

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

This week's parsha opens with an account of the laws of vows and oaths. What is it doing here near the end of the book of Numbers, as the Israelites approach the destination of their journey to the promised land?

Vows and oaths are obligations created by words. They are commitments to do something or refrain from doing something. A vow, *neder*, affects the status of an object. I may vow not to eat something. That something is now, for me, forbidden food. An oath, *shevuah*, affects the person not the object. What is now forbidden is not the food but the act of eating it. Both acts bind: that is the primary meaning of the word *issar*.

Such is the sanctity of such undertakings that there are demanding rules that have to be met if they are to be annulled. You cannot do it yourself: the parsha sets out some of the ground rules, the rest of which were supplied by the oral tradition. So seriously does Judaism treat verbal undertakings that one act of annulment, *Kol Nidrei*, takes place at the start of the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur.

The superficial reason for the law of vows appearing here is that the previous section of the Torah dealt with communal sacrifices. Individuals also brought sacrifices, sometimes because they were bound to do so but at other times because they voluntarily chose to do so. Hence the laws of voluntary undertakings.

But there is a deeper reason. The Israelites were nearing the land. They were about to construct a society unlike any other. It was to be a free society based on a covenant between the people and G-d. The rule of law was to be secured not by the use of force but by people honouring their moral commitments, their voluntary undertaking to G-d that what He commanded, they would do.

A covenantal society is one in which words are holy, sacrosanct. This is the principle at the heart of Judaism as a code of collective freedom, a constitution of liberty.

This needs explanation. Any society needs laws. Without that, it descends into anarchy. There are

three reasons why people obey laws. The first is that they will be punished if they don't. This is a society based on power. The second is that it is to their advantage to do so. This is a society based on self-interest.

Both have shortcomings. Power corrupts. So, at times, does the pursuit of self-interest. When power is corrupted, there is a loss of freedom. When self-interest prevails, there is a loss of social cohesion. When people care about themselves but not others, the successful thrive while others suffer. Justice and compassion give way to greed and exploitation.

The Torah sets forth a third way, in which people obey the law because they have voluntarily undertaken to do so. This is a society based not on power or the pursuit of self-interest but on freely embraced moral obligation. The Torah is the story of how the Israelites came to this unique and radical idea: the politics of covenant.

Ironically it was one of the great critics of Judaism, Friedrich Nietzsche, who had the insight to see that the capacity to bind ourselves by words is the basis of both morality and human freedom. This is what he says in his book, *On the Genealogy of Morality*: "To breed an animal with the prerogative to promise-is that not precisely the paradoxical task which nature has set herself with regard to humankind? is it not the real problem of humankind?"

Homo sapiens is distinguished from other animals by its use of language. That is well known. What Nietzsche saw, however, is that we use language in many different ways. We use it to describe, communicate, categorise and explain. Language in this sense is a kind of picture of reality, a translation of what is into a set of signs, symbols and images.

But we can also use language in a quite different way-not to describe what is, but to commit ourselves to some form of behaviour in the future.

So for instance when a groom says to his bride under the chuppah, "Behold you are betrothed to me..." he is not describing a marriage. He is getting married. He is undertaking a set of obligations to the woman he has chosen as his wife. Philosophers nowadays call this a performative utterance.

Nietzsche saw how fundamental this is to the human condition: "In order to have that degree of control over the future, man must first learn to distinguish between what happens by accident and what by design... and before he can do this, man

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himself will really have to become reliable, regular, necessary, even in his own self-image, so that he, as someone making a promise is, is answerable for his own future!"

When we bind ourselves by words we are using language not to describe but to create—to create an orderly future out of the chaos of human instincts and desires. What makes humans unique is not just the use of language. Other animals use forms of language. Dolphins do. So do primates. Even bees do complex dances that convey information to other bees.

What is unique to humans is that we use language to bind our own future behaviour so that we can form with other human beings bonds of mutuality and trust. One such bond is the promise. Another is marriage. A third—unique to Judaism—is society understood as a covenant, a set of mutually binding promises between the Jewish people and G-d.

It is this use of language, not to describe something already in existence but to create something that didn't exist before, that links us to G-d. G-d used words to bring the natural universe into being: "And G-d said... and there was." We use words to bring a social universe into being. What the Torah is telling us is that words create because words are holy: that is to say, they bind. When words bind, they generate trust. Trust is to society what predictability is to nature: the basis of order as opposed to chaos.

