

I GIVE MY WORD

by Rabbi Berel Wein

A person's word should be that person's bond. In Jewish law, oral agreements when properly witnessed are as binding as any written contract. The Torah teaches us that "everything that comes forth from one's mouth requires that person's fulfillment of his declaration." Commitments, such as vows, are viewed very seriously in Jewish law and the penalties associated with breaking one's commitment and/or vow are quite severe.

Because of this, King Solomon in Kohelet stated that "it is better not to vow at all than to vow and fulfill that vow." Due to the seriousness of vows, it has become customary in Jewish life for one to qualify any commitment that one may make, no matter how sincere and noble that commitment may be, with the Hebrew words *bli neder* - this is not to be construed as a vow.

In order to extricate people from vows already made, the halacha has provided a legal mechanism that can retroactively annul vows. This mechanism is founded on the principle that the vow was made in error, under an erroneous assumption that circumstances would allow the vow to be fulfilled. However, now, when it is apparent that because of changing or unforeseen circumstances, the person is unable to execute his vow, then the vow may be annulled retroactively. This is in reality the basis for the famous and moving Kol Nidrei prayer that ushers in the holy day of Yom Kippur.

We cannot ask for Divine forgiveness if we are yet burdened with unfulfilled commitments and pledges. However, there are limitations on the power of the Jewish court to annul vows and commitments. A vow or pledge made publicly is not capable of being annulled in most instances. There are other exceptions to the possibility of annulment of vows retroactively. An entire tractate of the Talmud, Nedarim, is devoted to the complexity of this subject. It is one of the "regular" tractates that form the basic Talmud curriculum in the yeshivot of the world.

The name of this week's parsha is Matot - the tribes. Moshe speaks to the heads of the tribes of Israel and instructs them regarding the laws of vows and oral commitments. Why is this the only place in the Torah that these laws are given specifically to the heads of the tribes? Perhaps it is a lesson that leaders have to be doubly careful in their words of promises and commitments. We are well aware that in the election campaigns that are currently mounted in the Western democratic world and here in Israel as well, the words of the candidates must be greatly discounted.

People run on a certain platform of expressed views and commitments and when elected often completely disregard their publicly stated pledges and policies. If any private individual is held to

one's word by the Torah, then how much more should public officials and elected leaders be held to their statements, which after all, forms the basis for their election victory. Therefore, Moshe first instructs the heads of the tribes, the leaders of Israel, regarding these laws of the Torah. Only by fulfilling one's words can trust and confidence be achieved between the public and its leaders.

Shabat shalom.

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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com