the right [arms](body.html).

Finally, the lower [body](body.html) is subdivided into three parts: The right leg, the left leg, and the organ of procreation which Kabbala calls the *third leg*.

We see that the arm is further divided into composed of three parts: The upper arm, the lower arm and the [hand](fourteen.html).

Finally, each of the [fingers](body.html) is divided into three parts: The part which is connected to the [hand](fourteen.html), the part used for touching, and the mediating part which [connects](connection.html) them.

This pattern of three repeats itself throughout the [body](body.html).

✡ ✡ ✡

The Arizal explains that [numbers](nchart.html) have their origins in the supernal [spiritual](physical.html) [worlds](worlds.html). Single digit [numbers](nchart.html) correspond to the [physical](physical.html) realm Asiyah, the sefirat Malkhut. Tens correspond to the angelic realm Yetzirah, the sefirat Tiferet. Hundreds correspond to the Neshama realm Beriah, the sefirat Binah, Imma. Being that hundreds emanate from the realm of Imma, they are the source of blessing. Therefore, all offerings are the rectification of 100% of the produce offered.

This [study](study.html) was written by

Rabbi Dr. Hillel ben David

(Greg Killian).

Comments may be submitted to:

Rabbi Dr. Greg Killian

12210 Luckey Summit

San Antonio, TX 78252

Internet address: gkilli@aol.com

Web page: http://www.betemunah.org/

(360) 918-2905

Return to The WATCHMAN home page

Send comments to Greg Killian at his email address: gkilli@aol.com

1. **Chazakah:** (a) An act of property acquisition. (b) The halachic status of permanence that is established when an event repeats itself three times. (c) An entity’s assumptive state based on its nature or personal track record. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Maharal: Pirkei Avot, by Rabbi Tuvia Basser, pg. 289 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sefer Yetzirah 1:7, Yeshayahu (Isaiah) 46:10. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Sanhedrin 74a [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hebrew עָרלָה; “uncircumcised”. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Vayikra 19:23 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Baba Kama 82a [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Avodah Zarah 3b [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. An *oleh* is one who is called to read the Torah in the synagogue. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)