Social institutions in a free society depend on trust, and trust means that we keep our word. We do what we say we are going to do. If we make a vow, an oath, a promise, a verbal undertaking, then we hold ourselves bound by it. This means that we will actually fulfil our commitment unless we can establish that, due to circumstances unforeseeable at the time, we are simply unable to do so.

If trust breaks down, social relationships break down, and then society depends on law enforcement agencies or some other use of force. When force is widely used, society is no longer free. The only way free human beings can form collaborative and cooperative relationships without recourse to force is by the use of verbal undertakings honoured by those who make them.

Freedom needs trust; trust needs people to keep their word; and keeping your word means treating words as holy, vows and oaths as sacrosanct. Only

under very special and precisely formulated circumstances can you be released from your undertakings. That is why, as the Israelites approached the holy land where they were to create a free society, they had to be reminded of the sacred character of vows and oaths.

The temptation to break your word when it is to your advantage to do so can sometimes be overwhelming. That is why belief in G-d—a G-d who oversees all we think, say and do, and who holds us accountable to our commitments—is so fundamental. Although it sounds strange to us now, the father of toleration and liberalism, John Locke (England, 17th century) held that citizenship should not be extended to atheists because, not believing in G-d, they could not be trusted to honour their word.

So the appearance of laws about vows and oaths at the end of the book of Bemidbar, as the Israelites are approaching the holy land, is no accident, and the moral is still relevant today. A free society depends on trust. Trust depends on keeping your word. That is how humans imitate G-d by using language to create.

Words create moral obligations, and moral obligations, undertaken responsibly and honoured faithfully, create the possibility of a free society.

So—always do what you say you are going to do. If we fail to keep our word, eventually we will lose our freedom. © 2011 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org

RABBI DR. ABRAHAM J. TWERSKI

TorahWeb

In parsha Matos, the Torah tells us that prior to entering Canaan, the tribes of Gad and Reuven came to Moshe with a request to give them their share of the land east of the Jordan River in the lands Bnai Yisroel had conquered, and that they were willing to forego their portion in Canaan. Moshe became furious with them, citing the refusal of the earlier generation to conquer Canaan, which resulted in their wandering in the desert for forty years.

Moshe became furious with them. "Ha'acheichem yavo'uh lamilchama v'atem teishvu poh—Your brethren will go to war and you will stay here?" (Bamidbar 32:6). Your fathers reject the land Hashem promised us, and, "V'hinei kamtem tachas avoseichem tarbus anashim chatoim lispos od al charon af Hashem el Yisroel—Now you have arisen in the place of your fathers, a society of sinful people, to add more to the burning wrath of Hashem against Israel" (Bamidbar 32:14).

The tribes of Gad and Reuven explained that they would never think of shirking their responsibility in the conquest of Canaan. To the contrary, they were willing to go head as a vanguard, and after Canaan was successfully conquered, they would then return to settle in Eiver haYarden. Moshe agreed to this.

But why was Moshe so quick in condemning them, telling them that they are as bad as their fathers? Why didn't he give them a chance to explain themselves?

When Moshe related the incident of the spies that had occurred forty years earlier, he expressed his guilt in the episode, saying that when they requested scouting the land, "The idea was good in my eyes." But why should he have felt guilty? The answer is in Rashi's comment on Moshe's statement, "All of you approached me," to which Moshe said, "You came as an undisciplined mob, the young pushing aside the old, and elders pushing aside the leaders." Moshe's confession of guilt was, "I should have known that with the gross disrespect you exhibited, the venture you suggested would not come to any good result."

During the forty years in the desert, Moshe taught Bnai Yisroel Torah, teaching them proper middos, and he had hoped that they had refined their character traits. But look carefully at the words in the Torah, "Vayavo'uh bnai Gad u'bnai Reuvein-The tribe of Gad and the tribe of Reuvein came to Moshe" (Bamidbar 32:2). Reuvein was the oldest of Yaakov's sons, and Gad was much younger. When they came to Moshe, the tribe of Gad had pushed the tribe of Reuvein aside! Moshe was horrified by this. "After forty years of my teaching you middos, you obviously have learned nothing! The younger are still pushing themselves ahead of the older. You haven't changed a bit! You are following in the chutzpadik footsteps of your fathers!" No wonder that Moshe was enraged. Because they manifested such poor middos, Moshe assumed that they would shirk their responsibility to the nation.

