

CLASS 55 - MATOS - MASEI

by Rabbi Heshy Grossman

When a man makes a vow or oath, he dare not violate his word, for this would be a violation of the Torah itself. The promise and commitment of a human being, although independently arrived at, carries the weight of Torah law.

By what power can man place a prohibition on certain objects? For example: a man determines that eating baked goods is an indulgence that leads him to sin, and vows never to enter a bakery, or eat their wares. How can he transform items that the Torah itself has permitted?

In our shiur this week, we will answer this question, explaining why a good man must be as good as his word.

1

What is the difference between a Neder and a Shavua?

The Talmud explains that while Nedarim impose prohibitions on a particular object, a Shavua is an obligation that man imposes upon himself - an 'Issur Cheftza' vs. an 'Issur Gavra'.

The Ramban, quoting the Sifri, discusses this idea in a cryptic passage:

"What is the difference between Nedarim and Shavuot? - Nedarim is to vow by the life of the king, while Shavuot is as if one swears by the king himself." (Ramban, Bamidbar 30:3)

In disputing the view of Rashi, the Ramban posits that while an ordinary oath cannot impact upon Torah requirements, a Neder overrides certain Torah obligations. For example, one may vow never to build a Sukkah, or wear Tefillin, and this Neder subsequently binds him.

"...and the secret is that Shavua is a language of 'Sheva' - seven, for the 'home is built with seven hewn pillars', while a Neder is with 'Tevunah' - 'the origin of His works, preceding all His acts.' We find, therefore, that a Neder can take effect even upon a Mitzva, as well as common matters...." (Ramban, ibid.)

Seven is always synonymous with the natural cycle, and the oath of man relates to the revealed world, one created in seven days. In that world, Hashem has revealed right and wrong, and the individual preference of one particular person cannot supersede G-d's command.

A Neder, however, reflects a deeper dimension, where man has the ability to relate to G-d in his own unique way, notwithstanding the Torah given to all of Israel. On this level, each person has his own

contribution to make in the realization of the Divine plan, and man sanctifies the object of his Nedarim with his own word.

Let us explain.

2

Man's word is more than a means of communication. It is the expression of an inner self, the vehicle by which his true identity emerges to the surface.

The average individual says much, but does little, and his words are often empty pledges, uttered only to assuage the demands of his conscience. Once the promise is made, he can now safely ignore his commitments, rationalizing that he has already given his word. He will never admit that subconsciously, his promise has no substance or staying power.

This is "Nidrei Reshaim" (Nedarim ga) - a promise that will never come to fruition.

From the Torah's perspective, this is the sign of a wicked man, one who distances himself from G-d, whose own sign and seal is Emes - absolute truth. In contrast, the righteous man speaks little but does a lot, for he never takes himself lightly. He understands that his words express his essence, and he hopes to attach himself to the eternally unchanging Rock of Ages, imitating His ways.

For this reason, a vow can be revoked only in special circumstances, such as evidence that the promise undertaken was subject to another's authority, or was otherwise unreflective of one's personal will. In both these cases, this pledge cannot be binding, for it lacks the total commitment of unyielding truth that is the hallmark of a valid Neder.

The perfect dedication of a Neder matches G-d's immutable word, and hence every vow has a status similar to Torah law. While an ordinary Shavua obligates man only to the extent that his words do not conflict with the Torah, a Neder takes this concept one step further, granting independent authority and a heavenly imprimatur to man's verbal expressions.

"What is the difference between Nedarim and Shavuos? - Nedarim is to vow by the life of the king, while Shavuos is as if one swears by the king himself."

The 'king himself' is a reference to the body of the king, his physical presence. A Shavua - related to 'Sheva' - reflects the seven stages of creation, the means by which G-d the King finds expression in the revealed world. Therefore, a Shavua is an 'Issur Gavra' - an obligation imposed upon man, who is committed to act accordingly.

The laws of the Torah are likewise a revelation of G-d's will, giving direction to mortal man, and defining the proper path, while prohibiting the forbidden fruit. A Shavua does not go beyond this boundary, for it is part of G-d's revealed world, the body of the king. This is the man who succeeds in aligning himself with the truth of His word, both good and evil, truth and falsehood, and he plays his part in faithfully carrying out the king's command.

A Neder is something more.

The Neder is the 'life of the king' - the inner spirit of man. As opposed to the body of the king, which is an allusion to the physical actions in the world of creation, a Neder touches a different dimension, one that lies above our own. Chazal explain that the word Neder refers to 'Nun Dar' - a place where the presence of G-d unites as one with creation. This is the fiftieth gate which is concealed and unknown, the origin of all life.

In simpler terms: the Neder is a function of man's spirit and intellect, and it is on this level that man has the ability to sanctify every object in creation. As opposed to a Shavua, a Neder is an 'Issur Cheftza' - and man's vow has the capability of transforming simple objects into Hekdesh.

Kedushah is brought to earth when man unifies his physical being with his inner spirit. The material world - in and of itself - possesses no sanctity, but becomes elevated only when man infuses his deeds with the proper intent and inspiration. This is the unique capability of Nedarim - the possibility of granting the status of Torah to even the mundane objects of our own world.

As opposed to a Shavua, which merely insures that man will behave as he must, every Neder is an expression of man at his best - reflecting the height of his power - a Tzelem Elokim whose words equate with those of his Creator.

The goal and purpose of creation is the ultimate unification of G-d and His world, where the singularity of One G-d is paralleled with the perfect symmetry of a world that matches this total unity, faithfully expressing His will.

The will of G-d is the 'life of the king', and when this will becomes manifest in the world, the entire existence acquires life, purpose, and direction. This is the trait of Malchus - and the man who successfully translates his thought and pledge into actions, forever consistent in word and deed, becomes a full partner in revealing the eternal kingdom, with every object of his expression a vehicle of sanctity - a 'Cheftza' of Kedushah.

While the Mitzvos of the Torah relate to the physical world, providing a path that defines both right, wrong, and every alternative in between, the Neder is an element of a world of perfect unity, where G-d's will is the only reality. Hence, the Neder is effective even when conflicting with the Torah itself, for in the world of G-d there can be no conflict.

This is a world where the intent of G-d is destined to be revealed, for whatever G-d says will be - "Hu Amar - VaYehi - He said - and it came to be" (morning prayers)

The man who learns this lesson well appreciates the value of his speech and the significance of his promise, and he strives to validate his life with the word of G-d that echoes for eternity.

"...Zeh HaDavar Asher Tzivah Hashem.....Ish Ki Yidor Neder LaHashem...K'Chol Asher Yotze MiPiv Ya'aseh." (BaMidbar 30:2-3)

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