

Parshat Matot-Masei 5782

Parshat Matot, the second parasha read this Shabbat, begins with a lengthy and intricate discussion about vows and promises and the circumstances under which these verbal commitments can be annulled.

The parasha begins with the following two passukim:

30:2 – *“Moshe spoke to all the tribal leaders of Bnei Yisrael, saying: this is what Hashem has commanded”* and:

30:3 – (Concerning the principle that).....*“when a person makes a vow to Hashem or makes an oath to prohibit himself (something which the Torah permits), he may not violate his word, (and) he must act in accordance with what he uttered.”*

One question regarding the first passuk is why in this instance did Moshe address the heads of the shevatim (tribes) and not the entire nation?

Rashi explains that Moshe first taught this material and instruction to the leaders of the 12 shevatim and only later to the rest of Bnei Yisrael. Rashi also states that this process was not only specific to the topic of vows but applied to everything that Moshe was instructed to tell the Bnei Yisrael.

So why was this halacha chosen as the prototype for describing how Moshe taught Torah to Am Yisrael? Rashi suggests the Torah is alluding to a special clause in Hilchot Nedarim that enables certain individual leaders of Israel to annul a vow instead of the equivalent three-laymen alternative. In other words, specifically in relation to vows, Nedarim, the qualified leaders have a special role to play. They and they alone can independently annul a vow in the correct circumstances.

Ramban suggests we take this passuk more literally. Perhaps the regular process of teaching was suspended with regards to Nedarim as not every individual is in control of what he or she says. Had Moshe taught this to the whole of Am Yisrael initially, there may have been ‘halachic chaos’ resulting from unnecessary vows and a general atmosphere of leniency. Hence on this occasion, Moshe chose to restrict this specific instruction to the leaders.

In the context of this parsha, a vow is a means by which a person makes a verbal undertaking, i.e., an oath or a promise, generating a personal obligation, e.g., a person might make a vow to donate a certain sum to charity. It can also take the form of a restriction, e.g., to refrain from eating ice cream for a specific period. In fact, for this person, ice cream is no different than the other foods prohibited by the Torah as

he/she has subjected themselves to an additional restriction. A vow that is impossible cannot be considered a vow. For example, you cannot vow not to eat or drink for an entire week. Similarly, you cannot make a vow to commit an aveirah.

Since this is considered one of the most fundamental of all principles, the Torah recognises that there are situations where promises or vows can be revoked or annulled. For example, perek 30, passuk 6:

”כִּי הִנֵּה אֲבִיהָ אוֹתָהּ”.....כֹּל נִדְרֶיהָ וְאִסְרֶיהָ אֲשֶׁר אָסְרָה עַל נַפְשָׁהּ לֹא יִקּוּם

explains that a father can reverse his unmarried daughter’s vow if she is still residing in his home, and Rashi in Perek 30, passuk 9 also states that in certain situations, fathers and husbands can annul a woman’s vow altogether, as long as they do so the moment they heard the vow being uttered (Rabbi Yosef Fleischman, Bar Ilana University).

Furthermore, a husband may overturn the vow of his wife, but only if it directly affects him, such as something relating to the marital bond, or unfitting behaviour within the home. However, if the wife makes a vow that affects no person other than herself, i.e. עֲנִי נַפְשִׁי – “self-denial”, according to Rashi 30:14, her husband is not permitted to annul or reverse the vow as he does not have authority over such vows.

This is also a process we perform every year on Erev Rosh Hashana, to repeal certain vows we took upon ourselves so that we can begin the Day of Judgement free from the Aveira of not keeping our word(s).

To conclude, Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks explains that the reason why the topic of vows is placed in this parasha is because the Bnei Yisrael were approaching Eretz Yisrael where they were about to create a free society, dependent on trust. Trust, says Rabbi Sacks, depends on keeping one’s word. If trust breaks down, social relationships break down and then society becomes dependent on law enforcement agencies or some other use of force. When force is widely used, society is no longer “free.”

Words also create moral obligations, which, if undertaken responsibly and honoured faithfully then, in turn, create the possibility of a free society. If a person fails to keep their word, they may then eventually lose their freedom.

So, Matot sets out the important ground rules of keeping promises, reminding us that this is something to be taken very seriously in our day-to-day lives, as words are the building blocks of our existence, reflecting our integrity. Since words hold power, it is vital to try and speak words that hold positive intentions both to yourself and to others.