

My family and I went on a cruise for a vacation this summer. The ship was massive, with 17 decks. On the first day, when we were on the elevator, Naomi noticed that the numbers went from 12 to 14. This prompted her to ask, “Daddy, why is there no number 13 on the elevator?” I explained that many people think that the number 13 is unlucky and bad things will happen to them if they are connected to that number. My children like long, complicated words, so I taught them a new one: Triskaidekaphobia, fear of the number 13.

Although the term itself was not coined until around 1910, Triskaidekaphobia has been a common phenomenon in western culture for centuries. All of us have encountered evidence of Triskaidekaphobia: Hotels have no 13th floor. Airplanes have no 13th row. Airports have no Gate 13.

The exact beginnings of Triskaidekaphobia are unclear. One possible origin is the Last Supper, where there were thirteen men at the table, one of whom, Judas, betrayed Jesus. Similarly, in Norse mythology, there was a tale about 12 gods having dinner in Valhalla.

During dinner, Loki, the trickster god, crashed the party, becoming the 13th attendee, and arranged for Hoor to shoot Balder with a poison-tipped arrow. In a Tarot card deck, Number 13 is the card of death.

Another possible origin for this irrational fear is the discontinuity of the solar and lunar cycles. Western society follows a solar year instead of the lunar year, and the lunar cycle stands out because there are thirteen moon cycles in one solar year. Also, twelve was seen as a perfect number, being the product of three and four. Thirteen, however, is a prime number, and does not fit any mathematical pattern.

In response to this seemingly irrational fear, an influential group of New Yorkers came together in 1881, led by US Civil War veteran Captain William Fowler, to put an end to this and other superstitions. They formed a dinner cabaret club, which they called “The Thirteen Club.” According to Wikipedia, their first meeting was held on January 13, 1881, at 8:13 p.m., when thirteen people sat down to dine in Room 13 of the venue. The guests walked under a ladder to enter the room and were seated among piles of spilled salt. Many “Thirteen Clubs” sprang

up all over North America over the next 45 years. Their activities were regularly reported in leading newspapers, and their numbers included five future US presidents, from Chester A. Arthur to Theodore Roosevelt. However, by the mid-20th century, they gradually faded due to a lack of interest.

There is another group of people who do not fear the number 13: the Jews. Thirteen appears in many positive ways in our tradition. A boy becomes Bar Mitzvah at 13 years of age. According to Rabbinic Tradition, there are 13 ways by which the Torah is interpreted. Maimonides enumerated 13 principles of faith.

One of the highlights of the Passover Seder is the concluding song “Who knows one?” a Hebrew/Aramaic ditty that counts to 13, repeating each previous number in cumulative fashion. Each verse of the song begins with a question, the response to which is a concept from Jewish tradition. The song begins:

אַחַד מִי יוֹדֵעַ, אַחַד אֲנִי יוֹדֵעַ. אַחַד אֱלֹהֵינוּ שְׁבַשְׁמִים וּבְאַרְצָא:

“Who knows one? I know one. One is our God who is in the heavens and the earth.”

It continues:

שְׁנַיִם מִי יוֹדֵעַ, שְׁנַיִם אֲנִי יוֹדֵעַ. שְׁנֵי לְחֻת הַבְּרִית. אֶחָד אֱלֹהֵינוּ שְׁבַשְׁמַיִם וּבְאָרֶץ:

“Who knows two? I know two. Two are the tablets of the covenant. One is our God in the heavens and the earth.”

And so on and so forth: Three are the patriarchs. Four are the matriarchs. Five are the books of the Torah. Six are the books of the Mishnah. Seven are the days of the week. Eight are the days till circumcision. Nine are the months till birth. Ten are the Ten Commandments. Eleven are the stars in Joseph’s dream. Twelve are the Tribes of Israel. Thirteen are the Attributes of God.

At my Seders, I like to assign each of these numbers to the attendees. Everyone collectively sings the question that begins each verse, and the individual assigned his or her number sings the response, so that the voices bounce around the table as the song gets longer with each additional number. Each person has to be aware of his or her

number and chime in at the appropriate time to keep the song going, or they will suffer much humorous ridicule, especially after four cups of wine, late into the night. It is a rollicking good time, and it works whether you are using the original Hebrew and Aramaic or an English translation.

