

SHEM MI SHMUEL, 5670

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Tamari

At the very opening of this parshah all the laws of oaths and vows are presented. Such oaths sanctify objects, possessions and acts. It is difficult to understand how a human being has the ability through speech to make something holy and thereby change its character and its nature. This would seem to be something that only HaShem can do. Rabbi Jonah teaches that one who guards their tongue transforms it into a vessel like those used in the Temple service. Therefore, in the same way that these vessels sanctified the offering put into them, so too the words that come out of our mouths are holy and can sanctify an article or an object. The ability given to the Jews to sanctify the months and thereby determine the exact dates of the Holy Days was deduced similarly in the midrash from the Temple vessels. Just as the vessel becomes holy because the priest received into it a holy object, so too Israel who are holy, are able to sanctify the months of the year.

We may wonder why of all the parts of the body, only the mouth has this ability of sanctification. We read in Isaiah (43: 21), 'This people I have created for Myself; they will recite My praises'. This is the whole purpose of the creation of Mankind, but especially of Israel, His People. In fulfillment of this purpose, the mouth becomes the means of kedusha. If this is indeed the whole purpose of Mankind and especially of Israel, then it is difficult to understand the statement by Rabbi Jonah, that it is necessary to guard the tongue in order to be able to achieve it. The teaching of Shimon Bar Yochai in the Yerushalmi, however, makes this very clear. 'If I would have been present at the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai I would have told G-d that Man should be created with two mouths; One mouth for teaching Torah, prayer and wise speech, and another mouth for slander, gossip and evil speech. However, I realize the Divine Wisdom inherent in the Creation, since human beings would have spoken evil speech and slander with both mouths.' (Talmud, Berachot, Chapter 1, halakha 2). This should be seen in connection with the words of Rashi explaining that a Temple vessel that had become impure, needs ritual immersion and anointment with oil, since they had lost their purity (Avodah Zara 52b). So too, creation of two mouths would have caused the loss of purity of both of them. That is why Rabbi Jonah taught that it is only by guarding the mouth and the speech that it is possible to make them a holy vessel. Without this, the mouth would become like a holy vessel that had lost its sanctity and become impure.

The sages explained the verse in Tehillim (55:21), 'and he stretched out his hand against those who were at peace with him, he desecrated his covenant,' to refer to one who is guilty of sexual immorality, thereby desecrating His Covenant. Joseph, who was able to preserve and maintain this Covenant by his moral behavior, bequeathed this ability to the whole House of Israel, so that they

too are able to keep the covenant of sexual morality. This is the answer to the Sadducee who asked Rabbi Kahane, (Sanhedrin 37 a), 'Is it possible that there is a flame within flax and nothing is burnt?' [Is it possible that given human sexuality, people are able to refrain from sinning with regard to Niddah?]. When Pinchas at Shittim, being zealous for the covenant of sexual morality, reinstated this moral ability inherent in Israel, they rejected immorality completely. The people rejected idolatry as well as sexual immorality and therefore they were able to restore also the purity of their mouths and thereby their speech; this enables them to make vows that confer holiness. This is in keeping with the teaching of Rabbi Jonah that such purity can only be achieved when the mouth is guarded.

Therefore, the laws of vows and oaths are brought after the story of Pinchas.

There are, however, two types of vows, one that consecrates something to Heaven, thereby changing its status universally and another that makes the object or action holy or obligatory only on the person making the vow. The first type of the oath or vow is like actually giving something to the Temple, thereby making it holy. Here, that holiness does not flow from the speech of the individual but rather from the sanctity of the Temple receiving the article or the object. However, in the case of the vow that changes the status of the action or the article, only in respect to the person making the oath or the vow, the sanctity that applies is a consequence only of the speech of that person. It seems difficult to understand how the second type of oath can exist. After all, something is either sacred, in which case it applies to everybody or it is not sacred for anybody. We can only understand how this is possible, if we realize that in this respect there is a difference between Israel and the Nations of the World. While both of them have the ability to take an oath creating sanctity that will apply to everybody, only a Jew has the ability to make something that is permitted to everybody else, but forbidden to that individual. This flows from the difference in their sanctity. All Mankind has a sanctity that flows from being part of the humanity created by God, while in Israel, each individual has an additional and special relationship; a relationship that flows from the Covenant between God and Israel. By this relationship, each Jewish individual becomes a world or an entity on their own, even as our sages in the Talmud taught, 'One who saves a single soul [life] in Israel, that is as though they saved a whole world' (Sanhedrin, 37a). [There is an alternative version (Yerushalmi, Sanhedrin, Chapter 4, Mishnah 9) without reference to Israel, making it more universal. This is an expression of an ancient discussion as to the universalism or particularism of Judaism]. It is this characteristic of being a world in itself that gives every Jew the ability to create a holiness that would apply only to that individual, as distinct from everybody else.

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