

Shabbat Shalom everyone,

Thank you for the opportunity to deliver once again a dvar tora in this manner.

Parashat Bechukotai starts off by saying that if the Jews will keep the commandments, everything will be fine, but otherwise there will be dire consequences.

After that the parasha specifies rules governing vows; specifically pledges of monetary value, or goods, to *hekdesh*, and the rules for redemption of goods from *hekdesh*. *Hekdesh* are funds used for the upkeep of the temple, as well as material things that belong to the temple.

I chose to speak about vows. This topic is so voluminous, so I can only allude to the tip of the iceberg.

But before proceeding, I want to cover the bottom line of my dvar tora, which is:

- Do not make a habit of vowing or taking oaths.
- Use the magic words “Beli Neder” when making a promise or commitment.
- Keep your promises,

And one more thing, since the rules of vows apply to women in the same way as they apply to men, my gender terminology of “he” is just used for convenience.

A number of *masechtot* (tractates of the Babylonian Talmud) deal with vows, namely *Shavuot*, *Nedarim*, *Nazir* and *Arachin*. As a matter of fact *Arachin* is mostly derived from our parasha. So is a large section of *Masechet Tmura* which deals with the rules governing redemption from *hekdesh*.

The vernacular for vows includes the commonly known words, *nedarim*, *arachin*, *shvuot*, *konamot* and *charamot*, each of which is a specific type of vow.

In today's parasha, *perek chaf zayin*, *pesukim aleph* thru *chaf zayin*, (chapter 27, verses 1-27) use the term *erkecha*. There are various commentaries (Rashi, Rashbam Even Ezra, among others) who discuss the *chaf sofit in erkecha*, and how to interpret the word.

At any rate, since the tora uses this term, these type of vows are referred to in the Talmud as *Arachin*.

Of course, this section of the Tora is closely related to *Devarim chaf gimel*, *pesukim chaf bet* thru *chaf dalet*, where it says: *ki tidor neder lashem elokecha, lo teacher leshalmo, motsa sefatecha tishmor, veasita kaasher nadarta lashem elokcha*, etc.

Translation: if you will make a vow to your god, do not be late paying your dues, the utterance of your mouth thou shalt keep, and thou shalt do as you vowed to the lord your god.

One difference between a *neder* and a *shvua*, is that in a *neder* we often times make an object not permissible to us, by saying *konam chefets ze alay*, (this object shall be forbidden unto me), and in a *shvua* we take it upon ourselves to have a certain responsibility.

In *shvuot* we often use the phrase like *shvua sheese kach vekach*, meaning, I swear I'll do such and such.

When a person says, “I vow not to eat this loaf of bread”, or says “this loaf of bread shall be forbidden unto me”, The end result is that the person is not allowed to eat this loaf of bread.

The difference between the two though, whether the object is not permissible, or whether the person is not allowed to do something, is referred to as in the *gemara* as *isur gavra* vs. *isur cheftsa*. It may seem like minutae, but there are halachic differences.

*Shvuot* as opposed to *nedarim*, are used to give testimony, which is another ball game altogether.

one of the aspects of vows, is the usage of exact linguistic syntax. For instance, when a person uses the term *erech* in his vow, and says *erki alay*, meaning I pledge “my value” to bet *hamikdash*, the payment due is based on gender, and age as outlined in our *parasha in perek chaf zayin verses gimel thru chet*.

A male, age 20 to 60 pays 50 shekalim, and a female in this age range pays 30. etc.

If the person is unable to pay the tora rate, the *kohen* (priest) will evaluate that person's situation and assign an appropriate payment amount.

If on the other hand a person says *damay alay*, which essentially means the same as *erchi alay*, the person's value is being determined by his estimated value if he were to be sold as a slave

on the market.

Another aspect of vows is *giluy daat* and *kavana*; i.e. what did the person really mean when he made the vow. It is necessary to understand the circumstances of the vow. Example, a person carrying a woolen load, is sweating profusely and says "I will never have wool on me again". That person is allowed to wear wool, but not allowed to carry wool in the manner that he did prior to the vow. Conversely, if the person was wearing wool, and experiencing discomfort, and said "I will never have wool on me again", that person may not wear wool, but may carry wool as a load.

The *mishna* in *perek heh of masechet erachin* tells the story of a wealthy woman, who had a daughter by the name of *yirmatya*. She once said *mishkal biti alay*, i.e. "the weight of my daughter is upon me". But she did not specify the material of the weight. She was made to pay her daughter's weight in gold. The *gemara* in *masechet erachin*, *daf yud tet* explains that this is based on a person's stature. The stature is used to determine *giluy daat*, and given that she was wealthy she had to pay the weight of her daughter in gold.

