

My grandfather (alavashalom) always told me "my word was my bond, and my bond was my name". I learned this to mean if I gave my word, I had to keep it, because it would impact my reputation. This applied to my personal life as well as in business. If I'm a person of my word – my reputation will be a good one – but if my word is broken, so will be my reputation. This taught me to say what I mean and mean what I say. My words and actions reflect on me, they impact those who interact with me, and impact their ability to trust and rely upon me.

This week's parsha, Ma'tot, and haftorah, Jeremiah, stress the importance of words and particularly promises – as well as the need for one's words to match their deeds and action.

Words can be a blessing, a promise, or a curse. They can be encouraging or hurtful. But clearly, words carry meaning and importance. Even the intent behind the words and the manner in which the words are conveyed can impact the message being delivered. Silence or inaction, in the face of another's words, can also result in adverse consequences.

Words spoken in anger can lose their intended meaning. It's therefore important to reflect, and choose words carefully, not just because they may form a vow, but also because words not carefully chosen, or spoken in anger, or in haste, may not convey the message intended.

We are often referred to as the people of the book. Books are filled with words. But words, without action, mean nothing. Words tie us to our past, but not for purposes of dwelling on it, but rather to learn so that we can live in the present and have hope for the future. We view the words of the Torah to be filled

with life and breath, and not just static words on a scroll or page carrying only historical significance. While the words of the Torah remain unchanged, the messages can be interpreted and re-interpreted in ways that keep them relevant to our lives today, so that we can remain spiritually connected to G-d, and each other. They provide us with a common starting point.

Vows while promises in the present must be backed up with action in the future. The parsha compares the implications of a man's vows to those of a woman. A distinction is drawn between a man's vow - which is always binding, and a woman's vow - which might be absolved when fulfillment is beyond her control if her actions are controlled by another. Is the distinction meant to demonstrate that a woman's word is worth less than that of a man, or that her rights and abilities are lesser than her male counter-part? I think not.

I believe that the distinction was made to demonstrate the consequences of breaching one's vow. I interpret the message of the parsha to also indicate that silent acquiesce, action or inaction can also be wrong, particularly when it impairs the ability of another to fulfill a vow which they have taken. In such instances a person who stands silent, fails to act or acts in a way that obstructs another's ability to act, is likely to be the person who will suffer the consequences.

According to the parsha, everyone who is free to control their own destiny and behavior is bound by their vow and may be punished if they break it. The distinction made in the parsha is that a woman's vow can be recanted. This will only occur when the woman lacks the ability or control to carry her vow to fruition

because she is bound to a parent or spouse. We learn that in order to be recanted or disavowed, her father (or husband) must upon learning of its utterance immediately act. He must put others on notice that the woman's promise cannot or will not be fulfilled. This recognizes that if one is not able (due to outside forces) to control of one's own actions – she should not be punished. If, however, the controlling party doesn't disavow the promise before it is relied upon and silently acquiesces to the promise, only to later impede it from being fulfilled, the controlling party will be the one held responsible, and it will be he who is punished for the broken promise.

The parsha focuses on promises made by the Jewish people to G-d as well as preparation for G-d to fulfil his promise to deliver us from slavery and into the promised land. In the haftorah, G-d has already fulfilled this promise, but the Jewish people have now broken their word. As a result, in the haftorah, G-d makes a promise to Jeremiah – and in doing so a single individual is entrusted from the point of his conception to carry the word of G-d to the Jewish people. G-d makes a conditional vow, he vows to provide protection and redemption but only if the Jews renounce their ways and return to a loving, faithful and trustworthy relationship with G-d, otherwise G-d vows that the people will face certain punishment.

G-d promised us the land of Israel. In the parsha we stand at the precipice - ready for this promise to be fulfilled. Moses' days are now numbered. A nation born of slavery needed a leader to direct them in order to bring them the word of G-d. But a nation born in freedom, needs to hear the still small voice of G-d from

within and act accordingly, out of free choice because it will be judged for its actions as well as its inaction.

Because the slave generation lacked trust in G-d it was fearful of entering Canaan. As a result, it was forced to wander for 40 years until a new generation (untainted by slavery) could enter the land. Why? Some say its because it's the first instance of a man refusing to ask for directions - - - I believe it is because G-d wants a willing, trusting and trustworthy partner.

In this week's parsha the latest threat to the Jewish people comes from within – it is the result of Israel breaking its vows to G-d. The consequence suffered was a plague that wiped out a significant number of people.

As people of the word, we learn that although the sword is not our weapon of choice, under certain circumstances actions and not just words are required. In the parsha we wipe out a nation through use of the sword that threatened us not with war but by their beliefs, thoughts and deeds that ate at us from within.

We need to remain true to ourselves, true to G-d, and true to our word. We learn that silence doesn't absolve us from responsibility and we must speak out against injustice and wrongful conduct. We must not stand idly by or act in ways that may keep another (especially one entrusted to our care) from fulfilling a vow.

While G-d may no longer speak to us in words, I believe that G-d continues to send us messages in many different ways. Whether we choose to hear the message or choose to ignore it and suffer the consequences - is the

result of free will – the attribute given to us by G-d that differentiates us from every other species on earth.

When we, as a nation, act in a fashion devoid of faith in G-d and fail to fulfill our collective promises to G-d, or fail to follow his direction, we collectively face the consequences. Is this meant as an explanation of why bad things can happen to good people? I think it is meant to emphasize that not only must we control and be responsible for our own behavior, and keep our word, but we must also speak out against wrongs, as they occur, and not stand in silent acquiescence.

I believe that this week's parsha and haftorah send a clear message that we must make sure our words and actions match. Both our expression of words and our silence have implications.

May in the coming week we each enjoy the benefits derived from our word being our bond and our bond being our name – according to Mat'ot (and my grandfather) our reputations and our futures may well depend upon it.

Shabbat shalom.