

MATOS

HOLINESS OF SPEECH, BUILDING BRIDGES INTO HEAVEN

A

Rabbinic Revocation

The *parsha* discusses the topic of *nedarim* and *shevuos*. A person can take an oath to do or not to do a particular action. The Torah says there is an obligation to keep one's word and a prohibition against violating it. This *mitzva* applies to both men and women.

The *parsha* starts with an unusual opening. Normally, a *parsha* that discusses a new *mitzva* would begin with the phrase, "*Vayedabeir Hashem el Moshe leimor.*" Hashem would speak to Moshe, and then Moshe would teach the information to the Jewish People. This *parsha*, however, starts with the words, "*Vayedabeir Moshe el roshei hamatos*" (Bamidbar 30:2). In this case, Moshe did not speak directly to the people, but rather to the heads of the tribes. Rashi quotes Chazal, who explain that Moshe addressed the heads of the tribes and then afterwards did indeed address the Jewish People. This actually serves as the model for how Moshe communicated all the other *mitzvos* to Bnei Yisrael. Why specifically in the discussion of oaths and vows does the Torah mention in a special way that Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes?

Rashi says that this teaches us a special rule. The Torah expects

Jews to keep to their promises. Sometimes, though, a person may make a vow or promise during an emotional fit. If a person takes a vow or promise and afterwards regrets it, he is not stuck forever with the vow. When the person calms down and wants to escape the vow, he has a way out. He can go to a single expert, a *yachid mumcheh*, and have the vow rescinded. He can also go to a group of three people to revoke the vow. With expressed regret, a person can ask to be released from the vow. This explains why Moshe delivered a special instruction to the heads of the tribes, who were of course Torah scholars. They needed to know this rule that they are able to revoke the vows of individual people.

B

Adding *Mitzvos*

The Avnei Neizer questions this explanation. The cancellation and annulment of these vows is a special license given to great Torah sages. However, the original vow itself can be taken by any Jew, even an uneducated Jew. If he takes a vow, he is obligated by two *mitzvos* in the Torah not to desecrate his words by violating it. Why did the Torah specifically mention the heads of the tribes when it gives the ability and responsibility to every Jew to make a vow? The Torah is not discussing the revocation of vows when it tells us that Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes!

The Avnei Neizer gives an original answer. There is a serious issue in the two *mitzvos*, both to keep and not desecrate a vow. The Torah is a complete package with 613 commandments. The Torah is inviolate, a singular and unchangeable Torah, which Hashem gave to the Jewish People at Sinai. This Torah includes two *mitzvos*: not to add a *mitzva* to the Torah, and not to delete a *mitzva* from the Torah.

This is one of the fundamental differences we have with those who purport to add and/or subtract from the Torah in creating

their new religions. So, how does the Torah grant a license to every person to add his own personal obligations to the 613 *mitzvos* that Hashem already gave to him?

Through a *shevua*, an oath, a person can create many new obligations. For example, if a person wants to go on a diet, he can take an oath: “I will not eat ice cream for the next twelve months.” According to Torah law, he now has a double *mitzva* not to eat ice cream for twelve months. A person can take any kind of vow. It is possible for people to add so many new obligations. Isn’t this against the principle that we cannot add to the Torah?

C

Eternal *Mitzvos*

The Avnei Neizer answers that vows are different because regular Torah *mitzvos* are eternal. One certainly shouldn’t add to them. They will never cease. Jews will always have to keep all 613 *mitzvos*, and they will never change. This is a fundamental principle of Judaism, as the Rambam writes. There is no canceling of any *mitzva*.

Regarding *nedarim*, however, we find a fundamental difference. The novelty of vows is that even though the Torah gives a person license to create a new obligation or prohibition, he can always get out of it. He can go to a *chacham*, a sage of his day, and ask him to cancel the vow. He can give an excuse, “When I made the *neder*, I felt emotional. I didn’t realize how difficult this vow would be to keep.” Then he can be released from the vow.