Proper middos are the foundation of Torah. Rebbe Chiam Vital, the prime disciple of the Ari z"l said that a person must be even more cautious and stringent in practicing fine middos than in the observance of both the positive and restrictive mitzvos (Shaar Hakedushah 2:2).

The mussar teachers bewailed the behavior of students who pushed aside others in order to sit next to the speaker. It is hypocritical and a violation of mussar to be inconsiderate of others in the effort to hear a lecture on mussar!

The episode of the tribes of Gad and Reuvein is an important lesson in derech eretz. © 2011 Dr. A.J. Twerski and The TorahWeb Foundation

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**O**ur Bible develops from the story of a family in the Book of Genesis - Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob his four wives replete with jealousies, intrigues and sibling rivalries - to the emergence of a nation in the Book of Exodus. And the bridge between family and nation seems to be the

twelve tribal divisions enunciated by Jacob, especially in his final blessings before his death.

However, the tribes do not disappear with the development of the nation, for example in the case of the twelve scouts; princes of each tribe are specifically chosen. This week's Torah portion begins with Moses' presenting the commandments regarding the laws of promises and oaths to the "heads of the tribes" (Numbers 30:2). Indeed, the very division of the land of Israel is established along tribal lines. The Biblical book of Judges is filled with tribal rivalries and murderous tribal conflicts, and even after King David unites the nation under one monarch with a single capital city of Jerusalem, the enmity of Judah and Ephraim persists until the destruction of the Holy Temple. Maimonides goes so far as to legislate separate courts of law for each individual tribe. To this very day, kohen-priest descendants of Aaron from the tribe of Levi rise to bless the congregation (daily in Israel, on the festivals in the Diaspora), and all the descendants of the tribe of Levi are called to the Torah immediately following the first-to-be called kohen. Why retain a tribal system which seems to have only contributed to the internecine strife which prevented the united period of Kings David and Solomon from becoming the norm of Israel's government?!

I believe that a careful reading of this week's Torah portion - paying particular attention to two different Hebrew words for "tribe" - will provide the answer to our question; it will also present us with the proper fashion in which to forge a nation dedicated to the ideal of "perfecting the world in the kingship of Divine."

The Hebrew word generally used for "tribe" is "shevet"; when Jacob concludes his blessings-descriptions of his twelve sons, highlighting the differences and even the tensions between them, the Biblical text states "all of these are the tribes (shivtei) of Israel, twelve [in number]..." (Genesis 49:28). Similarly, this week's Torah reading speaks of half the tribe (shevet) of Menasheh" (Numbers 32:33).

However, there is another Hebrew word used for tribe, *matteh*, and it is the noun in the very opening verse of our Torah portion: "And Moses spoke to the heads of tribes... [mattot, translated by Targum as *shivtaya*]" (Numbers 30:2). The very Book of Numbers, which opens with a census count of each of the tribes, provides for a representative of each tribe, "one man per tribe" - *lammateh*, (Numbers 1:4). Indeed, in the Book of Numbers, the Hebrew word *matteh* (and not *shevet*) is used for tribe no less than 91 times! What is the reason for these two different Hebrew nouns for the very same concept of tribe? And what is the precise distinction between *shevet* and *matteh*?

According to most of our classical commentaries, *shevet* is to be defined as a ruling rod whereas *matteh* is a supporting staff. When Jacob blesses Judah, he declares, "The rod (*shevet*) shall not

depart from Judah..." The Talmudic Sages interpret, "the rod refers to the exilarchs of Babylon, who strong-handedly (tyrannically) rule the nation with a rod; they derive their authority from the Gentile governments" (Genesis 49:10, Rashi ad loc). The Hebrew word *matteh*, on the other hand, is a supporting staff, as in the modern Hebrew position of *Ramatkal*, or Chief of Staff, with 'staff' referring to a support group of knowledgeable and experienced individuals.

