

TRIBAL RESPONSIBILITY

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The subject matter that begins this week's parsha concerns itself with vows and commitments that one undertakes to perform or to abstain from. There is an entire tractate in the Talmud - Nedarim - that discusses this subject almost exclusively. In Jewish life, even an oral commitment in many cases can be considered to be binding. The Torah expressly teaches us that one should live up to and perform "everything that emanates from one's mouth."

As such, it is completely understandable why this matter of vows and commitments should merit the attention that it does receive in the Talmud and in Jewish law generally. Man is elevated from the animal kingdom by the gift and ability to speak and communicate to others, even to later generations.

Words, whether spoken or written, are almost sacred in the view of Jewish tradition and society. The great sage and saint of Eastern European Jewry of the last century, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Hakohen Kagan - Chafetz Chaim - devoted much of his scholarly career to explaining and teaching the Torah laws regarding speech. We are taught that "life and death itself are dependent upon the utterances of our tongue."

In a society such as ours, where instant communication is the expected norm and silence is treated as a social and political aberration and not as a virtue of wisdom or patience, the sanctity of speech and its binding effect has unfortunately lost resonance amongst us. Nevertheless, it certainly would behoove us to study this parsha's message regarding our spoken words and the commitments that they carry with them.

The question arises and is discussed by many biblical commentators as to why this particular subject was initially taught by Moshe to the leaders of the tribes of Israel - and certainly why the Torah makes mention of this in the opening verse of the parsha itself. The question also subtly raises the issue of why the Torah allows, if not even demands, the continuation of the Jewish people as being divided into separate tribes and not treated as being one whole unit.

We see throughout the Bible that this division into tribes occasioned much social disunity and sometimes even civil war. I think that one insight into these matters is that people find it difficult to operate within a large and general group, with one perspective. Our nature is to remain familial and tribal.

Part of that nature unfortunately breeds a disdain for others not like us. This disdain is usually

reflected in our speech and comments about others and also in the fact that somehow we feel that we are not really bound by our verbal and written commitments made to those 'others.'

My commitments to my family and my tribe are certainly sacred in my eyes and I will do all in my power to fulfill them. But my commitments to your family or your tribe have a certain unjustified mental flexibility attached to them that would allow me somehow to avoid my responsibilities.

Moshe expresses this lesson regarding the individual commitments of Jews to the heads of all of the different tribes to teach them that they are all equally bound to all commitments made, no matter to what tribe, family or individual. The nature of humans is to be tribal and the Torah allows for it. However, the Torah does not allow for slippery speech and broken vows and shattered commitments, simply because they were made to those of another tribe.

Shabbat shalom Rabbi Berel Wein

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