

# INSIGHTS

## Into The Weekly Parsha

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This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Yentka Bas Yitzchak, Paul Koenigsberg's mother. "May her Neshama have an Aliya!"

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Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS MATTOS-MASEI

## A Man of Your Word

**Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes of Bnei Yisroel saying, "This is the matter that Hashem commanded: If a man takes a vow to Hashem or swears an oath..." (30:2-3)**

*Parshas Mattos* begins with Moshe introducing the laws of vows to the heads of the tribes. Rashi (ad loc) points out that this was a remarkable departure from Moshe's usual method of teaching of the laws of the Torah to Bnei Yisroel, and that Moshe taught the heads of the tribes first as a way of according them honor. Rashi also notes that a tribunal of three common people can nullify a vow if no expert in vows is available.

The holy day of Yom Kippur begins with this concept of vows – *Kol Nidrei*. What is so essential about the laws of vows that it opens the service on what is arguably the most intense day on the Jewish calendar?

The Talmud (*Bava Basra* 88a) comments on the verse "speaks truth in his heart" (*Psalms* 15) as referring to someone who truly fears Hashem. Curiously, the Gemara found it necessary to give an example of such a person: Rav Safra. Rashi (ad loc) goes on to explain how Rav Safra came to be the paragon of this virtue:

Rav Safra was in the middle of saying *Krias Shema* when someone approached him to buy something that Rav Safra was selling. The buyer proceeded to offer a sum of money for the item he wished to buy. Rav Safra, who was still *davening*, was silent. The buyer understood Rav Safra's silence as a reluctance to sell because the sum wasn't high enough, so he kept raising his offer until it was a very large sum of money. Once Rav Safra finished his prayers he turned to the

buyer and sold it to him for the original price offered. Rav Safra explained, "I had already decided after hearing your first offer to accept the original amount offered."

Most people are raised valuing the concept of "keeping your word." Unfortunately, modern society has all but abandoned this ideal; in fact, in some cultures a signed contract is only a basis for further negotiation. In general, this notion of being "a man (or woman) of your word" is seen as being morally binding because, once you give your word, someone else has ownership over your expected performance, which in turn causes them to make decisions and commitments of their own based on your word.

But, we see from the Gemara that there is really a much more profound reason for keeping your word. The story that Rashi cites has nothing to do with keeping your word; Rav Safra was silent the entire time, he never committed to a price. Why was Rav Safra bound to fulfill the price that he had only agreed to in his mind?

The answer is because there is a much higher truth that we are ALL bound to: we are obligated to be truthful to ourselves. We don't have to live up to our word because someone else has relied on it and made decisions based upon it; we have to fulfill our word because we said it and we have an obligation to ourselves to make it a reality. This is why the verse



says, "speaks truth in his heart" (*Psalms* 15): It has nothing to do with our commitments to other people – the basis for keeping our word is that we owe it to ourselves. That is what the whole discussion in this week's *parsha* regarding vows is about: when a person takes something that is permitted and forbids it from himself.

We often feel like we own the rights to ourselves. Therefore, even if we make commitments to ourselves (I will stop smoking, I will lose weight, etc.), we often have no compunction at all, or perhaps only a fleeting sense of guilt, about breaking our promises to ourselves. This is wrong. We don't own ourselves, we are here as a gift of the Almighty. Our responsibility to ourselves lie in the obligation to Hashem; that's why the Gemara calls those like Rav Safra "those that truly fear Hashem."

This is why the subject of vows is so central to the Yom Kippur service. We acknowledge that we understand that even within commitments to ourselves we have an obligation to Hashem. Only when we articulate the severity of the obligation that comes with giving our word, can we commit to fulfilling our word and changing our ways through *teshuvah*. This is the very essence of Yom Kippur, and thus why we begin with *Kol Nidrei*.