These obligations that a person imposes upon himself with his speech actually can be canceled or annulled. Therefore, they are not like any other *mitzvos* of the Torah, which cannot be canceled. Shabbos is always Shabbos, and always will be Shabbos. Christianity and Reform and Conservative Judaism are mistaken. Any movement that wants to cancel even the smallest part of a

mitzva is mistaken. No *mitzvos* of the Torah can be canceled. But personal vows and oaths can be canceled by going to a *chacham*.

When did the Torah forbid adding to the Torah? When someone imposes an eternal change, a new eternally binding *mitzva*, presented as God's will. A vow, though, is clearly a man-made prohibition. Just as man created the obligation himself, man can revoke it. Since it is imposed by man and can be revoked by man, it does not violate the commandment not to add to the Divine Torah.

Here it emerges that the only reason we are allowed to make vows in the first place is because of this release procedure. This is why Moshe addressed the *roshei matos*, the Torah scholars, the heads of the tribes, and informed them of their special license to nullify the *nedarim* that the people would make. This was the necessary introduction to the entire concept of vows, because it is what enables people to make vows in the first place.

D

Personal Holiness and Man-Made *Mitzvos*

The Shem Mishmuel adds his own amazing approach. He asks a deep philosophical question. The Torah gives every person the ability to take an oath. He will then be obligated by the Torah to fulfill that promise. The Shem Mishmuel focuses his question on the source of a person's power to create prohibitions on himself.

Hashem can place prohibitions and obligations on us. He is our God, Creator of the world, our King and Father. He has given us this world, and He controls our use of it. But from where does puny man derive the power to impose obligations and prohibitions? Hashem gave us the ability to place *mitzvos* upon ourselves, and even upon other people. For example, I am able to make an oath that no one else is allowed to wear my watch. If someone violates this prohibition and wears the watch, he violates

a Torah-level prohibition. From where does a person derive this ability and power to impose Torah prohibitions and obligations?

The answer is that the human being is a holy creature. We are endowed by our Creator with holiness. He created us *b'tzelem Elokim*, in the image of God. Hashem is the holiest entity of which we can conceive. People are also holy. People are like *klei shareis*, the holy vessels of the Beis Hamikdash. The rule in the Beis Hamikdash is that *klei sharei* sanctify whatever comes into contact with them. For example, if you pour some *chullin* (non-holy) grape juice into a holy vessel, the grape juice becomes holy. The holy cup in the Beis Hamikdash can sanctify simple grape juice.

The Shem Mishmuel says that the human being is a vessel endowed by his Creator with holiness to serve Him. We are different than animals; we are spiritual and sanctified. In what part of the human body is our holiness most concentrated? What is our holiest human power that distinguishes us from animals? It is speech, which emanates from the mouth of the person. Speech actually emanates from within the body, uniting the emotions and thoughts. Speech expresses the entirety of the human persona: body, spirit, and soul. Since speech comes from within, it has special *kedusha*. Just like the *klei shareis*, the human being sanctifies that which is inside of him. This is the basic and fundamental idea of the power of speech. Speech itself is a holy item, a product of the holy human being. This is why a person must fulfill his promises and vows. Just as one may not profane the holy things of the Temple, a person must not desecrate the holy speech that his own holy being utters. This is the secret of the power of the *neder* and *shevua*. This is the source of our power to create Torah-level obligations.

E

Are We Really Holy?

But, I ask, are we truly holy beings? Is my speech really a holy product? Is it so holy that it can have the power to create a *neder* and a *shevua*? Who actually has this great level of *kedusha*?

How many of us have, unfortunately, desecrated our *kedusha*? Who has taken the holy essence that God gave us and changed it into a profane and desecrated being? We have used our actions, thoughts, and emotions for negative things. Perhaps we have lost the power of holiness to create the *neder* and *shevua*. Our mouths are not as holy as the Torah presumes. We have said foolish and, perhaps, even disgusting things. How could such a dirty, defiled, and broken *kli* produce the holy speech of the *neder*?