In our Book of Numbers, when Korah challenged Aaron's leadership as High Priest from the tribe of Levi, each tribe was asked by G-d to take a staff and write upon the staff the name of the prince of each tribe; on the staff of the tribe of Levi was to be written the name of Aaron. "...And behold, the staff of Aaron of the tribe of Levi flowered, a flower arose, a bud blossomed and almond fruit matured" (Numbers 17:24). The staff (*matteh*) of the tribe (*matteh*) of Levi supported Aaron's appointment as High Priest, *Kohen Gadol*. The best Hebrew synonym of *matteh* is *mishenet*, a word used for the support staff of an elderly person with difficulty walking, and is also a Talmudic idiom for the son of a widow who serves as her aid and benefactor. This is likewise how many commentaries understand King David's psalm (23): "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He leads me through green pastures... Your rod (*shivtekh*) and your staff (*mishantekha*), they comfort me." The Psalmist is saying that sometimes he feels G-d's punishing rod, and sometimes he feels G-d's supporting staff; in both cases they give him comfort, because he knows that G-d means for his well-being! (In this context, *mishenet* is a synonym for *matteh*).

In effect, the Torah is teaching us that a nation comprised of different and distinctive tribes has both negative and positive possibilities. On the one hand, a particular tribe can be desirous of unilateral control (*shevet*), initiating a rivalry and even war. The United States of America - the individual states being analogous to the various tribes - underwent just such a fierce and threatening Civil War.

But too centralized a governmental power can turn unity into uniformity and produce all of the tyranny of a totalitarian Tower of Babel. Different tribes - each with its own cultural flavor, temperament and specific point of view - can provide a unity with diversity, an orchestra comprised of many individual instruments, as long as there is one conductor who recognizes, respects and knows how to "orchestrate" the different sounds into one magnificent symphony. Obviously, the tribes must subscribe to a united goal and agree upon basic values, ideals and rules of conduct. But differences which are respected and which respect others can provide the breadth, depth and growth possibility which is the best defense against stagnation and tyranny. Such a system of inclusive leadership will also leave room for many more individuals to express

themselves and for special interest groups to contribute and flourish.

Hence the world must have different nations, nations must have different cities (tribes, *edot*), cities must have different communities, communities must have different committees, and committees must have different families. It must be, in my grand-mother's words, a "velt mit veltelakh, a world with little worlds, - as long as each little world, as well as the greater world, remains committed to the integrity and inviolability of every individual and does not countenance fanatic bigotry in any form. As the prophet Micah teaches, as long as "humanity does not learn war anymore," "every individual can call upon his god and we will call upon the Lord our G-d forever" (Micah 4). ©2011 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

After the soldiers returned from obliterating Midyan, Moshe was angry with the officers in charge for not executing the women too, as "they were the ones [involved] with the Children of Israel as a result of Bilam's advice, to cause a rebellion against G-d regarding [the worship of] P'or, [resulting in] a plague" (Bamidbar 31:16). The verse is quite clear that the women who enticed the Children of Israel were Midyanites. From the original commandment to take revenge upon Midyan (25:16-18), it is also clear that it was Midyan that instigated the plan to turn the Children of Israel away from G-d through promiscuous behavior. Yet, when the incident is described, the Torah tells us that "the daughters of Moav" (25:1) enticed the nation, with the only "daughter of Midyan" referenced being Kuzbi, who was involved with the head of the Tribe of Shimon. Moav and Midyan were separate and distinct nations (and countries), the former descending from Lot (Beraishis 19:36-37) and the latter from Keturah, whom Avraham married after Sara died (Beraishis 25:1-2). We were given very different laws for each; we cannot accept male converts from Moav (Devarim 23:4), nor can we wage war with them (Devarim 1:9), whereas we were explicitly commanded to go to war with Midyan (Bamidbar 25:17 and 31:3). Since they are totally separate nations, why does the Torah initially indicate that the illicit behavior occurred with the daughters of Moav, and then tell us that it was with the daughters of Midyan?

B'er BaSadeh, a commentary on Rashi, offers a very straightforward solution. The Children of Israel sinned with both the daughters of Moav and the daughters of Midyan. They started sinning with the daughters of Moav, which is why the Torah says "they began to have illicit relations with the daughters of Moav" (25:1, key word being "began"), with the daughters of Midyan joining them shortly afterwards. Abarbanel (*ibid*) asks how the verse can say they were

the daughters of Moav. After all, the Torah lists the reasons why we don't accept converts from Amon or Moav (Devarim 23:5), and enticing the Children of Israel isn't included in the list. Secondly, it is only the males that are not accepted as converts; females (such as Rus) are accepted. If the women of Moav were so intimately involved in causing the sins, they shouldn't be accepted as converts either, even more so than the males. The fact that Moavite women can convert indicates that they were not involved in this episode. (Abarbanel then quotes the verses referenced above that indicate it was the Midyanite women who were involved, not women from Moav.)

