

Shabbat Matot-Mas'ei – July 30, 2022

By James Tulsky

Davar Torah Parshiyot Mattot/Ma'asei – July 30, 2022

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When I was a child, we spent many summers in Colombia, South America – specifically Medellin – where my mother's siblings, and nearly all of our cousins, lived. She was born in Czernowicz, Romania (now Ukraine), but as Europe changed, her father saw the writing on the wall and in 1936 brought the family to Medellin. Later, my mother met my father and moved to Chicago, but she deeply missed her family and brought us back to Colombia whenever she could.

In the summer of 1970, my parents, myself, and two of my three siblings went to Medellin, as we often did. My older brother Steve had just graduated high school and spent the first part of the summer taking a course in Madison, Wisconsin, and the plan was for him to join us when he was done. This not-quite 17 year old boy was to drive back to Chicago from Madison, stay in our apartment by himself, and then fly to Medellin through a connecting flight in Miami. The afternoon of his expected arrival in Colombia, my mother, and a whole slew of relatives (as was the custom back then), went to the airport to greet Steve. A plane descended into the valley, came to a stop, and she waited eagerly as the passengers descended the stairs of the Avianca Boeing 727. Yet, Steve never emerged. She checked with the airline and, indeed, my brother was not on the flight. At that point she became frantic and immediately thought something must have happened on his drive from Madison to Chicago, or the next day on the way to the airport. She called the Wisconsin state highway patrol and the Chicago Police Department to find out if there had been an accident or if they knew anything about his whereabouts. But nothing.

At that moment, left only with her fear and desperation, my mother made a vow. She told God that if she ever saw her son alive again, she would quit smoking. This week's parashah opens with a chapter about vows. The 2nd verse declares that:

אִישׁ כִּי-יִדָּר נָדָר לַיהוָה אֹו-הַשְּׁבַע שְׁבַעַה לְאִסֹּר אִסֹּר עַל-נַפְשׁוֹ לֹא יַחַל דְּבָרוֹ כְּכֹל-
הַיֵּצֵא מִפִּיֹו יַעֲשֶׂה

(Bamidbar 30:3)

“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.”

A “neder,” which is usually translated as a “vow,” is something much more powerful than just keeping one’s word. It’s a promise to God, in which one pledges to do something, usually contingent on, or in gratitude for, some outcome. One may pledge to abstain from a food or a practice. Or, the neder can obligate someone to perform an optional commandment, such as a sacrifice or tzedakah. As Rashi says, “I take upon myself an obligation which is as sacred to me as an offering, that I will not eat, that I will not do such-and-such a thing.”

This act has humans performing a function normally reserved only to God. That is, creating a new law. By pronouncing a neder, one places upon oneself, or upon an object of one’s choice, a status equivalent to that defined by a Torah commandment. If you violate the neder, it is as if you violated any commandment. A neder changes the status of an object, so that something permitted is now forbidden – just as forbidden as, if it had been written in the Torah. A cigarette becomes a strip of bacon.

Our tradition treats the concept of vows incredibly seriously.

How seriously?

An entire tractate of the Talmud, Nedarim, focuses on this subject.

Everett Fox observes that the length of this chapter in Mattot “signals the importance, or rather the sacredness, of an oath in ancient Israel; it stood as uttered unless an annulment procedure was followed. Human words, and not only divine ones, were seen as having effects in the real world.”

And, according to Rashi, the literal meaning of the verse I quoted above about not breaking a pledge is: “if a man makes a vow to the Lord... imposing an obligation on himself, **he shall not desecrate his word.**” Our tradition sees words as sacred and binding, and their violation as desecration, even when what is said is not intended.

This is the reason that observant Jews, before pledging to do something as simple as meeting a person at an appointed time, may insert the words “b’li neder” (i.e., “without a vow”) to ensure that they don’t accidentally obligate themselves in a way that is inescapable.

Yet, to fully convey the magnitude of what we are describing here, I’d like to transport you to an evening in the fall. Imagine you’re standing in a room crowded with Jews dressed in white, the sun is setting, anticipation is high, and now recall your emotion, as you hear these words sung:

“Kol Nidre...v’esarei, v’chamei, v’konamei, v’kinuyei, v’kinusei, u’shevuot.”

Just chilling.