The song concludes with “Thirteen are the Attributes of God,” a reference to Exodus 34:6-7, when God expresses attributes of forgiveness, following the Israelites failure of the Golden Calf. During a private encounter between God and Moses, in a moment of reconciliation, God declares, **” וְיִי אֱלֹהֵי רַחֲמוֹם וְחַנּוּן אַרְבָּעִים אַפַּיִם וְרַב־חַסְדִּים וְאֱמֶת: ”** “Adonai, Adonai, God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abundant in kindness and truth, keeping kindness unto thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, and cleansing.” The Rabbis call this list “God’s Thirteen Attributes of Mercy.”

We recite these attributes, not only because God said them and forgave long ago, but also because we remind God that this is how we

hope God will act on these days of judgment. We recite them during Selihot, during the Torah service of Festival Services, as was done a few moments ago, and several times on Yom Kippur.

An extended analysis of these verses in the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 17a-b) shows how these attributes are demonstrations of God's true desire to be merciful. The passage concludes with the anthropomorphic image of God, wrapped in a tallit like the leader of a Jewish prayer service. God recites the attributes of mercy, teaching them to Moses and instructing him, "Whenever the Jewish people go astray, let them act before Me in accordance with this order. Let the prayer leader wrap herself in a tallit and publicly recite the thirteen attributes of mercy, and I will forgive them." In another midrash (Brakhot 7a), the Rabbis tell us that God invents God's own prayer, which goes as follows, "May it be my will, that my compassion overcome my anger and that it prevail over my attribute of justice and judgment, and that I deal with my children according to the attribute of compassion, and that I may not act towards them according to the strict

line of justice.” God is supposed to recite this prayer especially in moments when God’s anger might be aroused by humanity’s failings.

According to the Rabbis, these attributes are a formula for forgiveness, to be recited whenever forgiveness is needed, and tradition locates the ritual in another event in the Torah, the sin of the spies. In the Book of Numbers, the people of Israel were whipped up into a frenzy by the scouts who explored the land of Canaan and reported back that it would be too difficult for them to conquer. In their hysteria, the Israelites demanded to go back to the good old days in Egypt. God was not happy about the spies’ report or Israel’s reaction, and expressed a desire to destroy the people. However, Moses recited the attributes of mercy as a liturgical formula, which resulted in God’s forgiveness.

(Numbers 14:11-20) The rabbinic promise of perpetual pardon is based in this biblical precedent.

There is another place in our liturgy where the number 13 plays an important role. It is a very familiar part of the daily and Shabbat prayer service, and a highlight of Rosh Hashanah, but its expression of the

number 13 is not immediately obvious. I am referring to Psalm 150, where the word Halleluyah, or its variant, appears 13 times. In fact, medieval commentator Rabbi David Kimḥi teaches that the 13 utterances which praise God in Psalm 150 are parallel to the 13 attributes of mercy in Exodus. As the number 13 represents God's mercy and love for Israel, we respond with 13 exhortations of praise of God.

Let us return to the Seder's concluding song. After an evening of retelling our foundational story, of how God took us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, we close out the entire ritual meal with a song that, on its surface seems like a fun little number game, when in reality, signifies an important aspect of the Jewish relationship with God.

Medieval western culture had many cumulative songs, but they only went up to 12. The most familiar one of these today is "The Twelve Days of Christmas," which has a similar formula to "Who knows One?" But we conclude our song with 13 because 13 is $1 + 12$.

In “Who knows One?”, 1 is God, ever-present in the heavens and the earth. 12 are the tribes of Israel, the Jewish People in one collective unit. Hidden in this little Pesah ditty is the essential statement that the number 13 expresses the unique bond, the covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish People.

The Thirteen Attributes of Mercy are God’s expressions of forgiveness. As part of their introduction on Yom Kippur, we say, “You taught us how to recite the thirteen attributes of your name. Remember us regarding the covenant of these thirteen attributes, which You first revealed to the humble one, Moses, long ago...” 13 represents that God will never abandon us, and that God will forgive us when we come in repentance, reminding God of the attributes that were said to Moses at Sinai.

Throughout history, so many peoples have said that the Jews were unlucky or cursed, as cursed as the number 13. In response, we claimed 13 as a badge of honor because we know One and we know Thirteen.

So, who is afraid of the number 13? Not the Jews. In fact, one could say that we have Triskaidekaphilia, love of the number 13. I think I may have invented that word. The recitation of the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy, together with its companion Psalm 150, are an outpouring of feelings and a yearning for relationship with God. These expressions that punctuate our High Holy Day season are reminders that we are partners with God and invite us to transform ourselves into the people that we wish to be. Shanah Tovah!