

“Mattot: Vows, financial responsibility, and leadership integrity”

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The opening theme of the sidrah Mattot is that of a situation wherein a wife or unmarried daughter has imposed an obligation upon herself by way of an oath. Given that this may unreasonably impact upon the resources or harmony of the home – especially if it involves an outlay of time or money that the vower is unable to fulfil – the Torah empowers the husband or father to cancel the vow.

Husbands and fathers have multiple responsibilities to their families, primarily the financial and emotional support of their wives and the education and upbringing of their children, or, in certain unfortunate situations, of other family members who may have fallen on hard times. The right to cancel their close female relatives’ vows of commitment was one way of ensuring that they were not unreasonably taken advantage of, or even reduced to penury. If a wife or daughter had mental health issues and lost their sense of responsibility such a restraint needed to be available. The modern equivalent situation was where a person with such a problem went on a gambling or spending spree with their payment cards.

Of course, in modern times there is no sanctuary or Temple to which one may make financial donations – though a woman may choose to spite her husband by donating a large sum from a joint account to a charity appeal or another cause without his knowledge and without his having any way of cancelling it.

That the Torah was not discriminating here against women is clear from the opening statement addressed to men. Down the ages, they were the sole breadwinners and controlled the purse strings. This granted them financial independence – the industrious biblical ‘*Eishet chayyil*’ businesswoman being a notable exception – which meant that men possessed total freedom to take vows of commitment and use the family resources as they wished.

However, the Torah did not idealise men and knew that, with their privileged financial position, they had an even greater desire and opportunity to enhance their prestige and project an appearance of wealth within their communities. Responding to public appeals for charity – or, in biblical and Temple times, making vows to donate free-will offerings or spontaneous gifts¹ – was the perfect way to do so. Hence the sidrah commences with a firm warning to men:

Moses spoke to the heads of the Israelite tribes, saying, ‘This is what the Lord commanded. If a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath imposing an obligation on himself, he shall not break his pledge; he must carry out all that has crossed his lips (Nu. 30:2-3).

Regarding this passage, the question is asked why the Torah required to state that Moses first addressed this particular body of law to ‘the heads of the Israelite tribes,’ given that whenever he revealed any new section of the Torah it was first taught to the priests and elders before they, in turn, disseminated it to the nation, adding explanatory material. This is made clear in the verse, *Moses wrote down this Teaching and gave it to the priests, sons of Levi, who carried the Ark of the Lord’s Covenant, and to **all the elders of Israel** (Deut. 31:79).*

‘The elders’ and ‘the heads of the Israelite tribes’ were the same, so what was significant about the laws of vows that required this additional reference?

Rabbi Moses Sopher, halakhist and leader of German Jewry (1762-1839), known by the title of his illustrious work, *Chatam Sopher*, offers a perceptive explanation for its inclusion. He observes that, while ordinary folk are occasionally economical with the truth, leaders (= ‘elders’) and those pursuing or holding political high office make promises, even vows, to all whom they think may be useful in support of their current objectives, but which, without a qualm. they subsequently fail to honour.

(With a recent UK election fresh in our memory, it is not difficult to find examples of policies Sir Keir Starmer trumpeted on becoming leader of the Labour Party (4th April 2020), but which he conveniently jettisoned in his bid to gain power.² Not surprisingly, his lukewarm attitude toward Israel has also become apparent.)

Rabbi Sopher adds that “people look to their community leaders as trusty and wise exemplars, and advisers on whose words they may rely and whose ethics they believe to be steadfast, whereas, too frequently, they readily break their promises without batting an eyelid and swat away criticisms when they renege on their vows and promises with the wave of a hand.”

Hence, he states, the Torah addressed its warning about keeping one’s word, first and foremost, to ‘the leaders of the Israelites tribes.’

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For regular readers of Torah Thoughts, I would draw your attention to a piece I wrote entitled, “Leadership and the Book of Bemidbar,”³ wherein I pointed out that the ancient Talmudic name of this book was *Chomesh Ha-Pekudim*.⁴ Now, while the word *pekudim* is clearly intended as a reference to the “numbers” of the Israelites – a subject confined to chs 1-4 and 26 of the book – yet the root *pakad* has another, related usage, namely, ‘to appoint,’ ‘to lead.’ Hence the noun *pakid* in the *TaNaCh* in the sense of ‘commissioner or overseer,’ and, in Modern Hebrew, ‘clerk or official.’

I pointed out that, viewed from that perspective, the term *Chomesh Ha-Pekudim* has a more direct and comprehensive association with the contents of the entire book which may accordingly be understood in the sense of “The Book of Leadership,” since ‘there is not a single sidrah in it that does not provide us with some significant insight into the nature of either Moses’ leadership, or leadership itself. The thought we have shared on this sidrah is an example of this recurring theme.

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At the beginning of our sidrah there is the reference to a public-spirited person ‘taking a vow to God,’ namely to donate to the Sanctuary or to undertake a special act of religious devotion or communal service.

The Torah states: *Ish ki yidor neder...lo yacheil devaro* – ‘If a person takes a vow, he shall not break his word.’ It then proceeds to repeat, *k’chol ha-*

yotzei mippiv ya'aseh – ‘according to all that issues forth from his mouth he shall do.’

We may wonder why the repetition was required! After all, for someone so determined and enthusiastic about a cause that he decides to take a solemn vow to fulfil it, why should there be any doubting his commitment and sincerity as to require such a double warning?

The answer, we suggest, is that the Torah is not repeating the warning unnecessarily and that the second phrase should be construed as adding a significant exhortation.

In the phrase *k'chol ha-yotzei mippiv ya'aseh*, the initial prefix, *k'*, may also yield the sense of ‘like,’ ‘in the same manner as,’ so that the phrase in its entirety may be understood as, ‘in the same manner as it all [the commitment] issued forth from his mouth – *ya'aseh* – he shall fulfil it.’

In other words, he should see the vow through to its ultimate fulfilment with the same degree of devotion, joy, and urgency that he exhibited – *hayotzei mippiv* – when the vow first ‘proceeded out of his mouth.’

May we all be moved to work for, and contribute to, the community and its worthy causes in that same generous spirit.

NOTES

1. See Ex. 35:29; Lev. 22:23; Ezr 3:5.
2. Quoted in *Big Issue*, 16 May 2024, p.1.
3. See “Leadership and the Book of Bemidbar.” Available to download at www.rabbijeffrey.co.uk < Torah Thoughts < 13 May 2021).
4. Tal. *Sota* 36a.

שבת שלום ושלום על ישראל בעת צרתה,

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