

## **Mattot-Massei 5777**

### **A Promise Is A Promise**

On the face of it, these two joined parshiyot are about the travels of the Children of Israel. We read of 42 waystations on their journey from Egypt to the plains of Moab, where they will stand at the entrance to the land of Canaan to listen to Moses' last great monologue which begins next week.

But reading over the parashah this year, I found another theme that weaves and wraps itself around this section of the Torah, and this morning I would like to take a few minutes to explore it and see what it has to teach us.

It is the theme of promises, and it appears twice. The first occurrence is in the part I chanted earlier this morning, discussing vows. When a person with capacity to do so - for these purposes a man of full age - takes a vow then *lo yahel devaro; kol hayotzei mipiv ya'aseh* - the person shall not break their pledge and must carry out all that has crossed their lips. It is only in a specific minority situation - a woman making a vow in a society where women were not as powerful as men - that a vow can be undone, and then only by a positive step to do so. (The language that is used is familiar - *kol nedareha va'asareha asher asrah al nafsha lo yakum* - anyone recognize it?). Absent that positive step, the vow remains binding.

The second is at the end of parashat Mattot. The tribes of Gad and Reuven and half the tribe of Manasseh, Joseph's son, are cowboys, it turns out, and they want a good place to raise their cattle. The land on the east side of the Jordan is perfect for this, while the rest of the land of Canaan is not. The tribes ask to stay on the east side of the Jordan. Moses is initially reluctant in case their help is needed in conquering the land, but permits them to do so if they articulate a particular kind of promise; they do, and the land is assigned to them.

So - two pieces of Torah about promises. What can we learn from them? To answer that question, we need to look at each one a little more closely.

The first scenario focuses on vows - acts of speech that bind our behavior. If we think about it, a vow is actually redundant. If as human beings we are judged by the quality of our actions rather than our words, then surely it should be the case that we should just get on with doing whatever we are going to do, without having to enshrine the intention to do so in words? But on the other hand, a promise to do or refrain from doing something has a certain power. If we have made a vow, if we have promised to steer or limit our behavior in certain ways, we have an anchor, a point of reference to come back to when we wobble or become distracted. As my little sister was taught at her school, and around the age of five would joyously repeat - many times - 'a promise is a promise and a promise must be kept!' Having a vow in place can help that to happen.

The second scenario takes the idea of a promise and doubles it. The demand made by Moses of the tribes that remain behind is, first, that they will risk their lives as shock-troops when required to do so; and secondly, that if they do not do so, they will have broken their oath. This formulation - if yes, then X, if no, then Y - comes to be known in Rabbinic law as a *tnai kaful*, a double condition. A *tnai kaful* is required for any real estate transaction and desirable in others as well. By setting out both the scenario of what will happen when the promise is kept along with the scenario of what will happen if it isn't, the promise is reinforced.

That's all very well, but that was then. Is there anything in this Torah that we can take and apply to our daily lives? Actually, I think we can.

I spoke last week about the prayers on pages 10 and 11 of the Siddur that set an intention for the day: often, that's a way of trying to address our deep-set habits.

Let's take an example. Suppose we smoke and really want to stop. (I choose that example because I was a smoker for 25 years and stopping was probably the hardest thing I've ever done.) We say to ourselves when setting our morning intention - 'I won't smoke today' - we can think of that as a vow. It binds us to keep the promise and not actually smoke. But habits are sticky things. We make our first cup of coffee in the morning. The phone rings. And before we are even conscious of what is happening, we are halfway through a cigarette, and the vow is broken. (Hence the need for a kol nidrei formula...)

And I think that is where the second scenario, the double condition, can be helpful. Suitably enough, there are two aspects here. Google just about anything to do with breaking habits, and you will encounter over and over again the idea of some kind of reminder or reinforcement. In practical terms in the example I gave, if we are not to smoke, it helps not to buy cigarettes in the first place, and to get rid of the ashtrays.

And secondly, just as in the t'nai of the sons of Gad and Reuven, it helps to place a new positive behavior before the negative one. So in our example, it's not so much 'I won't smoke today,' as 'I will invest in the long-term health of my body today, and a way to do that is not to smoke.' We might think that's just semantics, but reminding ourselves of the positive aspects of getting rid of a habit might help us over those difficult moments - especially if we have minimized the possibility of those moments in the first place.

One final thought. All of this occurs just before the final book of the Torah - which of course in Hebrew is called Devarim, speech. Human beings are the only creature on the planet with the power of speech, and we get to choose how we use it. Right now in the Jewish year, we contemplate Tisha B'Av, the destruction of the first two Temples; the tradition teaches that speech was closely involved in that catastrophe. And I think that the kol nidrei formula in this parashah can't be an accident either. Our speech matters. Our devarim are important. And the road towards the High Holydays has begun to open before us once again.

Shabbat shalom.