Nevertheless, if enticing the Children of Israel was Bilam's advice, following it could be considered an extension of "hiring Bilam to curse you," which is one of the reasons given for distancing ourselves from Moav. Several commentators discuss why Moavite women are allowed to convert despite their involvement in this sin, explaining that they were forced to (by the men and/or by the government). Because the Torah explicitly blames Midyan for following Bilam's advice and trying to get Israel to sin, the commentators (see Ramban and Abarbanel) say that this advice was given to Midyan when Bilam was passing through their land on his way home, and it was Midyan (not Moav) that put this plan into action, convincing Moav (and the Moavite women) to entice the Children of Israel. Some (see Chizkuni on Bamidbar 31:16) suggest that Bilam never gave them this advice explicitly; rather, based on his saying that Israel was blessed because G-d "sees no sin" in them (Bamidbar 23:21), Midyan figured this plan out on their own. If Midyan was the main instigator of the plan to cause Israel to sin, we can understand why even if the daughters of Moav were involved first, the blame is placed primarily on Midyan.

Abarbanel (25:1) suggests that Moavite women were never involved, only Midyanite women who disguised themselves by dressing like Moavite women. In Parashas Matos, he explains why they pretended they were from Moav: P'or was a local deity, and in order to persuade the Israelites to worship it, they had to pretend it was the deity they themselves worshipped. Additionally (Abarbanel continues), after Bilam told Balak that Israel did not present any immediate danger to Moav (24:17), Moav made peace with them. Midyan, on the other hand, was still Israel's enemy. Had the Israelites known they were Midyanite women, they would have suspected there were ulterior motives and avoided them. As "Moavites," though, they could approach the Israelites under the pretext of selling them goods, and, after establishing a business relationship, make it a personal one.

Since thousands of Israelites fell for the ruse, including worshipping P'or, they must have believed they really were Moavites. However, Moshe expected the officers in the army to know that it was really Midyanite women who were involved (and therefore

executed them). If the Midyanite women were (successfully) disguised as Moavites, how could the officers have known to kill Midyanite women?

Abarbanel gives a second possibility, suggesting that the daughters of Moav did have illicit relations with the Children of Israel, although not as part of a plan to get G-d angry with them. Midyan, on the other hand, sent their daughters specifically to create a schism between G-d and Israel, which is why it is only described as "Midyan's plan," not Moav's, and why the daughters of Midyan were treated much more harshly than the daughters of Moav. This approach works very well both textually and contextually. Moav's self-esteem was at an all-time low. Much of their land was conquered by Sichon (Bamidbar 21:26), and then conquered from Sichon by Israel (21:24-25). They appointed a new king, someone who had been a leader of their enemy, in an attempt to drive Israel from their land (see Rashi on 22:4). This king hired the sorcerer who had cursed Moav before their land was taken (see Rashi on 22:6) to curse Israel, but to no avail. Moav feared Israel, and was in awe of them, and their daughters wanted to become closer with this special nation. Not that they wanted to cause them to sin in order to be able to get the land back, but wanted the self-validation that would come if someone from the mighty nation of Israel took interest in them. They were able to successfully entice some, something that the leaders of Midyan took notice of. Midyan had thought that Israelites would never associate with the daughters of foreign nations, but now that they saw otherwise, devised a plan. Bilam had told them that as long as Israel remained faithful to G-d, they were invincible, so sent their daughters to seduce them and turn them away from G-d. The plan was hatched, and executed, by Midyan, so they were the ones blamed for it.

One of the lessons Chazal (Tanchuma 3/4, Bamidbar Rabbah 21:4) teach us based on this episode is how much worse trying to cause someone to sin is than trying to kill him; killing him only takes away his life in this world, while causing him to sin also takes away his life in the next world. Mitzrayim and Edom came after us with the sword, yet can join us after three generations (Devarim 23:9), while Amon and Moav, who tried to get us to sin, can never join us. According to Chazal, it wasn't just Midyan whose intent was to get us to sin, but Moav as well. If both were involved at the same level, with the same intent, why would the Torah place the blame primarily on Midyan? Another question this Midrash raises (see Eitz Yosef on the Tanchuma), is how Chazal learned this from the verses that place the blame on Midyan. I would therefore suggest a slightly different scenario.

