

Rabbi Noah Arnow
Kol Rinah
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To Vow or Not to Vow, That is the Question

Most Tuesdays from 2:30 to 3:30pm Central Time (3:30-4:30pm Eastern Time), I study on the phone with my friend and rabbinical school classmate Rabbi Ita Paskind. We started a chavruta—a study partnership, our last year of rabbinical school, and have continued it over the seven years since we were ordained. We've each moved congregations, and had various personal and professional struggles and successes. We've studied Talmud, Torah commentators, chasidut, and now we're back to the Talmud.

For the last year or so, we've been studying Masechet Nedarim, the Talmudic tractate which deals with vows. It spends analyzing what precisely constitutes a vow that requires fulfillment, and what wordings do not create any vow requiring fulfillment. And vows are the first topic of this week's Torah portion.

The Talmud talks primarily about vows where a person vows not to benefit from something by saying something like, "Jon's food is like a sacrifice for me," meaning Jon's food is like something that has been promised as a sacrifice in the Temple, and cannot be used for not sacred purposes. His food hasn't actually been promised, only it's going to be for me like it was.

The Mishna carefully analyzes what words and formulations make a vow necessary to fulfill, and what does not.

We don't make those kinds of vows anymore, but I think it would be worth thinking about what makes our words into promises, and our promises requiring fulfillment.

If I say, I'll be back in two minutes, is that a promise? Probably not. And if I come back in five minutes, not two minutes, it's no big deal.

When a president promises, "No new taxes," if he does not keep that promise, he may not be reelected.

What's the difference here? It's the expectation, the trust that someone is putting in us, and the degree to which it is violated.

Being three minutes late is not a big violation of trust. If you're at a restaurant and you tell your dinner date I'll be back in two minutes and you sneak out the back, go home and don't come back—that's a bit more of a trust violation!

Maybe it would be better never to make any promises—then you never break any promises!

This is exactly the subject of a dispute in the Talmud that my friend Ita and I studied a few months ago. Ecclesiastes (chapter 5) describes three groups of people—those who make a vow and fulfill it, those who make a vow and do not fulfill it, and those who do not make vows. In the Talmud (Nedarim 9b), Rabbi Meir says that the best person is the one who does not vow at all. Rabbi Yehuda says that even better than not vowing is vowing and fulfilling your vow.

Which position do you prefer? All in favor of vowing? All opposed?

Let's try first to understand Rabbi Yehuda's opinion. Why is it better to vow and fulfill the vow than not to vow at all?

When we make promises or commitments, and fulfill them, we build trust, and we build relationship. And we build a kind of political capital. We build credibility, and the possibility for others to feel obligated to let us rely on them.

We don't trust a person who will never commit to anything. Trust requires commitment and fulfillment.

Moreover, vows can give us purpose and direction in our lives. Sometimes, a person will choose a career and spend a lifetime fulfilling a vow.

But what about Rabbi Meir's position, that it is better not to vow? Later authorities side with Rabbi Meir and concur that it's better not to vow at all. Why not vow? Rabbi Meir's position is a bit more risk-averse. Violating an oath to a person or to God is a big deal, and should not be easily avoidable.

Moreover, one cannot annul a real vow on one's own. You need someone else to do it. You have to regret that you vowed and be able to say, "If at the moment of making the vow I had the knowledge I have now, I would not have made the vow."

This whole procedure though is rabbinic; it's not in the Torah. While the Torah allows for a man to annul the vow of a woman for whom he is responsible, there is no procedure for a man's vow to be annulled.

Perhaps that's why the Mishna says, "the release of vows floats in the air, and has nothing on which to lean" (Mishna Chagiga 1:8). It's not well-grounded in the Torah.

But then, if it's hard to find support for it in the Torah, why do we have so much written about the release of vows?

Because we have no choice. People are always going to make promises they turn out not to be able to keep, and they need to have ways of being released from their own vows.

So, on the one hand, vows are a way of building trust and relationship. On the other hand, vows are to be avoided, and we only have ways of annulling because humans, with our big, impulsive mouths, over-promise and under-deliver.

Some of us probably would do well to make more commitments, to build more trust, more relationship. Others of us need to work on better-fulfilling the promises we have made, and make, so as to avoid having to backtrack.

Which do you need to work on more, right now?

My friend Ita and I have this commitment to each other to study together weekly. And yet, we often wind up not studying, but talking, sharing, processing. We're breaking our implicit promise to study together when we don't get to the studying. But in the context of a trusting relationship, we can reset the rules and suspend certain promises easily.

On this topic, I'll end with a joke. A boy was at school and was acting up. The teacher called on him and asked, "Do you remember what you promised me?" The boy said, "Yes, that I wouldn't misbehave anymore." Then the teacher asked, "And do you remember what I promised you?" The boy responded, "Yes, that if I misbehaved again I'd be sent to the principal's office, but since I broke my promise it's ok if you do too."

Shabbat shalom!