

“The Parsha Discussion” by Rabbi Alex Israel

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Matot- Massei: The Power (and danger) of a Vow



The concept of a vow, the topic with which our parsha opens, is quite radical. As an ordinary civilian, I can take on a new obligation, or utter a ban for myself, and by combining my commitment with God's name this vow has real and binding legal force:

“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.” (Bamidbar 30:2)

Our words have enormous impact. Or maybe more accurately, the power of our intention when coupled with the divine name, create a binding commitment.

But why would a person do this? Why would I want to invoke God's name in an oath? For what purpose?

I would like to share a teaching of my teacher, Rav Yehudah Amital z”l, whose seventh yahrzeit is today. He suggests that people take on vows in a moment of religious weakness, or alternatively religious passion. People who have experienced failure in religious observance are motivated to add restrictions and safeguards, to take oaths and vows, to add stringencies and acts of abstinence to ensure that they will not slide again towards sinfulness. Much like a person who needs to lose weight might vow never to eat pretzels or to exercise daily, people experiencing the impetus for religious advancement might take a vow to distance sin or to expand and intensify their religious commitments.

“The Rambam (Laws of Vows 13:23) writes, “He who takes vows ... to correct his ways ... is praiseworthy.” Nonetheless, in the next paragraph (13:25), he discourages regular usage of vows and sharpens this point in saying that “He who takes a vow is tantamount to having built a *'bama'*” (a sacrificial altar outside the Temple, well intended, but against the law).

What is the meaning of this comparison? A *bama* (external altar) represents a person's desire to depart from the standard route of Temple worship to establish an alternate, personal route. Likewise, self-imposed prohibitions taken through vows also represent a retreat from the

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normative world of mitzvot... rather than remaining content with the commands that God gave, the person chooses the Torah-sanctioned track of vows, thereby isolating himself from the standard world of divine service.

Taken at face value, this scenario does not seem to be negative; on the contrary, the person is motivated by the desire to accept upon himself more obligations. However, one must know where he stands ... who are you to think that you have exhausted the 613 mitzvot which are the most basic level of observance? (- see the opening passage of Midrash Rabbah 22:1)

This issue of vows parallels a phenomenon which is widespread throughout the contemporary world of Jewish observance. Often, Orthodox Jews dismiss what the Halakha requires of them as being a bare minimum, and opt for "chumrot," or a stricter adherence to the laws. I strongly object to this ubiquitous practice - it must rather remain the province of rare individuals of great spiritual attainment. Often, by taking on a stricter level of observance which exceeds what God requires of us, we lose the spiritual component in our worship and instead become overly ritualistic. Instead, we should recognize who we are, and not deem ourselves above the basic level of observance.

...Obviously, I am not suggesting that there is no room for creativity in our worship. However, we must recognize the need to properly channel this creativity. There is ample room within the mitzvot, on their basic level, for each person to leave his mark. Although wearing tefillin has a uniform procedure in a formal sense, as far as spiritual content is concerned, no two people don their tefillin in the same way.

So, to summarize, we must exercise a dual caution with regard to adopting chumrot (halakhic stringencies). 1. We must honestly assess our spiritual level and avoid overreaching ourselves and adopting practices which are not consonant with our level. 2. We must try to find our own personal expression within the standard level of mitzva observance required by the Torah” (<http://etzion.org.il/en/vows-and-stringencies-going-beyond-halakha>)

Please discuss:

- According to Rav Yehuda Amital, why do people take a vow? What is the psychological-religious need for a measure of this sort?
- Maimonides praises the practice of vows as a corrective measure, but also warns that it is wrong as a standard religious path. When is this a positive practice, a sign of strength? What is problematic with this?
- Rav Amital connects this to a religious approach that seeks stringencies. Do you agree with his perspective? Some people, both in general and religious society, do adopt extreme positions in areas that they are passionate. Are extra, personally chosen restrictions and protocols, useful or foolish?

Shabbat Shalom!

To read some more of Rav Amital’s ideas on a related theme, see: <http://etzion.org.il/en/i-dwell-among-my-people>