



# CLASSIC DAF KESHER

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## PARSHAT MATOT פרשת מטות

### DVAR TORAH YOUR MONEY OR YOUR CHILD?

At the beginning of every pidyon haben (redemption of the first born), the halachah mandates the following exchange between the Kohen and the father of the boy: The Kohen asks, "What would you rather have, your first born son or the five silver coins that you're obligated to give to redeem him?" The father responds, "I want this first born son, and here are the silver coins that I'm obligated to give." The interchange sounds strange, for what kind of father would rather take the money than the child?

The simple reason for this conversation is to make sure that the father gives over the expensive silver coins wholeheartedly. The coins are worth a lot, and they must be given to the Kohen with complete intention. But Rabbi Meshulam Isaac (Rav Meshulam) told me that he once heard the following:

This question – "What would you rather have, your first born son or the five silver coins that you're obligated to give to redeem him?" – is not only asked of the father on the day of the pidyon haben, but the parents are asked it over and over again as they raise their children. When they are presented with expenses that are necessary for proper chinuch (education) and they hesitate to take them on, the parents of the child are asked, "What do you want, your money or your child?" Are your priorities straight?

This message is brought out in Parshat Shavua. The tribes of Reuven and Gad have a lot of livestock. The land on the Eastern side of the Jordan is good grazing land, and they want to settle there. Moshe Rabbeinu tells them how important it is to cross the Yarden with the rest of the people and join their brothers in the conquest of Eretz Yisrael. They begin their response: "גדרות צאן נבנה למקננו וערים לטפינו" – "We will build pens for our animals and cities for our children and then go and fight" (Bamidbar 32:16). Rashi points out that the men of Reuven and Gad mention their animals – their property – before their children. Moshe Rabbeinu corrects them later and says: "בנו לכם ערים לטפכם" "וגדרות לצאנכם" – "Build cities for your children and pens for your animals" (Bamidbar 32:24). Get your priorities straight.

No one would suggest that if the tribes of Reuven or Gad were asked, "Would you rather have children or sheep?" they would say, "We'll take the sheep."

But Moshe, through his subtle correction of the order they mentioned their children and livestock, taught them and us an important lesson. We should **internalize** correct priorities deeply. They should be so much a part of us that they are naturally reflected in our speech, our choice of words and their order. If we internalize our priorities properly, when subtle conflicts come up, we'll respond to them correctly and make the right choices. When we're asked, "Your money or your child?" we'll answer, "My child."

## SOURCE GUIDE:

# VOWS AND THE HEADS OF THE TRIBES

Why does Moshe direct the laws of nedarim (vows) to the heads of the tribes? The halachic answer is that only a great sage can annul a vow. However, this solution presents difficulties. For instance, why is that law not just incorporated into the later section of the passage that deals with annulling vows? This source guide is based on the essay that appears in the Netivot Shalom on Parshat Pinchas. The author deals with this and three other difficulties.

### 1. Bamidbar 30:2

Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes of the Children of Israel, saying, "This is the matter that Hashem commanded."

### במדבר ל:ב

וידבר משה אל ראשי המטות לבני ישראל  
לאמר זה הדבר אשר צוה ה'.

### 2. Rashi on Bamidbar 30:2

He showed deference to the heads of the tribes by teaching them first, and only afterwards the rest of the Children of Israel. How do we know that this was also the case by other Divine statements? We are taught through the verse, "Aharon and all of the princes of the congregation returned, and Moshe spoke with them, and afterwards all of the Children of Israel approached" (Shemot 34:31-32). Why, then, did he choose to note this (that the heads of tribes learned before the rest of Israel) here? It teaches that annulling vows is done through an individual who is an expert. If there is not an expert it can be done through three normal people (Bava Batra 120). Perhaps Moshe taught this passage **only** to the princes? [That is not the case, for] our passage uses the expression "this is the matter" and the passage about slaughtering outside of the Temple also uses the expression "this is the matter" (Vayikra 17:2). Just like that was taught to Aharon and his children and all of Israel, as it says, "Speak to Aharon ..." so this was taught to all of them.

