



## THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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# Breaking Promises

It was a typical park bench conversation. I hadn't seen my friend for quite some time, and we both were delighted when we ran into each other by chance that afternoon.

We shook hands and withdrew to a bench in the shade to spend a few minutes together catching up with each other. As is often the case in such conversations, we found ourselves discussing mutual acquaintances with whom one or the other of us had lost touch. Pretty soon we were discussing Sam.

Sam was a person who had many fine qualities, indeed some outstanding ones. But the one that made the biggest impression upon my park bench partner and me was Sam's impeccable honesty.

"Once Sam says something," my pal remarked, "he never backs out or changes his mind. You can count on him to keep his word."

Something deep inside of me, perhaps the ornery part of me, then spoke up. "Is it always a virtue to keep your word and never change your mind? Isn't that a sign of a certain rigidity, which is not always beneficial, and may even sometimes be morally wrong?"

My friend objected. "Surely," he said, "you don't mean to condone lying."

At this point, I realized that our idle

conversation was taking a deeper turn. We were beginning to wax philosophical and would soon have to resort to a higher level of discourse than we had bargained for when we initially sat down together.

But before changing the topic of conversation, I was reminded of this week's Torah portion, *Matot-Masei*, and of its opening passages which discuss the binding nature of vows and promises, and the circumstances under which those verbal commitments can be annulled.

"When a man vows a vow...or swears an oath to bind his soul with a bond, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth." (*Numbers* 30:3)

The binding quality of one's promises is emphasized by many non-biblical authors. The Roman sage Horace writes in his *Epistles*, "Once a word has been allowed to escape, it cannot be recalled." The Spanish novelist, Miguel de Cervantes, puts these words in the mouth of his hero Don Quixote: "An honest man's word is as good as his bond."

It is apparent that being true to one's words is a universal ethical standard. The Torah, however, while fully supporting the binding quality of one's promises, also recognizes that there are situations which call for the revocation of those promises. Times change, circumstances are altered, and a reassessment of past commitments is not only permitted but is to be commended.

Blind obedience to one's past vows can lead to disastrous consequences.

Whereas the Torah explicitly grants the authority to a father to annul the vows of his daughter, and under certain circumstances allows a husband to abrogate his wife's vows, our sages recognize that every individual must have access to a wise man, a *chacham*, who can help him assess his verbal commitments, and, when justified, release him from those commitments.

The classic case of misguided adherence to one's words is the story, narrated in the book of *Judges* chapter 11, of Jephthah (Yiftach). He was a great military leader who, when he embarked upon a battle against the Ammonites, vowed that if God would grant him victory, he would offer "whatever comes out of the door of my house...as a burnt offering." Tragically, it was his daughter, his only child, who came out to meet him. He felt bound by his words and "did to her as he vowed."

Our Sages see his blind obedience to his own words as being a result of his ignorance, and they do not commend his fidelity to his vow. Quite the contrary; our rabbis recognize the complexities of life and understand full well that situations which call for morality can be most ambiguous.

In certain circumstances, a sense of being bound by one's promises is an example of integrity and honesty of the highest order. But even one's promises need to be assessed in the light of changing circumstances. When those circumstances demand a loosening of the bond of verbal commitment, our tradition knows of procedures whereby one can be released even from his most fervent oaths and vows.

The opening passages of this week's Torah

portion recognize this complexity. These passages teach that one must be careful never to profane or violate his words. But they also teach that one's words need to be revisited, re-examined, and reassessed. And they teach that, under the guidance of a wise and pious *chacham*, the bonds of words can be undone, and the chains of past commitments can be loosened.

There is an additional lesson here, and that is the lesson of forgiveness. Sometimes human relationships necessitate certain reactions. My vow to have nothing to do with you may have been based upon the factual consideration that your behavior was undesirable and might have a negative effect upon me or my family. But I must be ready to say, "That was then and this is now." I must be ready to realize that you have changed and that now our relationship must change.

And when I realize that, I must re-examine my past promises and commitments and be ready to undo them. That is the underlying concept behind the procedure known as *hatarat nedarim*, the undoing of the bonds of words. That is among the messages of this week's Torah portion.

I am sharing these thoughts with you, dear reader, but didn't share them with my park bench partner. Certain matters are much too important for a park bench. But I am sharing my thoughts with you, and hope you find them meaningful. ■

**Shabbat afternoon**  
**Parshat HaShavua shiur**  
**given by Rabbi Chanoch Yeres**  
**at Beit Knesset Ohel Yitzchak,**  
**Rechov Washington 12 at 5:30 pm**