The answer is that, even though as individuals we may have desecrated and degraded our own personal *kedusha*, every Jew is still part of the holy collective of Israel. This holiness cannot be desecrated by an individual. A person can desecrate his personal holiness. But he or she is still a Jew. *Yisrael af al pi shechata Yisrael hu* (Sanhedrin 44a). Even when an individual Jew sins and desecrates his or her personal *kedusha*, he or she cannot desecrate the *kedusha* that he or she shares with all the other Jews of the world. That holiness remains for every Jew by dint of the fact that he or she was born Jewish.

F

The Untouchable Holiness of Klal Yisrael

Don't we see this incredible reality? How many people do we know who were raised without the practice of Torah and *mitzvos*? They did not have the chance to develop their personal holiness. In fact, many of our brothers and sisters have been raised in a totally profane lifestyle, where personal holiness is a completely

foreign concept. Nonetheless, many of these Jews have succeeded in returning to Torah and *mitzvos*. What enabled them to choose to come back?

The holiness of the collective of Klal Yisrael brought them back. Every Jew has this holiness, no matter what his or her lifestyle may be. We therefore count every Jew for the *minyan* on Yom Kippur. The *kedusha* of Am Yisrael is inviolate, so great and wondrous that it cannot be desecrated, no matter what the individual does.

The Shem Mishmuel sees a symbol of this concept in the Beis Hamikdash. The *ketores* (incense) that was brought in the Beis Hamikdash included one unusual ingredient, the *chelbena*. Chazal say (Krisos 6b) that, on its own, the *chelbena* has a terrible smell. However, together with the rest of the *ketores*, the *chelbena* contributed a positive aroma. When you mix it together with the rest of the *ketores*, it becomes *rei'ach nichoach*, a wonderful smell. The *chelbena* represents Jewish sinners. Even if the individual has desecrated his personal holiness, he still retains the *kedusha* of Am Yisrael. He is connected to other Jews. Furthermore, he is connected to the great holy leaders, the *tzaddikim* of our generation. Those people do have personal holiness, and they share it with the rest of the nation. They are the *roshei hamatos*.

This is the drip-down theory of holiness. The holiness of a righteous person is not just for himself. He shares it with the rest of his people, because we are *k'ish echad b'leiv echad*. We share in their holiness; we share the holiness of Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam. The personal holiness of a *tzaddik* is the national treasure of the whole Jewish People, like the heart that contributes health to the whole body. The national holiness of the *tzaddikim* enables each and every Jew to muster the requisite holiness to make a *shevua*.

This is why Moshe emphasized the *roshei matos* at the beginning of the *parsha*. They are the great masters of good deeds who share their personal *kedusha* with the whole people. There

is a spillover of *kedusha* from our Torah leaders to every single Jew. The *roshei matos* provide the guarantee that every Jew has the ability to sanctify his or her speech. This is the secret of the ability of the Jew to create holy obligations through speech.

This concept of national holiness corresponds to the fifth level of the soul, *yechida*, the one master-soul of Klal Yisrael. This level of soul has so much *kedusha* that it can never be desecrated. The *tzaddikim* and *anshei ma'aseh* give life to this level of soul.

G

Tilting Towards Holiness

The Shem Mishmuel makes a play on words in the *pasuk*: “*Vayed-abeir Moshe el roshei hamatos.*” The word *l'hatos* means to tilt. The word *mateh*, then, which means tribe, can also mean to tilt or incline.

God resides in heaven, and we live on earth. In order for us to connect, we need a bridge between us. When that bridge exists, the Jewish People shares in the holiness of God Himself. This bridge can begin from Hashem and come down to us. It could also begin with us and go up to Hashem. There are *matos*, two kinds of inclines. There is a road leading from heaven down to earth. And there is another kind of road beginning on the ground and working its way up to heaven. The *roshei hamatos* are the people who build these bridges, these inclined planes, which connect man to God. They are the masters of the incline.

There are two kinds of *tzaddikim*. One kind of *tzaddik* builds a bridge from heaven downward which, so to speak, leads Hashem into this world. The other kind of *tzaddik* builds a bridge from the ground up. He brings people up to God.

