

MATOT 1 - BENEFITS AND PERILS OF VOWS

We learn from the opening verses in our Parasha the laws of a prohibitive Neder or Shevuah that one declares upon an item or upon himself. A Neder or Vow prohibits an otherwise permissible item to himself while a Shevuah or Oath prohibits the person the use of an object. Concerning each of these the Torah warns that "He shall not desecrate his word; according to whatever comes from his mouth he shall do." 1 The Torah offers an additional warning in Sefer Devarim against contravening a Vow or an Oath "That which comes from your mouth you shall guard." 2 Furthermore the halakhic and moral consequences of failing to keep one's Vow or Oath appear in the oral law with serious repercussions. If so, why does the Torah even offer these options for one to deprive himself the benefits of a particular object? We will demonstrate that the Torah asserts that A Vow or Oath can accomplish something extremely spiritually beneficial.

Albeit reminding us that there also are serious spiritual ramifications of desecrating one's word. Lastly the Torah does offer a mechanism for one to be released from his Vow or Oath. He can come before a single Hakham or panel of three learned laymen who can have it annulled. Due to the seriousness of an unfulfilled Vow or Oath we often find Jewish communities staging numerous public annulment ceremonies prior to Rosh Hashana. We should also explore the implications of the Kal Nidre annulment ceremony and why it is placed immediately prior to the prayers of the Holy day of Yom Kippour.

SPIRITUAL BENEFIT OF VOWS AND OATHS

A simple reading of the appropriate sections of tractates Nedarim and Shevuot give the impression that people should be discouraged from making Vows and Oaths. The Talmud Yerushalmi teaches "Is what the Torah prohibits not enough for you, that you seek to interdict new things for yourself?" 3 Against this backdrop we do have sections of the Oral law that appear to encourage Vows or Oaths for certain individuals. The Midrash resolves this contradiction. Vows and Oaths should be used by those with certain spiritual qualities as related to their fear of Heaven. 4 R. HaAri explains that when one Makes a Vow or an Oath, he arouses a spiritual channel that can be used to subjugate or subdue ones temptation to transgress. 5 The Midrash asserts that all of the righteous used this method to subdue their evil urge. Whether it was Yosef being tempted by the wife of Potiphar or David tempted to kill Shaul or Boaz tempted when Ruth entered his lodging at night - the Midrash teaches that all used a method of declaring a prohibitive Oath to put a strangle hold on their evil inclination. 6 This is what R. Akiva was implying in his teaching found in Pirke Avot "Vows are a safety fence for abstinence" 7 The declared oath thus allows for an influx of spiritual light to descend affording one protection from Evil. This will last on condition that his Vow or Oath not remain unfulfilled.

CONSEQUENCES OF VIOLATING VOWS OR OATHS

If one Vows or Declares an Oath, he is granted an "up front" spiritual light. This however creates an obligation on the Vower. If his Vow remains unfulfilled a blemish is created in that the light from the source of the Vow becomes clogged. Simply understood - The seven lower spiritual channels become cut off from their mother channel (Binah) above them that feeds them. 8 Therefore the result of nonpayment can be devastating. The Talmud explains "R. Natan says for the sin of unfulfilled vows a man's wife dies...Ribbi says - For the sin of unfulfilled Vows a person's children die when they are young." 9 These stated punishments are the result of the spiritual blemish he caused above. The Midrash in Vayikra Rabbah and again in the Tanhuma Vayishlah reiterate what is written in the Talmud and note that in fact this punishment was meted out against Yaakov as a result of not fulfilling his vow he declared to Hashem. 10 On his way to Aram Naharayim he vows "וידר יעקב נדר לה' ". He thereby

aroused the lofty level of Binah which subdued an evil that existed from within himself. Since he did not fulfill this vow, he caused a spiritual blemish related to this channel - specifically where it shined into the spiritual reservoir below. His attempt to subdue evil was initially successful - but since he did not fulfill his Neder - it created a spiritual blemish commensurate with its initial influx. R. B. Rosenblum cites a Torah Temimah (Vayehi) 11 who writes that in the encounter where Yaakov asks Yoseph to swear that he buries him in Israel - he warns his son to take this pledge very seriously. In fact, he reminds Yoseph that on his return from Padan - מיתה עלי רחל - his wife had died. This he admits was a result of his unkept vow. The Torah Temimah points out that the insertion by Yaakov of the word עלי which is part of the standard formula of Vows hints to his taking responsibility for her death.

RELEASING OF VOWS AND OATHS

The Torah provides an alternative method of unclogging this spiritual channel of Binah as a result of an incomplete Vow. In this event - one has the option to ascend to the spiritual channel above Binah in order to release the blockage he created. He is instructed to go to a scholar - or to one who has acquired Hokhmah - the channel above Binah. Since the scholar resides above the Vow on his own individual merit - he has the unique ability to annul or clear the blockage created by the unfulfilled Vow of the Vower. 12 Now we can begin to appreciate the importance at the minimum to recite ceremoniously Hatarat Nedarim - annulment of Vows and the Kal Nidre. These days are opportune to draw down elevated spiritual blessings - but it must be preempted by the annulment process in order to unclog the channels by ascending to the highest levels of Hokhmah. 13

HOW TO ACT

One can attain holiness by making a Neder or Shavua and by even abstaining from that which is permitted to him. As the verse in Vayikra (19) writes קדושים תהיו You shall be Holy. This will arouse untouched spiritual channels subduing an evil within that would prevent one from attaining exalted levels. Many of the righteous opt to take this path - but as we learned it is not without possible peril. One must be careful to fulfill his word to avoid any of the noted negative consequences. Our Sages realized that an unfulfilled vow (or oath) clogs up the lofty level of Binah (Malkhut). This restricts one's ability to draw down the proper spiritual influx required - The Sages even count one with unfulfilled pledges as one who is judged early. We can then naturally understand why the Sages have instituted the annulment of vows prior to Rosh Hashana & the Kal Nidre prior to Yom Kippour. If we are going to attempt to rectify these lofty levels, we must begin by removing any vestige of blockage in the holy channels above prior to drawing down the holy lights of the days of awe.

Shabbat Shalom

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