

# AN OATH

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

*When a person makes a vow to God, or takes an oath to forbid something to himself, he should not profane his words; all that he said he must fulfill. (Bamidbar 30:3)*

Today, as of the writing of this parshah sheet, it is the yartzheit of the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh, or Rabbi Chaim ben Moshe ibn Attar (1696-1743), a Talmudist, kabbalist, and one of the most prominent rabbis of Morocco in his time.

Born to a well respected and wealthy family, and extremely talented even as child, he was destined to be a community leader. In 1733, he decided to leave Morocco and settle in Eretz Yisroel, which, at the time, had been part of the Ottoman Empire. However, while on the way, the wealthy members of the Jewish community, who established a yeshivah for him, detained him in Livorno.

Due to his extensive knowledge, sharp intellect, and extraordinary righteousness, he was received with great honor everywhere he went. Finally, in 1742 he arrived in Jerusalem, where he presided over the Knesses Yisroel Bais Midrash.

Rabbi Chaim Yosef Dovid Azulai, a student of the Ohr HaChaim, wrote the following:

"Attar's heart pulsated with Talmud; he uprooted mountains like a restless torrent; his holiness was that of an angel of God ... having severed all connection with the affairs of this world."

Some of the many works the Ohr HaChaim published include: Chefetz Hashem, on the four tractates of the Talmud, Berachos, Shabbos, Horayos, and Chullin; Ohr ha-Chaim on the Torah, for which he is best known; Pri Toar, novellae on Yoreh De'ah of the Shulchan Aruch, and Rishon L'Tzion, novellae on several tractates from the Talmud, certain portions of the Shulchan Aruch, the terminology of the Rambam, the five megillos, and on Navi (the Prophets) and Mishlei (Proverbs).

Remarkably, he accomplished all of this by the young age of 47 years, at which time he died and was buried on the Mount of Olives, in Jerusalem. And now, after having said all of this, it is only fitting to write something based upon the writings of the Ohr HaChaim himself, who commented on the verse mentioned above:

When a person makes a vow to God, etc.: We need to know why the language is doubled ... This is not something that is noticeable from the English, but in Hebrew, it is written yidor neder LaHashem, when it would have been sufficient to write, yidor LaHahem. Asks the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh: why the extra word?

Furthermore, why the double-language when it says, "he should not profane his words" and "all that he said he must fulfill"?

Technically-speaking, they mean the same thing: the only way to not profane the words of one's vow or oath is by fulfilling them. What is implied by employing both phrases?

It is this way because there are two kinds of vows and oaths, the first one to do with matters relevant to the soul, and this category can also be divided into two kinds. The first kind is for the sake of performing good deeds, like learning, teaching, and to sanctify oneself for acts of lovingkindness, and the other type is in order to distance oneself from disgusting things, such as not living in a neighborhood with a questionable woman, or to not keep company with sinners, etc.

In other words, this first category of vows or oaths is in order strengthen oneself in the performance of mitzvos, or to protect oneself against the committing of sins. It is a way of making a fence for the sake of following through with Torah obligations, or to avoid committing Torah prohibitions, both of which are matters pertaining to the soul.

The second category has to do with matters of the body, with actions that are neither mitzvos nor prohibitions, and they also divide into two: to eat and to drink or to live in a specific apartment, etc., or to not eat something, or to not wear something, or similar.

In other words, for personal reasons, the person has decided to make a mitzvah out of that which the Torah does not, or to forbid that which the Torah permits. Once the vow is made to this effect, it is as if eating the food, etc., or not eating the food etc., is a Torah mitzvah, since the fulfillment of a vow is a Torah mitzvah.

And God commanded His judgments, in order for a person to know what to do, and has said, *ki yidor neder ...* because there are vows that are to God, and their laws are different from profane vows, as the Torah will explain ...

Hence, the double language of the Torah is to indicate that there are two kinds of vows that can be made, and that the laws vary regarding them.

As to why the Torah sees fit to discuss the laws of vows and oaths at this point, there are a few explanations. One is mentioned by Rashi, and it has more to do with the end of last week's parshah than the beginning of this week's parshah, which deals with the war against Midian for their role in the downfall of the Jewish people at the end of Parashas Balak.

