



Vaetchanan

When Does The Number of Words Recited Matter?

In Jewish tradition, there is a halacha determined by the number of words we recite - the Shema, the first paragraph of which we read in Parshat Vaetchanan.

If you count the words in all three paragraphs of the Shema, we reach the number 245. If you were to add three to that, you get to 248 - a number that is charged with enormous significance.

There are 248 positive precepts in the Torah. 248 limbs in the human body. The gematria of the name of the founder of our faith, Abraham, is 248, because he was a person of action who used his limbs in order to perform the positive precepts. The Torah was given in *בְּמִדְבָּר*, - the desert, which also equals 248, because it was in the wilderness that we declared:

“כָּל אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' נַעֲשֶׂה”

“Whatever Hashem has spoken, we will do.”

It's hugely important for us that the Shema is not just a statement of belief, but rather a way to appreciate that we must translate our belief into action. And that's why it's important for the total tally to be 248.

This is why the Chazan must chant aloud three additional words at the end of the Shema:

“ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֶחָד”.

“The Lord Our God is Truth.”

The last two words of the Shema and the first word of the following paragraph. And in that way we recall the words of the prophet Jeremiah in chapter ten, verse ten:

“ה' אֱלֹהִים אֶחָד”

“The Lord God is truth.”

But what happens if one is praying at home and you're not part of a shul service and there is no Chazan? That's why you start the Shema with the words “יְיָ יְיָ יְיָ”, also three words. And the beginning letters make up the word, “אֱמֵן” - we affirm what we are about to say, so it's not a disruption in our service.

The Shema, which undoubtedly is the most significant statement of the Jewish people, calls upon us not just to believe in God, but also to guarantee that that will mean that our lives will always be filled with meaningful and productive action.

Shabbat Shalom.