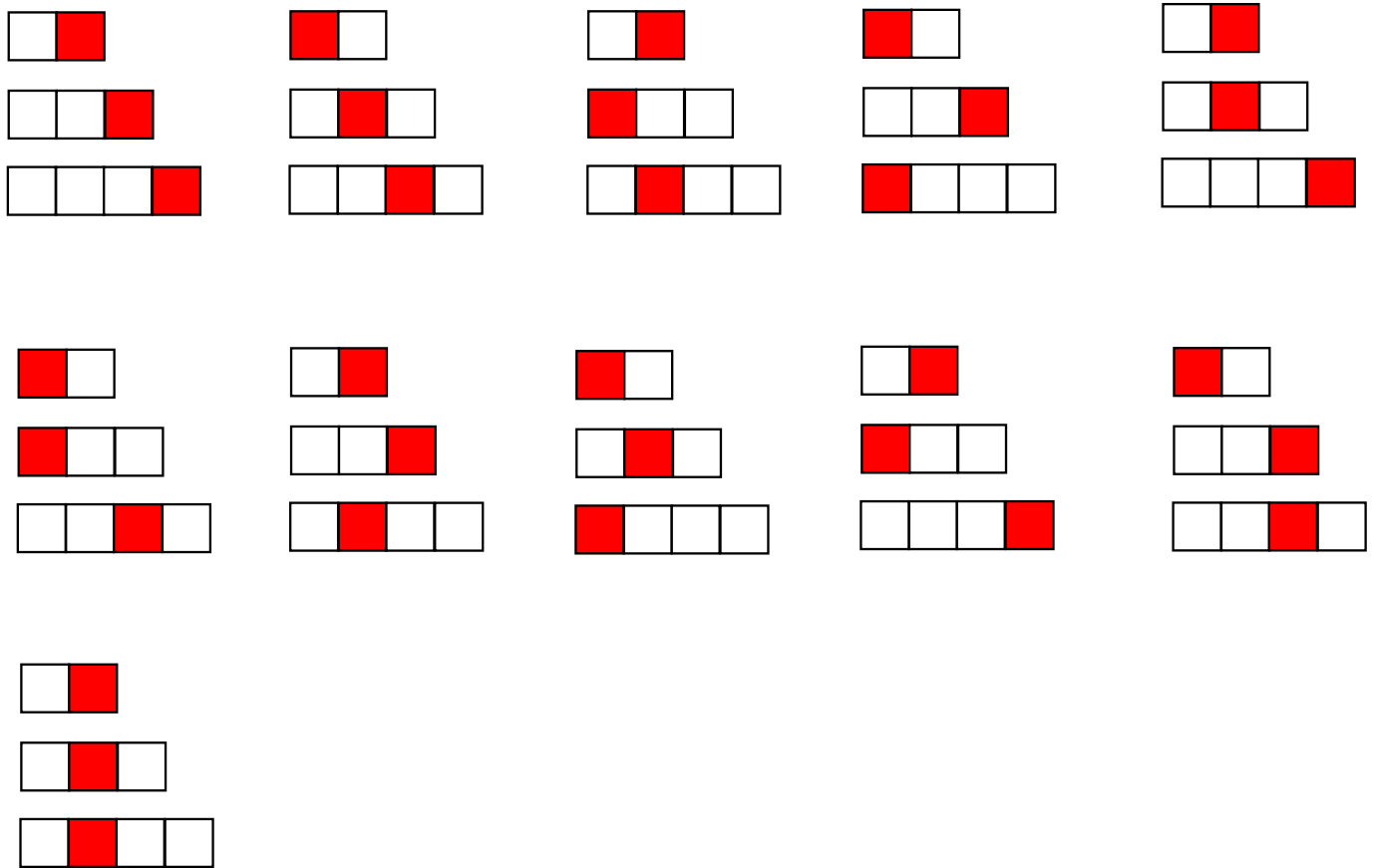


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A visual representation of $a(3)$. The variables are represented by the vertical bars. The values of variables are represented by the positions of the red squares. If the red squares in two rows are aligned vertically it means they have the same value. The decrease of the values is represented by moving the red squares to the left. The further the square is positioned to the right of a row, the higher the value.

As can be seen, after 10 iterations, the three red squares are vertically aligned, meaning the three variables have the same values. Therefore $a(3) = 10$.