

When Friday falls on the 13th day of the month, many people in the Western world are poised for disaster because the number 13 is commonly held to be unlucky, especially in combination with Friday. There are many theories about the origin of these superstitions, one of which is based on what was most likely a simple clerical error: The Code of Hammurabi lacks a 13th law! Since the time of the ancient Sumerians, who based their numeral system on 12, we have used that number for measuring time. And the preeminence of the metric system notwithstanding, a few countries still reckon distance and weight in units of 12. Because 12 is therefore considered “perfect,” 13 upsets the balance. In Norse mythology, evil and chaos entered the world when the mischievous Loki arrived as the 13th guest at a dinner party in Valhalla and helps the blind Hodur inadvertently kill Baldur. Friday enters the picture with the Christian belief that the 13th guest to arrive at the Last Supper was Judas Iscariot, whose betrayal caused Jesus to be executed on the next day, which was Friday. For all of these reasons, both the number 13 and its combination with Friday are fraught with danger. However, in Judaism, both Friday and the number 13 are full of positive implications. On Friday, the 6th day, HaShem completed all of creation, and deemed it “very good.” And on Friday we prepare for and welcome Shabbat, that day of rest that was initiated by HaShem and infuses us with divine holiness. In Hebrew the number 6 is represented by the letter *vav*, a joining letter whose very name means hook and stands for unity. The number 13 is also highly significant: Boys become bar mitzvah at 13; there are the 13 attributes of HaShem; on leap years the Hebrew calendar has 13 months with the addition of a second month of Adar; the Rambam (Maimonides) formulated 13 principles of Judaism; in *gematria* (Jewish numerology), the letters forming the words אהבה (*ahavah* – love) and אחד (*echad* – unity) both add up to 13; and in the diaspora there are 13 Jewish festival days. But putting all this numerical talk in its proper place, Leviticus 19:26, which we read last week, admonishes, “You shall not act on the basis of omens or lucky hours.” Indeed, the laws defined in what we call the “holiness codex,” which we began reading last week, are not based on portents or luck, but rather, on action. Holiness is neither a haphazard stroke of fate nor an inherited state of being; it is a way of life. The Hebrew root שקד denotes someone or something set apart to serve as a means to express awe, gratitude, and respect for HaShem. Because the priests functioned as the conduit between HaShem and the people, they and their families were held to the highest possible standards. Every aspect of their lives, from their interactions with others to their clothing and appearance, was strictly controlled in order to render them as perfect as a human being is able to be. These high standards were also applied to the offerings and to how, when, and where they were to be offered and eaten. Nothing but the very best could be deemed *kadosh*, i.e., fit to serve, or be presented to HaShem, and nothing was left to chance. Likewise, holiness was to be reflected in how the people treat their land and its crops, their animals, and each other. Like the sciences and the arts, holiness is a practice, which means it requires constant, careful attention. The old adage “practice makes perfect” is useless and misleading in our human realm. We do not “practice religion” by smugly looking down from some high pinnacle of perfection on those who do not do as we do. Perfection belongs solely to HaShem. We are only called upon to imitate it to the best of our human ability, but without setting unrealistic goals that do more harm than good. Practicing is predicated upon respecting both our individual potential and our limitations and acting judiciously within those parameters. It also means concentrating on the positive rather than trying to avert the negative. The word for the body of laws that outline principles for a lifestyle that emphasizes excellence rather than perfection, is *halacha*, which derives from the Hebrew root meaning to walk. Blindly following a set of rules without understanding why is as futile as practicing music while watching a movie. Talking the talk without walking the walk is affected and insincere, and a far cry from the holiness to which HaShem tells us to aspire. Holiness encompasses time, space, and person, manifesting in how we observe our holy times, treat our holy places and objects, and behave ourselves at all times, in all places, and toward all of HaShem’s creation. It is comprehensive, requiring our full concentration and our full commitment – “with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength,” as we recite daily in the *shema Yisrael*. Being fully engaged in the practice of holiness leaves no room for the superstition, ignorance, and authoritarianism that rightfully turn many people away from religion. HaShem brought us out of *mitzrayim*, the narrowness of slavery, into the freedom of choosing to live a holy life, a life based on actively observing the commandments through diligent practice. Let us welcome Shabbat on the evening of this Friday the 13th with particular joy as we remember all the good things associated with the number 13 and with Friday, the 6th day – which this year also happens to be the 12th day of the month of Iyar, and 6th day of the 4th week of Omer Counting: *yesod* (foundation, connection between heaven and earth) within *netzach* (endurance, time, and eternity). Happy Friday the 13th, and ...

Shabbat shalom!