### רש"י על במדבר ל:ב

ראשי המטות – חלק כבוד לנשיאים ללמדם  
תחלה ואחר כך לכל בני ישראל. ומנין שאף  
שאר הדברות כן? ת"ל: "וישובו אליו אהרן  
וכל הנשיאים בעדה וידבר משה אליהם  
ואחרי כן נגשו כל בני" (שמות לד:לא-  
לב). ומה ראה לאומרה כאן? למד שהפרת  
נדרים ביחיד מומחה, ואם אין יחיד מומחה  
מפר בשלשה הדיוטות (ב"ב קכ). או יכול  
שלא אמר משה פרשה זו אלא לנשיאים  
בלבד? נאמר כאן "זה הדבר" ונאמר  
בשחוטאי חוץ "זה הדבר" (ויקרא יז:ב). מה  
להלן נאמרה לאהרן ולבניו ולכל בני ישראל  
שנא' "דבר אל אהרן וגו'", אף זו נאמרה  
לכולן.

The non-standard opening of our Parshah is the textual basis of the halachah that a **חכם** (great sage) can annul a vow by himself. The Slonimer Rebbe, Harav Shalom Noach Brozofsky זצ"ל (1911-2000) in the Netivot Shalom on our Parshah, points out a number of difficulties connected with this.

## A. Four Difficulties

1. Annulling vows appears only later in the passage, when it speaks of a husband or father annulling a wife's or daughter's vow. Why does the law of a sage annulling a vow appear at the opening of the parsha and not later on?
2. What is behind the sage's unique power? The husband's and father's ability to annul a wife's or daughter's vow can be explained as deriving from those special relationships with the woman who vows. But where does the sage's power come from? What enables him to annul the vow of any Jew?
3. The whole concept of a vow is also a unique but puzzling halachic phenomenon. What is the source of this ability the Torah gave us to create a binding prohibition by a mere verbal declaration? The ability to sanctify a sacrifice (hekdesh) by a vow is less problematic. Through hekdesh a person verbally transfers the animal to the Temple. It is then naturally prohibited for anyone to benefit from it. A vow, though, can be created that only prohibits something to one person. How?
4. According to the Sifrei Zuta, a non-Jew's vow is not halachically binding. This seems inconsistent with the halachah that a non-Jew's sacrifice is offered in the Temple and has the status of hekdesh (sanctified property). It is prohibited to derive benefit from a sacrifice set aside by a non-Jew. Why does a non-Jew saying, "This piece of bread is prohibited," not create a halachically binding vow, whereas a non-Jew saying, "This animal is dedicated as a sacrifice to the Temple," does create a halachically legitimate sacrifice?

## B. Two Assumptions

His answer is based on two assumptions:

A. Sanctifying speech is likened by Rabbeinu Yonah to placing an object inside a holy vessel of the Temple.

According to the halachah, something that enters the vessel takes on the sanctity of the vessel. Just as the mouth is holy, so the words that go through it have holiness. This is the source of the power of a vow – that a statement of holiness can create a personal prohibition.

This would seemingly only apply to the sages and holy men of Judaism, whose speech is so holy that it can create such a prohibition. The sages of the beit din (rabbinical court) can, for instance, create the sanctity of the holidays through their declaration of the new month. This explains the juxtaposition in the Torah of the passage of vows (the beginning of this week's parshah) and that of the holidays (the end of the last). Why can all the rest of the Jews sanctify speech?

B. To explain this, we need the second of the Netivot Shalom's two assumptions (he quotes the sefer Torat Avot, section Emunat Chakhamim), that the influx of Divine good to the Jewish people in all the generations comes down via its spiritual leaders. Similarly, the power of sanctification through speech comes down to normal Jews through the channel of their intrinsic connection with their spiritual leaders.

