



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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WINNING NUMBERS

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס זייל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

BESHALACH

WINNING NUMBERS

Everyone knows the traditional Passover song “Echad, Mi Yodea?” It is sung in every language—at least in Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian and English—and several other languages, I’m sure. It’s a very popular song—but no one knows who composed it.

So let’s see who remembers all the numbers. Anyone want to venture a guess?
[Interact with crowd.]

Okay, well, here’s the official breakdown:

- 1 is G-d;
- 2 are the Two Tablets;
- 3 are the Patriarchs;
- 4 are the Matriarchs;
- 5 are the Books of the Torah;
- 6 are the six books of the Mishnah;
- 7 are the days of Shabbos, meaning, the 7-day week that ends with Shabbos;
- 8 are the days after which a Jewish baby boy is circumcised;
- 9 are the 9 months of pregnancy (having children is a very Jewish thing, after all);
- 10 are the 10 Commandments;
- 11 are the stars Yosef saw in his dream;
- 12 are the 12 Tribes of Israel; and, last but not least
- 13 are the 13 Attributes of Mercy.

But let’s try to understand what this whole song is about. I know plenty of people who, should you ask them what comes to mind when they think of the number 11, don’t exactly think of the 11 stars in Yosef’s dream. However, they will be able to tell you the 11 starting players of Super Bowl. So what really is the idea behind this song?

About two years, ago, there was a special event in Washington marking the 20th year since the beginning of the Soviet Jewish exodus. One of the speakers was Israeli Knesset member Yuli Edelstein, a former Prisoner of Zion. In his remarks, he recounted how 25 years earlier, he had lived in Russia and worked as an underground activist for all things related to Jews and Judaism—and the KGB, obviously, didn’t exactly like his activities.

So one day they arrested him and put him in prison on false charges. He was detained for three years until his court case. During that time, they kept him in a cell in which it was virtually impossible to know if it was day or night. Finally, his long-awaited trial day arrived.

By law, the “enlightened” Communists only allowed two family members to be present in court. Edelstein knew from letters he had gotten from home that his mother and his kallah (fiancée) would be in court. When he was transported to the courthouse, he was surrounded by several circles of security forces, who concealed him so that he could not make eye contact with any family members.

Besides his mother and kallah, the courtroom was filled with KGB personnel. The verdict, of course, had been rigged from the get-go, and the judge threw the book at him, convicting him of everything under the sun. When Edelstein understood that his fate was sealed and he had nothing to lose, he suddenly shoved the guards next to him to the sides and shouted out something to his mother and future wife.

So let me ask you a question: What would you shout out if you had just a few seconds to say something to the people you love most? If you had just one opportunity to say one thing after not seeing them for three years, and you didn’t know how many years it would be until you would see them next, what would you say? [Interact with crowd.]

Most people would say, “I love you!” or something similar, right?

Yuli Edelstein shouted out, “How many candles are tonight?” He had learned in a roundabout way that it was Chanukah—but he didn’t know which night of Chanukah it was. Thankfully, he managed to get a glimpse of his kallah holding up two fingers, indicating that tonight was the second night of Chanukah. He was then rushed back to his cell.

Yuli Edelstein concluded his story by saying: “Every year, when I look at the candles on the second night of Chanukah, I remember this story.” Where everyone sees candles, Yuli Edelstein sees something else altogether.

This is the entire concept of the song, “Echod, Mi Yodea?”

When an average person sees the number 1, all he sees is a number, nothing more.

But when a Jew sees a number, it must remind him of something Jewish: Eight reminds him of circumcision, ten reminds him of the Ten Commandments, two reminds him of the Two Tablets, etc. A Jew must find the Jewish connection in everything. So the numbers of the song are not just a pattern that organizes things in

an orderly fashion but rather, the numbers recount the Jewish story behind each number—and every number has a story.

In these weeks we read about the Exodus from Egypt.

To preface, the first mitzvah in the Torah given to the Jewish People as a whole is the mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh, the Jewish new month, meaning, the mitzvah to count the months of the Jewish calendar.

Now, for your information, the months of the Jewish calendar do not have any names in the Torah. They are not called Tishrei, Cheshvan, Kislev, etc. These names were brought by the Jewish People from Babylon over 2,500 years ago when they returned from the Babylonian Exile to the Holy Land to build the Second Temple.

However, the Torah does assign numbers to the Jewish calendar months. The month of the holiday of Passover is “the First Month.” The holiday of Shavuot is the “Third Month.” And Rosh Hashanah is “on the first of the Seventh Month.” In the Torah, months only go by number.

In general, numbers are very popular in Judaism. Gematrios, or numerical values, is an entire subject in its own right. With gematrios, we can connect and bind all kinds of different things throughout the Torah simply because they have the same numerical values. For example, in our Parshah, the Hebrew word “Amalek”, the name of the evil tribe that attacked our ancestors, has the same numerical value as “safek,” or doubt, referring to the doubts in faith that Amalek triggered in our ancestors.

But now, we can ask the big question: Why do we sing “Echad, Mi Yodea?” on Seder night? Seemingly, the song itself has no connection to the Passover Seder. We can sing it on Yom Kippur too! Nowhere in the song does it say anything about Passover—so how did this song land in the Haggadah?

Perhaps we can answer as follows: The entire idea of Seder night is to ask questions. And not just the Four Questions, but more than that. The “Four Sons” in the Haggadah who ask, “What is this service of yours?” or “What’s this?”, etc.—what are they really asking?

What they are really asking is, How is it possible that after 3,300 years, the Jewish Nation is still alive—and not only alive, but alive and kicking? They want to know, What is the secret of survival of the Jewish People? How did they succeed in surviving all the horrors of exile?

To answer this question, we have the song, “Echad, Mi Yodea?”

First and foremost, we have survived in the merit of our One G-d. Secondly, in the merit of the Two Tablets. And then, in the merit of the Patriarchs, the Matriarchs, the Torah, the Mishnah, the Shabbos and circumcision, the newborns who are our next generation, the Ten Commandments, the power to dream about the future, the Twelve Tribes, and finally, above all, in the merit of the plentiful mercies of G-d.

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