After Bilam's failed curse, he either advised Moav and Midyan, or informed them through the wording of his blessing, that that they can only defeat Israel if they are sinning. Moav therefore tries to convince its daughters (who may not have needed that

much convincing because of the self-esteem issue) to try seducing Israelites. They have some success, but not enough to make a difference (that they can see); even if some Israelites can be enticed into an illicit relationship, they cannot be convinced to worship the local deity. Or, perhaps, not enough Moavite women are interested enough in accomplishing the mission to do so successfully. Midyan sees that seduction is possible, and takes the plan one step further. Rather than trying to convince them to worship the deity that they (the Midyanites) believe in, during the process of seducing them they suggest doing something to ridicule the local deity. Midyan may know that relieving yourself on (or in the direction of) P'or is how this deity is worshipped, but Israel doesn't (yet). The Midyanite women, who are much more eager to get Israel to sin and can use their shared lack of respect for P'or to get Israel to worship it while thinking they are ridiculing it, are much more successful at not only seducing the Israelites, but at getting them to worship P'or.

Moav started the process (as suggested by B'er BaSadeh and Abrabanel's second approach), and did so with the intent of causing Israel to sin, and can therefore be used to learn the lesson that trying to cause sin is worse than trying to kill. Moav and Midyan had the same goal, and a similar plan, so the verses describing Midyan's attempt can be used to enlighten us about Moav (i.e. that they tried to get Israel to sin, not that their daughters just wanted the twisted self-validation that comes with being able to get the attention of the mighty Israelites). In the end, though, it was Midyan that was able to (partially) accomplish what both Moav and Midyan wanted, so the Torah places the blame on them. © 2011 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

In this week's portion, Moshe (Moses) gives to the tribe of Reuven, the tribe of Gad and half of the tribe of Menasseh the entire Kingdom of Og, ruler of Bashan (Numbers 32:33). Interestingly, just before Moshe and the Israelites conquered the land of Bashan, the Torah records that G-d tells Moshe "fear him [Og] not" (Numbers 21:34).

Why should Moshe have been fearful of Og? Rashi writes that "Moshe was afraid of doing battle lest he [Og] be protected by the merit of (his services to) Avraham (Abraham), as it is written 'and there came one that had escaped and told Avraham (of the capture of Lot-Avraham's nephew) (Genesis 14:13). The one that came was none other than Og." Rashi's comment is best understood with the backdrop of the Maimonidean understanding of reward and punishment.

Maimonides, echoing the Talmud, notes that three books are open on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Those who are clearly meritorious are immediately inscribed for a good year on Rosh

Hashanah. And those clearly sinful, are inscribed immediately for a bad year on Rosh Hashanah. The benonim-those in the middle, have their sentence suspended until Yom Kippur, when their destiny is sealed. (Rambam, Hil. Teshuvah 3:3)

For Maimonides, it appears that reward and punishment is a simple matter of weighing one's good deeds against one's bad deeds. A person's fate depends upon what he or she has done more-good or bad.

But, Maimonides adds, that one bad deed because of its particular circumstances, could outweigh all the good one has done. The reverse is also true. One good deed could outweigh all of the evil ones. (Rambam, Hil. Teshuvah 3:2)

In other words, for Maimonides, only G-d can be the accountant for our deeds. The evaluation is not a mere weighing of numbers, it is a qualitative one-and only G-d can know which deed will make the whole difference.

This may be the intent of Rashi. True, King Og was the wicked of the wicked. But Moshe was concerned that he may have performed one good deed, like alerting Avraham that his nephew was taken hostage-and that good deed could carry him forever.

It sometimes occurs when traveling, that former students approach me and say-"you know, there is something you said, something you did in class that made a great difference in my life." My heart then drops as I offer a little prayer that the one word or action that is remembered, made a positive difference and not a negative one.

Rashi's comments teaches that we all should take heed to every action, every deed-as it could make the whole difference and change an entire world. © 2011 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and President of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School - the Modern and Open Orthodox Rabbinical School. He is Senior Rabbi at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, a Modern and Open Orthodox congregation of 850 families. He is also National President of AMCHA - the Coalition for Jewish Concerns.

RABBI NAFTALI REICH

Legacy

Oaths and vows are very sacred things, so sacred that it is unthinkable that someone would violate them. In fact, no matter how skeptical and distrustful we may generally be, if we hear someone, anyone, make a solemn vow by all that is holy, we tend to believe it.