# Violations and Obligations

*Hashem spoke to Moshe saying, “Take vengeance for Bnei Yisroel from the Midianites...” (31:1-2)*

Hashem asked Moshe to go to war with Midian and take revenge for what they did to the Jewish people. Interestingly enough, Moshe chose not to go himself, but rather sent Pinchas to lead Bnei Yisroel into battle. This seems somewhat odd as Hashem told **Moshe** to take vengeance on the Midianites. Why didn't he go himself? Is it possible that it was because he was getting up there in years? However, just shortly prior, Moshe himself defeated the two greatest world powers: Sichon and Og. So why didn't he go fight the Midianites as Hashem had commanded?

There is a concept known as *hakoras hatov* – recognizing the good that someone has done for us. We see this in Egypt when it came to striking the water to create the plagues of blood and frogs. Aharon was asked to perform these plagues instead of Moshe because both these plagues entailed afflicting the Nile and the Nile had served to protect Moshe when he was a baby (see *Rashi Shemos* 7:19). Similarly, Moshe was not permitted to strike the ground for the third plague (lice) as the earth had helped him by hiding the corpse of the Egyptian whom he struck down (see *Rashi Shemos* 8:12).

So too, Moshe could not possibly attack the Midianites because he owed them a debt of gratitude from when he was a fugitive from Egyptian justice. Eventually, he also married the daughter of Yisro, a high priest in Midian, and had children there.

We see something quite fascinating here; even though Hashem clearly told Moshe to go and take vengeance from the Midianites, Moshe understood that he himself could not go because that would display a deep sense of personal disloyalty. The Torah is teaching us an

incredible lesson: Hashem doesn't just issue a command and in doing so, abrogate a core principle and tenet of Jewish philosophy. Moshe understood that even though Hashem wanted the Midianites to pay for what they had done, it was inappropriate for **him** to lead an attack.

This message is often lost on those who blindly follow what they believe to be the right course of religious action, believing they are doing it for the sake of Hashem. In fact, the Torah gives us an example of a person who had every intention of acting for the sake of heaven, but the Torah castigates her for what she wanted to do.

The wife of Potiphar was trying to seduce Yosef in order to have children with him – believing that she saw in her astrological signs that some of the Jewish tribes would descend from her. The Torah considers her act so repulsive that she is called a “wild animal” for what she wanted to do; even though she thought she was doing it for the sake of Hashem.

Having the right intention isn't enough. We cannot abrogate Hashem's other commandments to fulfill those that we would like to do, or to make social commentary (e.g. throwing rocks on Shabbos at cars traveling through a religious neighborhood). We must remember that Hashem places the highest importance on the value of *shalom*, even allowing His name to be erased for the **possibility** of *shalom*. Finally, it is important to remember that Hashem destroyed the generation of the flood because they were fighting with each other, while he kept the generation of the disbursement alive because they got along (even though their unity was really only grounded in fighting a war against Hashem).

## Did You Know...

Right before the Jewish people went into *Eretz Yisroel*, Hashem commands them to drive out the previous inhabitants, to destroy their idols, and to destroy their places of worship.

Interestingly, what the Arabs call their temple (mosque) comes from the word the Torah uses here to say place of worship (*maskiyosem*). Similarly, Christians refer to their church as a house of worship.

This is telling because it shows us how the non-Jews view their temples: as a place to worship their god. This is in stark contrast to how Jews view it, as a *beis haknesses*. The literal translation simply means “a house of gathering,” a place where we can come together and pray. Although the difference seems subtle, it is profoundly different.

Essentially, non-Jews view worshipping god as something that is reserved to their individual temples and no more. In contrast, Jews view *avodas Hashem* as something that we do every second of every day. We ought to do it in *shul*, but if for whatever reason that isn't feasible, we *daven* at home or while traveling. The only difference between everyday worship and worshipping in a *beis haknesses* (or a *shul*) is the importance of a gathering, mainly that Hashem's presence rests on a group (of ten or more men) and, as Maimonides tells us, the prayers of a congregation never go unanswered. Summarily, non-Jews view worship as an act of going somewhere and completing something, while Jews understand that *avodas Hashem* has to be a complete lifestyle and an integral part of everything that we do.



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