

Parashat Mattot-Massei
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Shabbat Shalom.

I'm going to start out this morning by posing a question.

Imagine for a moment that you are an Israelite woman who was part of the group who left Egypt and was wandering in the desert for 40 years – so you might be an older woman who had survived that long 40 year journey, or a middle aged woman born during that time, or even a younger woman born more recently – the question is: what kinds of vows or oaths would you make?

Think about this for a minute.

I've been trying to imagine what life is like for these folks. They are living in tents. They are moving quite frequently. They know they are heading to the Promised Land, but they aren't there yet. They are living in tribal groups – the 12 tribes, descended from the sons of Jacob.

So what kind of vows or oaths would these people, and in particular, these women, be making?

I'm going to leave this question there for a bit, while I give you some more information.



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In the beginning of Mattot – which means tribes, by the way – it says Moses spoke to the head of the tribes and said: this is what G-d commanded:

If a man makes a vow to the Lord, or takes an oath imposing an obligation on himself, he shall not break his pledge, he must carry out all that has crossed his lips.

According to one commentary I read, a vow is conditional – only if G-d fulfills the requested blessing must the person then follow through. An oath differs in that it's something you promise another person, and those must be followed through on regardless.

In any event, men are supposed to follow through on their vows and oaths. This is mentioned in ONE verse.

Next there is a very long discussion – 14 verses, to be exact - about what to do if and when women make vows. As the Five Books of Miriam, a women's' commentary on the Torah states: these verses elaborate in considerable detail the limits of women's freedom to commit themselves with their own words.

If the father or husband finds out about the woman's vow and “offers no objection” – then the vow stands. But if the father or husband finds out about it and disagrees with it within a day's time – 24 hours – it becomes annulled.

The only women who are allowed to make vows without a male's approval are widows and divorced women, as they don't have a man who is “responsible” for them.

There are four specific cases mentioned in these verses. The first is a woman still living in her father's household – older than a girl (who can't make vows yet), but presumably not old enough to be married. The second is a married woman – even if she is newly married and made a vow previously, her husband can object to it on the day he finds out about it and annul it.

A widows vow is binding, as is a divorced woman's vow.

But if the widow or divorced woman made the vow before the husband died or before the divorce, the husband could have objected to it, as before, and annul it.

So what are these vows and oaths that are so “dangerous” that there needs to be lines and lines of Torah talking about them?

The Torah doesn't say, so we have to guess. Some of the commentary I read said that these could be positive or negative. Positive would be something like if such and such happens, I will give something to G-d and negative might mean denying oneself something, for example, denying oneself certain foods. One commentator said that other areas might include “specific household responsibilities, privileges, and marital relationships.” Could it be that Israelite women said things like – “I'm tired of cleaning up around here - this tent is a mess! I vow that I won't clean up any more until everyone who lives in this tent helps out!”

I don't know.

I polled some friends to try to figure out what kind of vows or oaths Israelite women living in the desert might make, and we were all kind of stumped. We came up with things like asking G-d to protect her family, keep them healthy, thinking of inventive ways to survive in the desert, to have patience and persistence. But we couldn't really think of any vows or oaths that would be so “dangerous” that fathers or husbands would need to annul them.

One commentator, interestingly, thought that actually, the men's power was limited since they only had 24 hours after learning about the vow that his wife or daughter had made to cancel it.

Putting all these thoughts aside, it is kind of amazing to realize that whoever wrote the bible – presumably a man – was so worried about women's vows that he needed 14 verses to discuss how to control them.

It's hard not to draw a parallel with what's going on in our country right now with reproductive rights.

Having worked in women's health mainly in the 1980s, it's kind of astonishing to realize that women now have less rights in this sphere than they did 40 years ago.

Once again, men (mostly) are trying to control women with many, many complex laws that are leading to confusion, health risks, and sometimes, death.

I realize this isn't the same thing as what's going on in Mattot. But there is something about the need to control women that seems very similar.

I don't have a pat answer to this issue. What I will end with is that on Erev Yom Kippur, many people come to synagogue to hear the Kol Nidre prayer, which nullifies our vows that we may make in the coming year.

This commentary, by Rabbi Jacqueline Koch Ellenson in MyJewishLearning.com, says this:

When we make vows, we put into speech our deepest fears and most profound hopes... Yet some vows are rash, regrettable, or unrealizable; some are made under duress.

Kol Nidre reminds us that we have the choice to keep or annul our vows, thus affirming our most basic rights to self-expression and self-determination. This is part of what gives both the prayer and its recitation its profound power.

Shabbat Shalom.