

## CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted September 12, 2002 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

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## Exciting Developments in Long-Term, Intensive Talmud Study at Maqom!

About one year ago, I offered those who study Talmud with Maqom the option of working with me on a one-on-one basis to do research and create articles about rabbinic literature that would be posted [here](#) at Maqom. With this article, that project is bearing its first fruit. I hope you enjoy reading Rabbi Louis Rieser's research and the papers that have yet to come.

--Rabbi Judith Z. Abrams, Ph.D.

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## NUMEROLOGY AND TORAH "CODES"

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Much has been made of the Torah's "codes"; that the Torah predicts events in our own day if one jiggles the letters enough. I am openly disbelieving of this kind of Torah interpretation. However, that does not mean that numerology and literary analysis of the Torah does not yield some amazing findings that tell us about those who redacted the Torah whether you consider that to be God or a group of people.

We will have to do this in English but I strongly encourage you to do this with a Hebrew Bible close to hand. Here are the first two sentences in the book of Genesis:

*Breishit bara Elohim et hashamayim v'et ha'arets.*

*V'ha'arets hayta tohu vavohu v'choshekh al plnei t'hom v'ruach Elohim m'reachefet al p'nei hamayim.*

First, count the words in the first sentence. You should have come up with 7. Now, go to the Hebrew and count the number of letters in the first sentence. You should have come up with 28 letters. This telling of creation is the Priestly one: it is dignified, taxonomic and unemotional. There are no snakes or fig leaves here. God creates containers for different parts of the world and then fills them with appropriate creations.

Seven was an important number for the priesthood. It was the basis of their weekly schedule of sacrifices and was connected to the seven planets known at that time, the seven levels of heaven (hence the phrase, "I'm in seventh heaven"), the branches on the menorah and so forth. Twenty-eight is not only a multiple of seven it is the number of days in a lunar month. Therefore, in this sentence, allegiance to the lunar month is ratified.

In Torah, as in rabbinic, literature what is most important is placed in the center of the work. So the most important word in the first sentence of the Torah is "et". Not only is it the central word it is central among the letters: 13 on each side of it. "Et" signifies a direct object and thus is untranslatable. It connotes momentum, a direction. It is also

composed of the first and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet: aleph and taf. Thus, this tiny word encompasses all that will come after it.

Just one further note on this first verse. The first letter's vowel is a shva, not a kamats. Therefore, the word is best translated "In a beginning" and is incorrectly translated "In the beginning".

Now, count the words in the second verse. You should have come out with 14. Now count the letters in the second verse. You should come up with the number 52. This is the number of weeks in a solar calendar. This, then, ratifies the constituency among the Jewish people that hold to a solar calendar. As you know, the Jewish calendar is a complicated affair based on both solar and lunar reckonings of time.

One last thought. The word "Vayikra" is the name of Leviticus (the central book of the Torah) and it is the verb describing God's calling out, or naming, the first day. Already, the connection between this version of creation and the priestly cult is brought forth in the description of the first day of creation.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. Are you comfortable using this method of understanding Torah? Why or why not?
2. The text suggests that God made and destroyed many worlds until God promised Noah to never again destroy the earth. The Torah clearly validates several different creation stories. What does this say about our ability to scrap projects and start over again? Put another way, when do we admit we've made a mistake and, instead of "throwing good money after bad", decide to stop and start a different way?
3. We are at the beginning of a new year. Knowing what you now know about the richness of the Hebrew text, how will you go about exploring this level of Torah study?