

HOLY WORDS

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Holy Words¹

Kedushah, at least the Torah's conception of it, eludes our quick comprehension. Sacred space, sacred time, sacred objects - these are so intuitive that almost every religion has them. But the Torah goes well beyond the intuitive. Sanctity to other people is assumed to be innate in some things, or created through contact or association with something already sacred. According to our Torah, however, sanctity can be manufactured at will. Take an ordinary object, and simply designate it as *hekdes*, and it becomes *hekdes*. (When this happens, the object is changed profoundly and essentially. We do not simply look at it differently, or treat it differently. More than its legal status has changed. We understand that the object has turned into something new and different.)

Moreover, a verbal designation suffices to make the transformation. Holiness comes about simply through words.

The first verses of our *parshah* convey an even greater surprise. Words - ordinary words whose aim is not to create holiness in some object - are also holy! The Torah instructs us to carefully uphold our vows. What happens when we fail to do so? We are not described as abrogating our vow, or violating it, as we might suppose. The Torah calls it a "desecration" of our word.² By what argument are they holy, that they can be desecrated? Nothing changes intrinsically through a vow. The one who took the vow must relate to its object differently - but no one else must.

Can words alone be this holy?

Some details of the *parshah* are also jarring. The *parshah* addresses "the heads of the tribes."³ Nowhere else in the Torah does Hashem direct His mitzvah to them. The halachic implication of this is well established, as cited by Rashi. Those similar to the recognized stature of the heads of the tribes, i.e. those who have recognized expertise in the area of *nedarim*, are the ones who as single individuals are empowered to revoke vows. Why, though, would the Torah teach us how to revoke vows before explaining the vows themselves?

Some powerful imagery from Rabbenu Yonah⁴ provides a partial answer. The *keli shares* - one of the ministering vessels used in the *beis hamikdash* - plays a major role in the process of the *avodah*. The *minchah* offering takes on the full status of *korban* when it is introduced into the *keli*. Since the *keli* is

holy, it has the capacity to invest its contents with holiness.

By extension, a Jew's mouth can become nothing less than a *keli shares*! We should not be surprised, therefore, that the contents of the mouth - the words that it forms and releases - should become sanctified as well.

Why would the mouth rise to the level of *keli shares*, more than any other part of the body? Surely we serve Hashem with every part of ourselves, and every bit of energy He gives us! The mouth, however, stands out from other parts of ourselves. It is with our mouths that we perform so many of the mitzvos that are constant and unceasing. We use our mouths to study Torah, the all-important mitzvah which devolves upon us at all times. Prayer is a constant preoccupation; some of the remembrance-mitzvos like remembering Amalek, and remembering Shabbos through Kiddush are performed by oral declaration. The mouth excels among all the organs of the body in its service of G-d. It truly is a ministering vessel, constantly enabling our *avodah*!

As attractive as this thought might be, it appears to suffer from a fatal flaw. While the mouth can become a *keli shares* for some people, for too many others the vessel is flawed and damaged. Not everyone succeeds in turning his mouth into a constant tool of Divine service, and yet all Jews can make binding vows!

Earlier, we puzzled over the Torah's addressing the *parshah* to the heads of the *shevatim*, and to placing the reference to them front and center, before even setting forth the basic components of vows. The *seforim ha-kedoshim* make an observation that sets off a cascade of associations, leading to a solution of our problem. Immediately preceding our *parshah*, the Torah lists all the holidays of the calendar and their special offerings. The celebration of these holidays depends upon the leaders of the community, the larger group from which the "heads of the tribes" are drawn. The chief *beis din* meets and declares which of two days is Rosh Chodesh, and when to insert the intercalated month of the leap year into the calendar. The holiday observances are completely dependant upon these actions of the court. Moreover, these actions are really not actions at all, but verbal declarations. Once again, the power of words surfaces and displays its importance. Mentioning the "heads of the tribes" at the very beginning of our *parshah* serves as a logical bridge between two similar Torah sections. Both of them demonstrate the value and power of the speech of those who have turned their mouths into instruments of holiness.

The connection between these sections can be appreciated at a deeper level. *Toras Avos* teaches that the Divine Word is directed each day to humanity, but is only received by the heads of the community and the masters of Torah. (When Chazal taught⁵ that Yiftach in his generation is like the Shmuel of his, this is what they had in mind. Despite Yiftach's lesser stature relative to Shmuel, he still served in a similar role. As the de facto head of his generation, Hashem's Word came to Yiftach's generation through him.) Others benefit from the Divine Influence through their connection with Torah leaders.

The mouths of ordinary people, despite being unperfected vessels, nonetheless can generate holiness because their leaders receive the Divine Influence, and use it to produce *kedushah*. The leaders sanctify Rosh Chodesh; they sanctify the holidays; they sanctify ordinary speech. Some of that power is shared with the ordinary members of the community. This power manifests itself in the institution of vows, which allows the holiness of words and speech to create new requirements and restrictions which should not be desecrated.

Any person's vow can be undone by the Torah scholar. He serves in the same capacity as a father regarding the vows of his daughter, and the husband regarding the vows of his wife. Because the daughter and wife to some extent answer to the authority of others, those others are empowered to restrict certain vows. Similarly, all Jews derive their power to make vows from the Torah leaders to whom they subordinate themselves. Their vows are contingent upon them. When they do not approve, these leaders can make the vows disappear.

Torah leaders are what make the vows possible in the first place. It thus makes perfect sense that the *parshah* should be addressed to them, and begins with them. By directing the Divine Influence to us, they potentiate our speech, giving mere words the ability to be spiritually significant. (The Gemara tells us that the laws of the Sage releasing people from vows are not so well sourced in the text as other laws. They "float in the air."⁶ In truth, these laws do not need to be made explicit. Without the Sage, there would be no significance to the vows we make. It is intuitive that the Sage have a key role in validating or dismissing them.)

Non-Jews cannot make halachically significant vows. They can, however, consecrate animals as offerings in the Temple. Clearly, their speech can direct objects to the "ownership" of the Temple estate. These objects then have changed status relative to everyone. Their words, however, cannot create personalized transgressions that apply to no one else but the person who uttered them. Such power only come through the chief Torah personalities, with which non-Jews have no connection.

Our words, it seems, are supercharged with holiness-generating capacity, drawing from the Divine Word itself, which is brought near to us by our association with Torah personalities. Comprehending this source of all vows gives us new appreciation of the gift of speech, and our responsibility to use it wisely.

¹ Based on Nesivos Shalom, pgs. 165-166; 164

² Bamidbar 30:3

³ Ibid. 30:2

⁴ Avos 1:17

⁵ Rosh Hashanah 25B

⁶ Chagigah 10A

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