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Parshat Matot

The end of *Parshat Pinchas* ends with G-d telling Moshe that on the Jewish Holidays, besides for the obligatory communal offerings, the Jewish people should bring their vow and free-will offerings as well. Therefore, says Rashbam (12th Century), *Parshat Matot* begins with Moshe detailing the laws of vows. This is meant to encourage the Jews to be vigilant about fulfilling their vows and to bring their sacrifices and contributions to the Temple without delay. While one can make many different types of vows, the classic vow in the Torah is when one takes an ordinary object and sets it aside to be holy for the Temple, either for an animal sacrifice or simply as a donation.

An entire tractate of the Talmud, *Masechet Nedarim*, deals with the laws of the different types of vows one can make. Nowadays, although we do not offer sacrifices, one could still prohibit himself from using permissible objects. For example, one could make a particular food forbidden to eat, as a Nazir forbids himself from eating grapes and wine. The vow takes effect when one uses a certain language, as described in the tractate. Once one makes a vow, there is both a positive commandment to keep it and a negative commandment not to violate it (Numbers 30:3).

Even though the average person does not make formal *nedarim* (vows) throughout the year, there is a custom both on Erev Rosh Hashana and on the onset of Yom Kippur to annul any vows one may have made the previous year. The annulment of vows in the morning of Erev Rosh Hashana is done in the presence of three people who act as judges, and at the onset of Yom Kippur the whole congregation collectively annuls vows in the Kol Nidre service. These two practices do not legally (*halachically*) work, because one must specify the vow in order to undo it, but we still say these texts right before Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur begin. Why do we bother saying these texts if they have no legal significance?

We must understand the meaning of both making and annulling vows in order to appreciate the significance of the customs we do before Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. If a vow is like evil speech (*lashon hara*), then why would it help to undo it? If it is not evil, why should we even need to undo it? The commentaries on the verse describing G-d's creation of man (Genesis 2:7) explain that the ability to speak is what sets man apart from all other living things. Now, the gift of speech is not meant merely to enable man to communicate in a more sophisticated way than an



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animal. Rather, it empowers man to make concrete commitments and challenge himself to keep them. While thoughts alone do not bind a person to any commitment, words do. When one commits verbally to do something or vows not to do something, he must keep his word. If one does not keep his word, he abuses the uniquely human gift of speech and behaves more like an animal.

In describing vows in the beginning of our parsha, the Torah says “He should not desecrate (*yachel*) his word.”(Numbers 30:3) The literal translation of “*yachel*” is “he should not make his word hollow.” When one does not keep a commitment, he shows the words he said earlier were really hollow and empty. But if one realizes it will be very difficult to keep his vow, he can have his vow legally annulled through three judges by explaining he regrets ever making the vow.

Once the judges undoes the vow, the vow is no longer binding and therefore those words will not become hollow. The Torah recognizes it will not always be easy for a person to follow through on a commitment, but the Torah teaches us that speech is not something to be taken lightly. A word is a word, and a person of substance should not simply ignore previous statements of intent. Rather, he should use more words to explain why those earlier words should not be relevant, and then he will not make those words hollow by not carrying through with them.

Before Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, the three days of the year with the longest prayers, we become extra sensitive to the power of words. When we pray before G-d to judge us favorably on Rosh Hashana and to forgive us on Yom Kippur, we want the words of our prayers to have real meaning. If we start by stating how we recognize the power of words by trying to annul any vows before we begin praying, our prayers take on new meaning. We hope that appreciating the weight of our words will sensitize us to the voice within us that wants to rise above our animalistic tendencies and become refined people. Sensitivity to words serves as catalyst in our *teshuva* process, returning to Hashem, which is the goal of the Days of Awe.

Shabbat Shalom.
Rabbi Yosef Saltzman