These are the two *tzaddikim* who took us out of Egypt. Moshe brought heaven down to earth. He went up into heaven and brought God's Torah down to earth. When he brought the

luchos down from heaven, he brought Hashem into this world. The Zohar calls him *shushvina d'malka*, the one who accompanies the king. Aharon is called *shushvina d'matronisa*, the one who accompanies the queen. The queen represents the Jewish people, for we are God's bride (see, for example, Rashi Shemos 19:17). He brings the Jews from earth up to heaven. Aharon was a man of the people. He was with them daily, and his holiness inspired Jews to live holy lives. These are the two types of great Torah leaders.

Throughout the ages, Jews always had these two kinds of leaders. In the times of the Beis Hamikdash, there were always two leaders: the king and the *kohen gadol*. The king leads from heaven to earth, and the *kohen gadol* from earth to heaven. In the Sanhedrin, the high court of Jewish law, there is the chief justice—the *nasi*—who leads the Jews from heaven to earth, and the assistant chief justice—the *av beis din*—who leads the Jews from earth to heaven. (You, the reader, are invited to figure out how this model works.)

The reason Torah scholars are able to release us from our vows is because our vows are rooted in their holiness in the first place. Without the greatness of our Torah leaders, who share their holiness with us, we would not be able to make vows in the first place. This is why the *roshei hamatos*, who connect heaven and earth, have the power to rescind the vow.

This is true in Jewish marriage as well, as seen in sources such as in Hadar Zekeinim and P'nei Dovid. Marriage is called *kiddushin*, "holiness." In rare, special circumstances, the greatest of rabbis in the Sanhedrin can annul *kiddushin* without a divorce. What gave the individual husband and bride the original *kedusha* to make their holy bond in the first place? The holiness of the *tzaddikim* within the Jewish People. Since they are the source, they are able to revoke the marriage in certain extraordinarily dire circumstances. They are the ultimate source of Jewish marriage, of the *kedusha* of Am Yisrael.

The Immense Power of Release

The Midrash says that, after the *eigel*, Hashem took an oath to destroy the Jewish People. But Moshe released Hashem from the oath, and so the Jews survived in the desert. What was the source of Moshe's power to annul God's oath?

God's oath is also a function of His connection to us. If He wouldn't be connected to us at all, He would not get angry with us, give us blessings, mete out punishments, or swear about anything regarding us. He would have nothing to do with us. But, because of great *tzaddikim* like Moshe and Aharon, He maintains His connection to us. Even though we have our individual failings, Hashem remains loyal to us. However, when the nation as a whole fails and acts inappropriately, Hashem becomes infuriated, as it were. Sometimes, He may express oaths of destruction against us. But then the *tzaddik* comes and says, "My connection is what keeps You and the Jewish People connected in the first place. Therefore, I release You from Your oath. It is my connection, and I release You from it." This is how Moshe released God from the oath of destruction that He uttered against the Jewish People.

These amazing ideas of the Shem Mishmuel should inspire us. We must realize the holiness of our personal speech. We should feel that we are holy beings. We have to feel the holiness of being Jewish and behave accordingly. A Jew is a child of God. Our Father is holy, we are holy, and our nation is holy. We should be holy in our actions and especially in our speech. We should try to be that *tzaddik*, that righteous person, who fosters a holy connection to Hashem. We can be like Avraham or Sara, Moshe or Miriam. With our own holy actions, we can become a *kli shareis*, a holy vessel in the service of God.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why aren't vows considered adding to the 613 *mitzvos*?
2. From where do people derive the power to add biblically binding prohibitions through *nedarim*?
3. Which *kedusha* of the Jewish People is inviolate?
4. What is the source of the *kedusha* of Am Yisrael?
5. What are the two types of *tzaddikim* who build bridges from heaven to earth?
6. What gives Torah scholars the ability to nullify vows?

EXERCISES

1. Keep a log of your speech for a week. Were you able to keep it holy?
2. In what kind of situations did you succeed and when didn't you succeed?