But what if the one making the vow could rescind it at will? Would a vow still have the same credibility? Obviously not. The force of a vow derives from its permanence and inviolability. And yet, the Torah laws regarding vows, about which we read in this week's Torah portion, feature a mechanism by which one can be released from a vow. Surely then, this

mechanism reveals a very fundamental flaw in the vow. What is the mechanism? And what is the flaw?

They are as follows. If the one making the vow encounters an unexpected situation in which the vow creates complications, it may be possible to obtain a release. For instance, a person vows not to eat a certain type of food and afterwards he discovers that just this food will be served at his son's wedding. In retrospect, had he known he would not be able to eat at his own son's wedding he would never have made that vow in the first place. In this case, he must present his argument to a rabbinical court, and if it meets the specific criteria, the court can release him from his vow.

What is the basis for this release mechanism? The Talmud derives it from the verse, "Everything a person expresses in an oath." It would have been sufficient to say, "Everything expressed in an oath." Why the inclusion of the words "a person"? This seems to indicate that only someone considered "a person" can make binding oaths and vows. Oaths and vows that do not take future developments into consideration are not valid. Why? Because they were made without the human ingredient.

Let us reflect for a moment. What are we accustomed to thinking of as the human ingredient? In what way does our society consider human beings superior to animals? It is in our creativity, our intelligence, our ability to think and reason. Homo sapiens. Thinking man. But the Torah uses an altogether different criterion. "A person," according to the Torah, is someone who has foresight, who considers not only the instant gratification of the here and now like an animal but also the future ramifications of all his actions.

Why is this the ultimate human ingredient? Because what truly sets a human being apart from an animal is his soul, the indestructible spark of the divine that will continue to exist after the body perishes, that draws its sustenance from the spiritual world rather than the physical. A person with foresight, therefore, realizes he cannot allow himself to be distracted by the immediate gratification of his physical impulses. He knows that he must use the short time allotted to him in this world to accumulate merit which will stand him in eternal good stead in the next world. This is the mark of a true human being.

A father was sitting on a park bench watching his young sons at play. Nearby sat an old man.

The boys were exceedingly rough in their play, pushing and grabbing things from each other, and the father looked on with concern.

"Are you worried about them?" asked the old man.

"A little," replied the father. "But I have foresight. I came prepared with paraphernalia from my medicine cabinet in case they get hurt."

The old man laughed. "That's foresight? Thinking of bringing paraphernalia when you're already

standing at the door? If you really had foresight you would have started years ago by bringing them up to be more courteous and considerate of each other."

In our own lives, we are all aware of the importance of preparing for the future. But for which future are we preparing, the temporary future we will encounter in a few years or the eternal future of our indestructible souls? It is all good and well to make financial investments that will secure our physical well-being when we grow old, but it even more important to make spiritual investments that will secure the well-being of our souls for all eternity. © 2011 Rabbi N. Reich & torah.org

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

This week's parsha concentrates upon the great commitment of the spoken word. In English Common Law and in most legal systems in the world, agreements that are not committed to writing and then signed by the parties are of little enforceable value.

Though the parsha concentrates on the legalism of vows and oaths in Jewish law and life, the general message that it conveys is a clear one - the spoken word binds a person to what is said and declared. This is part of the general pattern of the Torah to rigidly enforce the value of truth and to warn humans of the dangers of duplicity and falsehood in personal relationships. The ultimate punishment of a con man is that he eventually cons himself.

Today's financial markets are strewn with the wreckage of such falsehoods and cons. Ironically, most of them originate without criminal intent involved. But once involved with falsehoods, the trap closes on individuals and it becomes well nigh impossible to extract one's self from the clutches of this self-made web of falsehood.

My word is my bond was the slogan of honest people in all commercial enterprises. There are many fields of economic endeavor where this motto yet has legal effect and the spoken word is itself a binding commitment to buy or sell or to establish a price for an item.

Jewish rabbinic responsa over the ages is replete with instances of enforceable oral commitments. It is not for naught that the rabbis warned us that wise men should be careful as to what they say. Saying is signing - it is committing and it is binding.

There are two tractates of the Mishna and Talmud - both of considerable size and complexity - that deal with this issue of the legal and spiritual ramifications of the spoken word. Nedarim - the tractate that deals with vows (there is no perfect translation of this Hebrew term in English) - appears in seder Nashim - the order of the Mishna and the Talmud that deals with marriage, divorce and domestic relations.