Another explanation has to do with the power of speech to control action, something that the Jewish people had failed to do during the crisis in Shittim. Indeed, the entire episode represented something not so distant from all of us, an example of how we can "innocently" wander into spiritual danger, and as a result, gravely falter. And, if it was a problem back then, it has become a much, much greater problem today, when "wandering" into a "bad neighborhood" can happen as easily as going into the Internet. The word *neder* — vow — is spelled: Nun-Dalet-Raish. As is the case with all

Torah-based Hebrew words, the concept is embedded in the letters themselves. Hence, the word can be broken down into two parts, the letter Nun, which is always an allusion to the Nun Sha'arei Binah — the Fifty Gates of Understanding — and the letters Dalet-Raish, which is the Hebrew for "dwell." An apartment is called a "dirah."

Together, they mean "Nun," or "50," "dwells," or as we have just mentioned, the Nun Sha'arei Binah — the Fifty Gates of Understanding — dwell, as in, are present. That is, a vow is, or at least should be, a function of the Fifty Gates of Understanding, which prompt one to make a vow, and to fulfill it.

This is because the level of Binah is also the level of teshuvah, for without understanding, one cannot do teshuvah. For, teshuvah is a function of recognition, recognition of what is, what must be, and what has gone wrong. It is completely a function of one's appreciation of the damage that is done to the world and to oneself as a result of sinning, even a little sinning.

This is because, the effects of a sin, for the most part, remain hidden, at least for a period of time. Not always, and actually, rarely, are the spiritual and physical effects of a sin apparent at the time of the act itself. Sometimes, by the time the effect actually makes itself to our vision of reality, we'll have long ago forgotten what we might have done to bring about such a result.

As they say, "the best defense is an offense," which is what the Talmud implies when it states:

Who is a wise man? One who sees what is being born. (Tamid 32a)

Why is that a definition of a wise man? Because it takes a wise man to see what he is doing now, and to project into the future and see the impact his actions can potentially have. It takes someone who has access to the Nun Sha'arei Binah to understand the damaging effect of today's sin, tomorrow.

And not just that, it takes someone with binah to appreciate now, while feeling safe and secure, how easy it is to fall prey to the evils of the world, just like that. As the Talmud, teaches, we're not supposed to trust ourselves until the day we die, if then at all, and it takes a chacham — a wise person — to appreciate why this is so, and how to counteract it.

This is because, so many sins begin with something that is perfectly permissible to do. Indeed, the act itself, under the right circumstances, may not only be harmless, but inspiring. For example, the Jews had merely gone shopping for linen when Bilaam's evil plot was sprung upon them, pulling them into terrible sins against their will.

And, it was not by coincidence that the Jewish people were affected after approaching the Midianite tents, as opposed to the Midianites approaching the Jewish people. Everything in the physical world is a function of spiritual realities, and therefore, the physical world is a function of spiritual intentions, which can affect those who use it. There is no question that, part of the spiritual trap, the Midianite tents were infused with both a physical and spiritual atmosphere that would weaken Jewish resolve.

It's like being a conscious trance. You may be aware of who you are and where you are, but unaware

of the impact that the environment in which you find yourself is having on you, including your drives and spiritual defenses. You have to be more than just a good psychologist to figure all of that out, and to properly respond to it.

People who have realized this, or at least have come to understand the potential for such realities, avoid potentially spiritually problematic situations from the start. And, understanding the power of rationalization, and the ability to use a permissible situation to end up in a forbidden one, they have employed a secret weapon with which this week's parshah begins: the neder. To protect themselves, they use the power of speech to turn a permissible, but potentially forbidden situation, into a completely forbidden one.

In other words, with a single statement, one can turn kosher meat into treif meat. Not that the meat is actually transformed for everyone; for everyone else, the meat is still kosher. But, if the person who took the vow not to eat the meat in fact does so, it is as if, for him, he has indeed eaten treif meat, and is likewise culpable.

Hence, vows are serious realities. There are many laws regarding what constitutes a vow, and how one must act once the vow, or oath, has been made. However, even if one does not make a vow, the wise advice still applies: know your spiritual limitations, even when approaching and taking advantage of that which is permissible to you, so that you are not drawn down a wrong path in the process.

And, if you find that you cannot avoid spiritual pitfalls even in areas where the Torah does not prohibit something, it might be wise to act as if it does.

Chazak! Text

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