And, an extraordinary statement that we enter the holiest day of the year by chanting this iconic prayer asking forgiveness for unfulfilled (and even fulfilled) vows. Much is written about why this might be the case. At the least, Kol Nidre was a maneuver created by the rabbis to absolve us of vows, because we cannot perform the act of teshuva ahead of us with such a heavy obligation hanging over our heads.

So, our tradition clearly takes vows seriously....and, is equally ambivalent about them.

As in the Kol Nidre example, the Rabbis worked hard to legislate away the consequences of breaking vows. And, all of the unfortunate misogynistic rules that follow today’s parasha’s initial description of a neder send the message that cancelling vows might often be a good idea. They want us to be on guard against making promises, commitments, and pledges that we do not intend to keep or that we may not be able to keep.

As Kohelet says:

טוֹב אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תִדָּר מִשֶּׁתִּדָּר וְלֹא תִשְׁלֵם:

“It is better not to vow at all than to vow and not fulfill.”

But, if we want people to stop vowing, shouldn't we ask why they make vows in the first place? They clearly serve some need.

I believe that vows are a natural human response to mortal fear.

I work as a palliative care physician and that brings me in touch with many people living with serious illnesses who face challenging, dire, and scary situations. I watch patients, confronted with their mortality, bargain with God all the time. Usually, it comes out as a prayer or a simple bequest. Yet, vows are not uncommon, and may be seen as the most effective way to make a deal with God.

Unfortunately, and highly anecdotally, my sense has also been that those who try to craft a relationship with God in this way often find themselves only suffering more – particularly when nothing they do can stop the progression of a lethal disease.

I think our tradition understands this and doesn't want us to use God in this way. When we make a vow, we are trying to be Gods ourselves, creating a new commandment in an ultimately futile attempt to eliminate our fear. So, the Rabbis tried to discourage this response. I want to believe that they understood that we need to learn to live alongside that fear, accommodate it, and have faith that we will find a way through the darkness. It may seem that making a vow to God in exchange for some benefit is a deeply religious act. In fact, it demonstrates an absence of faith. True faith, or hope, or reliance, means trusting in an outcome that's beyond one's control.

So, let's return to my mother and her vow to quit smoking if she ever saw my brother alive.

What she didn't know was that while she was swearing, my brother was sleeping – in a comfortable bed in Bogota. There were two flights that afternoon from Miami and both had been delayed. The flight my mother went out to greet was the earlier flight, now landing quite a bit later. My brother's flight was so delayed that it couldn't land in Medellin, which at the time was unapproachable after dark because of the tall mountains and narrow valley. They were diverted to Bogota for the night, and the airline put him up in a nice hotel. Our family figured this out very early the next morning, and my brother was awakened by a phone call from

our Bogota cousin checking on his welfare. He flew to Medellin later that day and was greeted by my relieved, angry, and now changed mother. She kept her vow and quit smoking permanently, something she had been trying to do for years but had never been able to achieve.

So, was this vow a good thing? Well, it helped her get through that long night in Medellin as she worried about the fate of her son. And, she did quit smoking and lived to be 86 years old, healthy until near the end, so perhaps the vow played a role in her longevity. Finally, I'm fairly sure it deepened her faith. My mother was always a believer but, after that – after seeing her vow yield results – she never questioned the existence of God.

But what were the risks, and what might have been lost? Well, first, what if Steve had never returned? What if, in fact, he really had suffered a deadly accident on the road from Wisconsin to Chicago? What would this have done to her faith after God didn't accept her plea? One usually makes a vow contingent on something happening. But, if the desired outcome doesn't occur, what's left? A crisis of faith.

But, in her case, it actually worked! So, what's the problem? This act left my mother with an even thinner set of defenses to manage her anxiety. She could always invoke the supernatural, but she had done nothing to strengthen her coping skills. While perhaps her belief in an almighty God that intercedes in the world had been rewarded, her reliance on her own internal resources had been diminished.

Much of the traditional commentary suggests that the risk of a vow is that one may not keep it. I believe the risk runs much deeper than this. Vows – true nedarim – prevent us from fully feeling and managing our anxieties, and by doing so, lessen our faith. Vows are not a demonstration of piety, rather a tool to avoid experiencing the full breadth of what the world brings, which we must navigate with a faith that whatever happens, we'll be okay.

Shabbat shalom.