This placement comes to emphasize to us the necessary commitment and honesty that is the basis of the relationship of marriage and family. The vows and commitments that a husband and wife make to each other are deemed sacrosanct in Jewish life and law. Only by realizing the seriousness of vows can one train one's self in honest speech and true emotional commitment in family life.

The tractate of Shavuot - dealing with oaths that are taken (again there is no exact nuanced translation of this Hebrew word in English) - is found in the order of Nezikin (torts, courts and commercial issues) in the Mishna and Talmud. Honesty and probity in the world of finance and commerce is dependent upon keeping one's word. Breaking one's word damages everyone involved.

Many a person has been ruined by the inability to withstand the temptation of breaking one's word for a seemingly short-term financial gain. Since this temptation is omnipresent and very persuasive, the Torah goes to great lengths to emphasize the importance of keeping one's word under all circumstances. It reconfirms to us the maxim that "Life and death themselves are dependent upon the spoken word." © 2011 Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Mordechai Greenberg,
Rosh Yeshiva, Kerem B'Yavne

“In each and every generation the worship of the Golden Calf leads to the shattering of the Two Tablets." Rav A.Y. Kook wrote this in reference to the month of Tammuz. But this is a remarkable statement - while it is true that the first Tablets were shattered on the seventeenth of Tammuz, how is this related to "each and every generation"?

Moshe had sharp criticism of the tribes of Gad and Reuven in response to their request to take possession of the land across the Jordan River before the other tribes received their own heritage. The sages taught us that this is the reason that these two tribes were the first ones to be sent into exile. "What caused this? It was because they separated themselves from their brethren due to their possessions." [Bamidbar Rabba 22:7].

"Because of his lust he wants to be alone" [Mishlei 18:1], the sages see this as a reference to Lot. He was controlled by his desires, and one who is filled with lust is selfish and cannot join together with others. And that is why Avraham said to him, "Separate yourself from me" [Bereishit 13:9]. And, "They separated, each one from his brother" [13:11]. His descendent Ruth, the woman of kindness, was able to

make amends for the sin, "And Ruth clung to her" [Ruth 1:14]. This explains what happened to the people of Gad and Reuven - because they loved their possessions they separated themselves from their brethren.

Moshe did not criticize the people of Gad and Reuven because they were concerned about their wealth. Judaism has nothing against riches as such. Judaism objects when wealth becomes an objective in itself and is no longer understood to be a means to accomplish greater goals. That is what Moshe said to the two tribes: "Keep the main element as the most important factor and treat the secondary elements as minor."

This fault of exaggerated love for wealth is repeated in every generation. Everybody is aware that the Second Temple was destroyed because of unfounded hatred, but one may ask what the underlying cause of the hatred was. The answer of the sages is, "It is because they loved their wealth and hated each other." The love for wealth stems from a selfish attitude, and this is the source of hatred. As the Natziv wrote, "The problem in the Second Temple was the love of wealth, and this still exists among us." [Harchev Davar, Torah portion of Devarim].

Rav Kook wrote to his father-in-law, the Aderet, that he was concerned about what is written in the Torah portion of Haazinu, "You have become fat, you have become thick, you have become overly fat" [Devarim 32:15]. These are the three generations before the days of the Mashiach, he said, as is written, "The land was filled with gold and silver... The land was filled with horses... And the land was filled with idols" [Yeshayahu 2:7,8].

The prophet describes three stages of moral decay. First the land is filled with gold and silver. In the second stage, the land is filled with horses, chariots, cars, and all sorts of luxuries. And in the third stage, the gold and silver are transformed into a god which is worshipped.

The Talmud states (Berachot 32b) that ever since the Temple was destroyed there has been a barrier of iron separating Bnei Yisrael from their Father in Heaven, as is written, "And you: take for yourself a frying pan made of iron and put it as an iron wall between you and the city" [Yechezkel 4:3]. Rav Kook explains in his book Ein Ayah that the frying pan is a symbol of luxury, since it is a utensil where meat is transformed into a choice food instead of simply cooking or broiling it.

The Anshei Knesset Hagedola, the wise men of the Second Temple era, were able to eliminate the lust for idol worship but not the lust for illicit sex, which is the source for hedonism and the desire for wealth. Thus, even if there is no idol worship in our generation the worship of the "Golden" Calf remains, and the result is the shattering of the Tablets - leading to a phenomenon of spiritual crisis and to abandoning all worthy ideals.