

When Friday falls on the 13th day of the month, as it does this week, many people in the Western world fear the worst. Since ancient times the number 13 has been associated with bad luck, especially in conjunction with Friday. Among the many theories about the origin of this superstition is the fact that the Code of Hammurabi lacks a 13th law, which may only be due to a clerical error. The number 12, which we use for reckoning time, was the unit upon which the ancient Sumerians based their entire system of measurement. And a few countries still reckon distance and weight in units of 12. The number 12 is therefore considered “perfect,” while 13 upsets the balance. In Norse mythology, evil and chaos entered the world when the mischievous Loki became the 13th guest at a dinner party in Valhalla and helped the blind Hodur to inadvertently kill Baldur. Friday entered the picture because of Judas Iscariot, who was said to have been the 13th guest to arrive at the Last Supper. He betrayed Jesus, who was executed on the following day, a Friday. In Judaism however, both Friday and the number 13 are particularly positive. On Friday, the 6th day, HaShem completed all of creation, and deemed it “very good.” And on Friday we prepare for and welcome Shabbat. In Hebrew the number 6 is represented by the letter *vav*, a multitasking, conjoining letter whose very name means hook and stands for unity. The number 13 is also highly significant: Boys become bar mitzvah at 13; in answer to Moses’ request, HaShem lists 13 attributes (Exodus 34:6-7); on leap years the Hebrew calendar has 13 months; Maimonides formulated 13 principles of Judaism; in *gematria* (Jewish numerology), the letters of אהבה (*ahavah* – love) and אחד (*echad* – unity) both add up to 13; and in the diaspora there are 13 Jewish festival days. Happy Friday, the 13th and on to more number talk.

In our parashah, which contains the most *mitzvot* of all parashiot, Moses reviews and elaborates on over 70 laws and precepts governing the entire spectrum of life, from warfare to interpersonal relationships and legal matters. One of the most revealing and revolutionary sets of laws deals with behavior in a military camp. And however we may regard it today, the Israelites will have to wage war against the present inhabitants of Canaan. No matter how it is justified, glorified and romanticized, war is brutal, disorderly, ugly, and unsanitary. When I was music director at the Ray Barracks Army Chapel during the height of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, I heard firsthand reports from returning soldiers that graphically attested to this. One soft-spoken, polite young man told me that when President George W. Bush, who was visiting the troops, asked him how life was for him, he was shocked to hear himself answering, “Pretty shitty, Sir.” In short, war is dehumanizing, and it will be tremendously challenging to uphold Torah values. Even the most lenient interpretations of our *mitzvot* do not condone barbarism. After instructions on the treatment of captive women (21:10-14), which were revolutionary and humane then, however odious they are to us today, Moses issues two rules for behavior within a military camp, repeating the word camp a significant 7 times. The overarching message is “For the Lord, your God, walks in the midst of your camp, to rescue you and to deliver your enemies before you. Therefore, your camp shall be holy, so that He should not see anything unseemly among you and turn away from you.” (23:15) Indeed, the Ark is carried into battle, which makes the encampment holy ground. Therefore, “You shall be holy, because I, the Lord, your God, am holy.” (Leviticus 19:2) is mandatory. First, Moses reiterates the law governing nocturnal emissions (Leviticus 15:16-18). One who has experienced a seminal discharge is *tamey* (ritually impure); he must remain outside the camp until nightfall, and then immerse himself in water before he may reenter the camp. (23:11-12) The second ruling has to do with hygiene and decorum rather than with ritual purity. Soldiers are commanded to designate an area outside the camp to use as a latrine, and along with their weapons and other equipment, each soldier must carry a stake with which to bury his excrement. As we know, Judaism does not consider the body and its functions to be intrinsically evil or dirty. The Talmud emphasizes that like all animals, we eat, procreate, and eliminate waste. But we are commanded to imbue these basic functions with holiness by sanctifying them with special blessings and creating respectful boundaries around them – the polar opposite of many idolatrous practices the Israelites had already encountered (defecating before the image of Ba’al Peor, for example) and will continue to confront. Talmud Tractate Berakhot 25 teaches that one may not recite *shema Yisrael* in the presence of uncovered human excrement. In the 13th century, the Ramban (Nachmanides) warned: “It is known that troops going into battle will consume every imaginable abomination; they rob, act violently and shamelessly, even in matters of sexual immorality ... Even the most upright of men by nature dons a mantle of cruelty and rage when his forces prepare to engage the enemy, and therefore the Torah warns, ‘you shall guard against anything evil’ (23:10), for the plain sense of the phrase is to caution about every forbidden matter.” In other words, we are required to observe the Commandments at all times, even during war. Our sages recognize that while it may not always be possible to maintain strict ritual purity in the heat of battle, we must still avoid succumbing to our basest instincts. Our Torah values define us both as individuals and as a people. It is our duty to uphold them at all times to the best of our ability.

Shabbat shalom!