

BEASTS AND BLESSINGS

One recent morning when my laptop suddenly died, I scurried to the comfort of our family computer – a large, heavy workhorse of a machine – to make a few online purchases. Some days earlier, a new credit card had mysteriously arrived in the mail for me, three years prior to the expiration date of my old one. This move by the card company, I speculated, was likely motivated by the creation of some new, more secure chip technology to prevent fraud and theft. Feeling mighty secure, I pulled the card from its envelope, activated it over the phone, and set out for a bit of an impulse shopping spree to calm my shaky nerves, made unsteady by the thought of having to purchase a new computer. As I came to the on-line check-out, I inputted the card information and was then asked for the three-digit security code. Turning it over to the back, I felt the hairs on my neck stand up as I imagined Damien, the evil boy who is the demonic antichrist in the cult film classic, *The Omen*, staring at me. I promise you that I am not making this up. The code was 666, the numerical mark of the ancient beast of Christian scripture that occupies an outsized legacy in the annals of demon lore and popular superstition.

The original story of the beast and its numerical mark is one among very early Jewish and Christian “end-of-the-world” stories. In them, God brings to heel the

cosmic forces of evil and chaos, such as the infamous beast with his three-digit ID. The actual number, 666, is what ancient Jews called a Gematria, in this case, the number equivalent of the Hebrew letters that spell out the name, Nero the Caesar. Nero was the famously brutal bad-boy emperor of Rome at the time that the Romans were violently suppressing a major revolt by the Jews of Jerusalem between the years 66 and 68 CE. It's no surprise that in the midst of such cataclysmic upheaval, the writer of this story would associate those beastly forces of world-ending chaos with him.

Feeling a bit unsettled, I reminded myself that getting the randomly generated number 666 on my credit card was nothing to freak out about. All of this stuff about the beast with his legendary number of evil is superstition rooted in early Christian mysticism and even some Jewish folk lore, none of which I believe as a believing Jew. Showing the card to my wife, I thought to myself, "Dan, you're being ridiculous. Your computer didn't break because of your credit card security number. Let this nonsense go!"

I really tried to let it go. I bought a new computer, I loaded it up all in one day...and then *that* brand spanking new computer died on me as well, the victim of a factory defect....or was it a defect? I trudged back to the store, got another

new computer, and had my outstanding IT consultant load it up. As it woke up, purring to life, my wife texted me to tell me that her company laptop had inexplicably shut down. Feeling those horror movie shivers tingling up and down my back, I told my incredulous IT guy what had happened. I texted my wife back to see what she was going to do without her work computer. All she texted in reply were the numbers...666. As all this was happening, our normally mediocre home Wifi began to disconnect with even fiercer vengeance, while later that night, my very dependable exercise bike shut down in the middle of a heavy workout I was doing.

By that point, my rationality had gone the way of alchemy and other ancient stupidities. I commenced plotting a DIY exorcism, an incantation using the numbers 666 in a different fashion, like a Gematria number in reverse, to undo this dark possession.

And this is where I ask you, dear reader and listener, to enter my world and the way that I think.

Remember Gematria, the mystical system of number equivalents for letters that our ancient ancestors believed could signal messages from the great beyond? I found myself at that moment doing some of my own Gematria. Looking at the

three sixes, I realized that they add up to the number 18, whose Hebrew letter equivalents form the word, *Chai*, which means...to live.

This was my message from God, speaking as it were through my credit card company.

“Dan, stop fretting about fantastical beasts on high that populate ancient texts and modern pop culture.

Heaven knows, we have enough real beasts threatening human existence right here on earth, right now.

Your job is to bring more life into the world through what you do and how you do it every day.

Choose life.

And for heaven’s sake, if it makes you feel better, get a new credit card!”

Which I did.