

## **Pesach II 5779**

### **Who Knows Why We End the Seder With “Who Knows 13?”**

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Who knows one? *Echad Elokeinu* - G-d is one. So begins the end-of-Seder song “*Echad Mi Yodea?* Who knows one?”

Who knows 13? *Shlosha Asar Midaya* - G-d’s attributes are 13.

Now who knows why we stop at 13?

It’s odd to end the song right there. After all, we could easily keep going. The number 14 also appears in the Torah: it’s the number of days a woman is ritually impure after delivering a baby girl. OK, that’s not the most exciting thing to sing about, but the point is that ending at 13 seems arbitrary.

Let’s review 1-13:

1. G-d.
2. Tablets of the covenant
3. Patriarchs
4. Matriarchs
5. Books of the Torah
6. Orders of the Mishna, first Jewish law code and first layer of the Talmud
7. Days in a week
8. Days until the Bris
9. Months of pregnancy
10. Commandments
11. Stars in Joseph’s dream
12. Tribes of Israel
13. Attributes of G-d

The thirteen attributes of G-d - in Hebrew, *Middot* - are a list of G-d’s qualities. In Exodus 34, the Torah names 13 characteristics of G-d, most of which recall G-d’s mercy. You may recognize the Hebrew from the prayer we sing on the High Holidays: *Adonai, Adonai, El Rahum VHanun* - קל רחום - ה' ה' קל רחום...etc.” In English: “The Lord! The Lord! G-d, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abundant in kindness and truth, preserver of kindness for thousands of generations, forgiver of iniquity, willful sin, and error, and who cleanses [sin]” (Ex. 34:6,7). The Talmud imagines that G-d revealed these to Moses and told him “Whenever Israel sins, let them recite this [the Thirteen Attributes] in its proper order and I will forgive them.” It’s fitting that we sing these on the High Holidays, the season of forgiveness and mercy.

While the Passover song stops at 13, I wanted to keep going. Indeed, I can proceed with the next seven numbers, all of them connected to Pesach:

14 - steps of the **Seder** - (*Kadesh, Urhatz, Karpas, Yachatz, Magid, Rahtza, Motzi Matza, Maror, Korech, Shulchan Orech, Tzafun, Barech, Hallel, Nirtzah*).

15 - date of the Hebrew month of *Nisan* to celebrate **Pesach**.

16 - drops of wine spilled at the **Seder** (10 plagues, *Dam VaEsh VTimrot Ashan; Dtzach, Adash B'A'chav*).

17 - age of Joseph when he was sold down to **Egypt**, thus setting the Exodus in motion: later his brothers came down to Egypt; next his whole family followed; finally the Jews were in Egypt for Pharaoh to enslave).

18 - minutes to finish **Matza** from the moment flour touches water.

19 - years in the Jewish calendar cycle, which adds leap months every two or three years so that **Passover** will always be in spring.

20 - age of adulthood for Jewish men who fought and were counted in a census. The first one was in *Parashat Ki Tisa*, shortly after the **Exodus**.

As a side note, I'm trying to continue all the way to 50. Check out the Beth El Facebook page for daily updates as I share each number on the corresponding day of the Omer. I still need some help with the 40's. If you know of any, please share with me!

Let's go back to the original question: why should this song stop at 13?

I want to share both a historical answer and a literary answer.

First the historical answer, taken from Dr. Josh Kulp's terrific commentary in the Schechter Haggadah.

He writes that the song *Echad Mi Yodea* has been in the Haggadah since 1590, but it had already been around for centuries. We know it's relatively old because it was sung in many far flung places of the Diaspora. And we know that it was used in non-Seder contexts: the Jews of Provence sang it during Sukkot while the Jews of Kochin, India, sang it at weddings!

There are early fragmentary versions found in the Cairo Geniza that begin with the *Shma*. The *Shma*, of course, affirms that G-d is *Echad*, one. Then the song ascends in number order with other significant numbers, stopping at 12, not our customary 13.

Kulp cites Menachem Zvi Fox's suggestion on how it became attached to the Seder. Recall the famous story early in the Haggadah about the all-night gathering in Bnai Brak. It concludes with a student coming to tell the rabbis that, as the sun was about to rise, it was time to say the *Shma*. Thus the end of the Seder became associated with being reminded that it was almost time to say the *Shma*. So this song, which originally began with the *Shma*, was added to the Seder to remind everyone that soon it would be morning and time to recite the *Shma*.

Fox offers an explanation as to why the song concludes at 13, which doesn't have major significance in Judaism. He suggests that if you add up all the numbers from 1-13, you get 91. This is the Gematria value of the word *Amen*. Gematria assigns each letter a number. And *Amen* is connected to the *Shma*. In any Siddur, you'll see an instruction to add three words to the *Shma* if there's no Minyan, *El Melech Ne'eman*, which begin with *Aleph, Mem, Nun*. 1,

40, and 50. *Amen*. Cool, right? However, Kulp sees a flaw in that the original version had *twelve* stanzas, so the Gematria fails because it needs 13 to work. In the end, we don't see a compelling historical reason to end with 13.

Let's examine a literary answer from a book called *Haggadah Mimkorah* - Haggadah from its Sources - by R. Yosef Zvi Rimon.

He points out that the Seder *begins* with a question: *Mah Nishtanah?* How is this night different? It's fitting that we *end* with a question too: Who knows one? *Mah Nishtanah* is about the specifics of Passover. Whereas *Echad Mi Yodea* is general, about life. That's the goal, for us to move from this specific Seder experience to appreciate a whole world that flows from G-d.

Here is why we end with 13: Because 13 closes the circle. Number one is about G-d, the unity. And number 13 is also about G-d, the attributes of mercy. To quote Isaiah, "I, [G-d] am first and I am last, and there is no G-d beside Me" (Is. 44:6). We begin with G-d and we end with G-d: these are the bookends of our faith and tradition from before the Exodus through today. Wherever we are, we always wind our way back to *Echad Elokeinu*, G-d is one.

The Baal Shem Tov taught that each of the increasing numbers represents the increasing complexity of our world. But it's all anchored in "G-d is one." When we finally get to thirteen, we realize that the Gematria teaches us something amazing. The word "One, *Echad*" is spelled *Aleph, Chet, Dalet*. This has the value of 1, 8, and 4. Together that's 13. So in this way thirteen becomes one. And one is thirteen.

Who knows why we conclude *Echad Mi Yodea* at 13?

One is G-d, thirteen is G-d, and everything in the middle returns to G-d. On the night of the Seder and throughout the year. Then, now, and next year... in Jerusalem.

Chag Sameach.