An important area of vows is the annulment of vows, aka. *hatarat nedarim*. Each year before *Rosh Hashana*, we do *Hatarat Nedarim*, where we concene at the synagogue and go through the process of annulling our vows of the past year, as well as the vows we will make in the coming year.

On *Erev yom Kippur* the very first service is named *kol nidre*, where we publicly renounce our vows. *Hatarat nedarim* works very much like *teshuva* or repentance. The essence is *charata* or remorse and regret. We say "if only I had known such and such I would never have made this vow".

To understand a little how remorse works on the spiritual level, let me digress momentarily. Last week, Jay Gindin spoke beautifully about the origins of time, and the essence of the theory of relativity and how time can move at different rates depending on space coordinates. Being an avid Star Trek fan, I immensely enjoyed his presentation, especially since I recently watched an episode on Star Trek Voyager that enacted these concepts exactly. However there is another aspect to the theory of relativity with

regards to the dimension of time: namely, that time does not exist!! We humans use time to process events in a linear fashion. It is so ingrained into our being that we cannot fathom timelessness. It is known for instance that the images we see are projected upside down on our retinas. Our brains inverts the objects and we are totally unaware of this happening. Similarly, time is what our brain uses to process the world. In the spiritual sense, the transcendence of time is the essence of *teshuva*. and *hatarat nedarim*. the only thing that counts is the present moment, and the present moment frame of mind. This is *charata*. The Rambam says, *ezuhi teshuva? kol sheya'id ribon olamin shelo yashuv ze lecheto leolmim*. Meaning: What is true teshuva? if go-d himself can vouch that this person will never return to his sin. The question on this famous passage is. how can this be? we all do teshuva, and yet we often stumble on the same issues as we did before? Does this mean that our teshuva was not complete? The answer is, that in the current state of mind, this person will never return to his sin. So, it's all about the now. The aspect of the present moment is so important, that on one hand if teshuva is done correctly, we say that past sins turn into *zechuyot*, *zedonot hofchim lo lizchuyot*, but at the same time, a slip in the present moment can reverse everything! (i.e. all the *mitsvot* you made are reversed to in the same way. That's what Hillel refers to in *perek bet of pirke avot* second chapter in proverbs of our forefathers), *veal taamin beatsmecha ad yom motcha*, do not believe in yourself, until the very day you pass on. You can have a slip in the present moment, and lose everything.

One of the high priests in temple times, when he was in his eighties, and was pretty close to passing on, regretted the life he had led. I believe it was *rav yochanan kohen gadol*, but I am uncertain.

Eastern cultures attribute great importance to the spiritual aspect of the present moment, as well as mindful speaking, which to a great extent, is what vows are about.

Returning from the digression, back to *nedarim*...

In general if a person says, "I swear such and such", or uses any of the commonly socially accepted terms to make a strong commitment, there is a high chance that from a halachik

perspective a vow has just taken place. We hear it all the time, “dear go-d, if only such and such, I promise to do such and such”.

Having covered some of the aspects of vows, it is important to mention that it is not at all considered a good practice to vow.

The *gemara* in *masechet nedarim*, *daf chaf*, brings forth a berayta that says, *leolam al tehe ragil benedarim*, *sesofcha limol beshvuot*. The *gemara* in *daf chaf bet*: says, *amar shmuel, kol hanoder af al pi shemekaymo nikra chote, vechen tana rav dimi, achuha derav safra, kol hanoder af al pi shemekaymo nikra chote*.

Essentially it means, do not make a habit of vowing, because even if you keep your vow, you're still called a *Chote*.

The very first halacha in *yore deah*, *siman resh gimel*, *hilchot nedarim* says the same thing, and refers to the the *gemarot* mentioned.

The underlying tone of the halacha seems to be like this: Don't vow, It's not a good thing, however if you do, here are some rules you need to be aware of.

So returning to the bottom line, I mentioned at the outset of this dvar tora,

- To steer clear of halachic complications, do not make a habit of vowing, and use the words *bli neder* when promising or making a commitment
- And of course, keep your promises.

As far as myself is concerned, I have an 11 year old who won't let me forget my promises ... lol.

Another area where exact linguistic syntax and kavana are critical, is *kidushin*. The exact syntax for *kidushin* is outlined in *shulchan aruch*, *even haezer*, *siman chaf zayin*. I recall that in Israel there was a case where a boy and girl were playing and they had a make believe marriage, where the boy slipped a toy ring onto the girl's finger and said the magic words *hara at mekudeshet li*”, and caused a lot of trouble. I don't recall the details but to the best of my recollection the boy had to divorce the girl afterwards...

p.s: Last time I was approached by a few of you, asking me to to publish my writing. As of now this dvar tora as well as the previous one, along with other writings are available on my website.

Thank you, shabbat shalom, and Kol tuv