IS ENGLISH GEMATRIA?

BARRY CHAMISH
Jerusalem, Israel

Gematria is an ancient, arithmetically-based method of deciphering the Torah. Joshua S. Persky, an American-born Israeli, is convinced that the principles of gematria are invaluable for letting the linguist peek into a subconscious basis for the formation of English words and phrases. Writing under the pseudonym of Peter K. Peterson, he develops this thesis by example in English is Gematria (Apocalypse Press, Jerusalem, 1988). If he is right, then a radical new linguistic theory has been proposed.

One of the core principles of gematria is the numerical equivalence of words. The first nine Hebrew letters (aleph through teth) are given values 1 through 9, and the additional fourteen are labeled 10, 20, ..., 140. The combined total of the letters in a word reveals its numerical meaning. Transferred to English by Persky, A is worth 1, B, 2, and so on until Z which is worth 26. The work **make** has a numerical value of 13 for M, 1 for A, 11 for K and 5 for E, or a value of 30. Using the same system, the value of **care** is also 30 and thus is the numerical equivalent of **make**. Gematria scholars would aver that this is no coincidence, and that there is some relationship between **make** and **care**.

Although gematria has been used as a method of Torah interpretation by Hebrew scholars for two thousand years, can it be applied to a different language such as English? Persky obviously believes so. Let us begin with some of Persky's religious English gematrias:

lord = 44 = faith
deus = 49 = lord
madonna = 62 = magdalene
divine = 63 = godly
Israel = 64 = Zion
Jesus = 74 = messiah = cross = Joshua = son [of] God
Christ = 77 = power = glory
heretical = 81 = godless = blaspheme
immoral = 81 = sinful
son [of] Mary = 105 = mother [of] God
old testament = 148 = scriptures

The reader is invited to do the calculations himself. Persky's counting is correct, and he continues to find additional numerical equivalents in the Christian scriptures. But Perksy also claims secular word formation was no less aided by an unconscious need for balance and order in written and spoken communication:

lock = 41 = key

plague = 62 = disease = cholera
finite = 63 = limit
nuclear = 74 = energy
truth = 87 = justice = punish = vindicate
legendary = 91 = mythical
mathematical = 106 = arithmetic
senseless = 117 = irrational
clairvoyance = 128 = telekinesis

One striking juxtaposition is **genius** and **madness**, both scoring 75. As the title of Persky's book is meant to suggest, **English** is numerically equivalent to **gematria**!

Persky is equally convinced that the phrases we create are guided for this need for order: death and decay are equivalent, as are cold and damp, odds and ends, thick and thin, down and out, etc. Other equivalents include shell and shock, bird and seed, coffee and cup, busy and work, and jail and cell.

The Hebrew gematria is based on far more complicated mathematical concepts than mere numerical pairings of words, and Persky has not yet explored English gematria beyond such equivalences. But he is convinced that when he goes looking, he'll not return empty-handed. For example, the circumference of the circle with unit radius is equal to 2π. This can be translated into a gematric equivalent: circle = 50 = 2 x 25 = 2(pi). Further, the area of the circle with unit radius is π, which becomes area = 25 = pi.

* * *

To find out if Persky is onto something, I visited Yaacov Auerbach of Jerusalem, considered by many to be the leading expert on gematria in Israel and certainly one of the top few in the world. Auerbach leafed through Persky's book and declared it "ingenious, a wonderful exercise". Then he asked "Is he serious?" I replied "Completely. He believes gematria may be the basis of all language interpretation." At this point Auerbach, in a good-natured way, expressed his doubts.

"Take his example of pi and circle. Pi is a Greek word, and unless the Greek word kyklos is the numerical equivalent of pi, which it is not, he's transposing foreign words into his theory. And what of French or Spanish? Do his examples in English work for the same words in other languages?"

Persky's answer to this is no. He adds "Each language has its own reality, a unique set of perceptions that go into its word formation. Think of my theory like this: before Freud, dreams were not considered subconscious messages. I believe all languages are mathematically based and words are their subconscious messages."

Auerbach expressed a second doubt. "Hebrew has an ancient text that has not changed through the ages. English has been constantly changing and really is a Latin-Germanic cocktail. Take the word doubt. What's that B doing there? It's there because the Latin root is dubitum. Or daughter. What's that GH doing in there? The word is from the Sanskrit **duhitar** and not a product of unique

English thinking at all. Hebrew has no vowels, no wasted letters, and is founded on a constant set of strict rules. The Hebrew language is prophetic while English is phonetic. The era of prophets lasted only a thousand years, ending with the Greek conquest of ancient Israel. It is based on prophetic principles and that's what makes Hebrew so unique and why gematria can only be applied to it."

This is not the place to discuss Hebrew gematria in detail. The reader is directed to Gutman Locks's book The Spice of Torah-Gematria (Judaica Press, New York, 1985), which states (in the Introduction) "Gematria provides a method of converting words into numbers and/or numbers into words, thereby revealing relationships between words." His first example concerns Jacob's dream of Paradise on earth. Jacob awakes and remarks "There is God in this place." Where is the place? When the letters of Jacob's utterance are computed, the total is 541, the total of the letters contained in Israel.

Sometimes the number of letters in a word also plays a role. In the first generation of Jews, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are composed of 13 letters in Hebrew while their wives, Sarah, Rivka and Rachel also total 13 letters. 13 plus 13 totals 26, the numerical value of Yahweh, God's holiest name. At a religious Jewish meal, the blessing of the bread is followed by the dipping of the bread in salt three times. This is because the name Yahweh has a value of 26 which, multiplied by 3, results in 78, the numerical value for both bread and salt.

Auerbach then raised a third objection to Persky's work. "Look at the small numbers he's working with. You're bound to get coincidences within such a small range. Gematria is far beyond accident." When I asked him for examples, he pointed out that there are 70 nations mentioned in Chapter 10 of Genesis. The total numerical value of the names of these nations, plus the names of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and their wives Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah plus the Twelve Tribes is 4900, or 70 times 70.

Then Auerbach related to me his personal favorite. The blessing of the bride in the Torah, found in Rebecca, consists of 15 words with a total numerical value of 4662. The blessing of the groom in the Torah, found in Ruth, also consists of 15 words with a numerical value of 4662! "These are huge numbers," concluded Auerbach, "and they defy the laws of coincidence."

The case for English gematria, at least in Auerbach's eyes, has not yet been proven. Persky concedes that gematria works best for the Torah, but insists that it can be applied to other languages as well. "Languages are not entirely arbitrary. There are subtle equations beneath the apparent chaos, and gematria reveals much about the processes that went into the formation of English, even if the mathematics weren't deliberate like those of the Torah."

If Persky's work is proven true, even in part, the study of English will be very different in the future.