Now the difficulties we mentioned above fit into place.

This is why the law of annulling vows by a sage is mentioned at the opening of the parshah, and not along with the law of the father and husband. The whole basis of the power to make vows is our connection with the sages, the "heads of the tribes," who have the gift of high level sanctification of speech. A sage annulling a vow takes away the power that initially came through him. This is why a vow annulled by a sage is retroactively uprooted – as if it never existed – whereas when a father or husband annuls his wife's or daughter's vow it is only "cut off" from then on, but is not retroactively uprooted.

We can now also understand the reason why when a non-Jew makes a vow it does not halachically take effect, but when he dedicates a sacrifice to the Temple it has sanctity and is offered on the altar. When he says, "This animal is sanctified as a sacrifice," he legally transfers it to the Temple and it thereby derives its status. Making a vow, saying, "This object is prohibited to me," can only take effect through the connection to the sages. He lacks this connection, as well as the power of high level sanctification of speech that comes with it. Declaring an animal a sacrifice, though, only entails making a legal transfer of the animal to the Temple (something that the non-Jew can also do), not creating sanctity. The sanctity comes automatically to anything under the Temple's control. The power of vows, though, demands an intrinsic connection with the sages and spiritual leaders, the "heads of the tribes."

## “THIS” VS. “SO” BY RABBI MENDEL FARBER

The Parshah begins with Moshe saying to the heads of the tribes, “זֶה הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה'” – “This is the matter Hashem has commanded” (Bamidbar 30:2). Rashi points out that only Moshe introduced his prophecies with both the pronoun “זֶה” – “this” – and also with the adverb “כֵּן” – “so.” All of the other נביאים (prophets) introduced their prophecies only with the word “כֵּן” – “so.”

The word “this” implies a visual clarity not available when described with the adverb “so.” The difference between the two introductions, “this” and “so,” indicates two types of prophecy. There is one type of prophecy shown to all the prophets, Moshe included; and there is another type of prophecy shown to Moshe alone.

The first is prophecy as it applies to history; the second is the prophetic revelation of Torah. History is the result of human interaction with Divine purpose. Torah is the pure Divine design for all physical existence in history – before humans interface and interact with it. Hashem’s intent was for Man to create history that will perfectly mirror His plan.

But, alas, Man has free will and history developed in a way that did not reflect the Divine design. Human deviation from the ideal resulted in many different Heavenly reactions. Those reactions are found in all the words of all the prophets. Those reactions, not being imperative, are introduced with the adverb “so” – “כֵּן אָמַר ה'”, whereas the Torah prophesied by Moshe was the imperative, unchanging Divine ideal for existence that was prefaced with “this” – “זֶה הַדָּבָר”, the definitive pronoun.

This difference between the prophetic revelation of the ideal and the prophetic revelation of its realization was told to us in the beginning of Matot in the Parshah of vows, in the Parshah that teaches us the power of speech. A person, through speech, can create upon himself a Torah obligation, This is an amazing thought to contemplate, that a person has such power in his speech.

Why is the beginning of Parshat Matot the location in the Torah that Hashem chose to define the two different types of prophecy? Defining prophecy in this Parshah teaches us that all of our speech is in some way connected to prophecy, to Divine revelation. The ability to talk was created when Hashem breathed into us our soul of life. That breath became a “speaking spirit” (see Targum Unkelos on Bereishit 2:7). What was that spirit meant to say? It was meant to reveal the צֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים (image of G-d) that was breathed into us. There is no way that we can reveal our true essence and our true dignity other than through speech. Without speech the human essence remains an unrevealed secret.

May we have the זְכוּת (merit) to unravel that inner dimension within us and reveal it through the proper use of our כַּחַת הַדִּבְרֹת (power of speech). And may Hashem protect us from that ugly, destructive עֲבִירָה (sin), of לְשׁוֹן הָרַע (evil speech).

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