

Promises, Promises

Matot-Masei 5786 sermon by Rabbi Lisë Stern

7.10.26

Tomorrow's Torah portion, Matot-Masei, begins with a recounting of instructions regarding vows, oaths, binding expressions and utterances.

I'm going to read the Hebrew here, because we have this one verse that says a lot, yet is also very cryptic, from Numbers 30 verse 3:

אִישׁ כִּי־יָדַר נָדָר לַה' אִזְּהִישָׁבַע שְׁבַעַה לְאַסֹּר אֶסֶר עַל־נַפְשׁוֹ לֹא יִחַל דְּבָרוֹ כְּכֹל־הֵיטָא מִפִּיו
יַעֲשֶׂה:

A man who vows a vow to God, or swears a sworn-oath, to bind himself by a binding-obligation: **he is not to violate his word; exactly what goes out of his mouth, he is to do.**

There is a distinction between vows for men and for women in the subsequent verses, and we will be discussing that tomorrow during our Torah study. But here, now, I want to concentrate on the concept of the promising itself.

Is there anyone among us who has not broken a promise? It feels like a stronger act than simply not doing what you hoped to do. Several years ago, I took a trip to Curacao with my daughter. We stayed at a house in a gated community, and would greet the guard every time we came in and went out. On our final departure, we let him know it was our last day. How did you like Curacao, he asked? We loved it, I responded. Will you come back? Oh yes, I said almost automatically?. Promise? he asked? And I said yes, even knowing as I did it might not be true. Yet that so far unfulfilled promise stands out to me, nearly a decade later. I could have said “I hope so,” or “I’ll try” but the confirming of a promise feels like a weightier obligation. And it is a weighty ask.

This concept of fulfilling promises and the weight they bear is reflected in the verse I quoted. The verse cites three different ways of promising, without explaining the differences – that is left up to us, starting with the rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud, the earliest commentary on the Torah. The Torah gives us a foundation, a structure, and it is up to us to interpret and understand.

We get multiple terms for different kinds of promises, and an extensive discussion on how and when they can be honored or negated. But there is no real explanation of vows and oaths, and how they are different. This mystery captivated the rabbis of the Talmud so much that there are two tractates devoted to the topic, one to vows and one to oaths.

[McClintock and Strong Biblical Cyclopedia](#) says “The Bible speaks of vows of devotion in general (נָדָר, neder, properly so called) and vows of abstinence (אַסֵּר, esr, or אִסָּר, issar, Nu 30:3 sq.). Vows of devotion may include a kind of bartering – the first time we hear the word NEDER is from Jacob, In Genesis 28, where he vows a vow to give 10 percent of his property to God, as long as God protects him and is with him. Later, Hannah vows a vow (and this is the language used) that, should God enable her to bear a son, she’d devote him to Temple service, and a year later she gives birth to Samuel.

[My Jewish Learning.com](http://MyJewishLearning.com) describes the difference between oaths and vows: Vows refer to an object — a person prohibits something to themselves (wine or sex, for example). The vow refers to the thing. An oath refers to the person — a person swears an oath to perform an action or swears that something is true. The oath pertains to the person.

The word for Vow is NEDER – which might sound vaguely familiar, connected to one of our most important Jewish holidays. NEDER is what we sing about on Yom Kippur Eve, Kol Nidrei, all vows, and their nullification as we move from one year into the next.

Yom Kippur may seem far away, but this passage is a reminder about our upcoming time of introspection.

The focus on vows – and the stress that, once made, using the formal language of vowing, of promising, puts an emphasis on the importance of words: **he is not to violate his word; exactly what goes out of his mouth, he is to do.**

And yet, if we say we'll do something, we'll try to do something, it does not carry the same weight as the formal – do you promise? Do you give your word? Your word is an obligation. After the Torah, the rabbis actually frown on the idea of vows – [Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig](#) notes that the Shulchan Aruch (Code of Jewish Law) explicitly warns people not to regularly make vows, and states that someone who does – even if they fulfill the vow – is called wicked and a sinner. Many observant Jews have the practice of saying “b’li neder” (“without a vow”) whenever they say they will do something, in order to make an explicit articulation that they are not making a vow.

Yet the passage says **exactly what goes out of his mouth, he is to do**, beyond a vow, oath, binding obligation, and this underscores the emphasis of the importance of words.

A reflection on states of promises:

A vow, avowing, how

What where when meaning

I mean who does

This promising oathing swearing

Said with so

Much FERVOR it might take you further

From or toward the truth.

May we do our best to follow through – I mean, going to Curacao again would not be so bad. And there are two synagogues.

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