

Parasha Matot/Masai

Why can the Father and Husband Nullify her Word?



Dear Rebbetzin Chana Bracha,

I'm really bothered by notion of vows in this week's parasha. Why is so much attention given to what a person says he will or will not do? Why is that anyone else's business? Even more so, the asymmetry in the matters of nullifying vows is quite disturbing to me. Why can a father nullify a daughter's vow but not a son's? Why can a husband nullify his wife's oath, whereas the wife cannot nullify her husband's vow? This smacks of fundamentalist chauvinism! Why does any vow I make have to be validated by my husband first? Why do I need his permission? Am I not an adult, capable of making my own commitments and carrying them out?

Nancy Wilikov (name changed)

Dear Nancy,

I understand that the notion of vows and the Torah's emphasis on the seriousness of our words is quite foreign to the Western mind. How often do we say, for example, that we will be somewhere at a certain time, but we end up being deterred? No one makes a big deal if we arrive five minutes after the agreed time. Yet, our Torah portion teaches that whenever we commit to a certain action, no matter how insignificant, our words have the power and obligation of a vow.

אִישׁ כִּי יִדַּר נֶדֶר לַיהוָה אוֹ הִשָּׁבַע שְׁבַעַת לְאִסֹּר אָסֹר עַל נַפְשׁוֹ לֹא יַחַל דְּבָרוֹ כִּכְל הֵיטָא מִפִּי יַעֲשֶׂה:
(במדבר פרק ל פסוק ג).

“If a man makes a vow to Hashem or makes an oath to prohibit himself, he shall not violate his word; according to whatever came out of his mouth, he shall do” (*Bamidbar 30:3*).

If we agreed to help clear the table right away, this means we must do it now, not later, not whenever we feel like it, or after we have finished what we are in the middle of. Once the words have emerged from our mouth, we are obligated to fulfill exactly what we ourselves said. Thus, we encounter vows for which we are held accountable on a daily basis. The reason our words carries such importance is that words create the reality. By means of speech Hashem created the world, and by means of speech people can create joy or anger etc. We have the power to effect change and create a new reality through our speech. In spiritual healing we focus our minds to create a picture of an alternate reality and then to channel the image of this desired reality into the power of speech. But why is this ability seemingly diminished from women by the overriding power of the speech of their men?

The Liability of Single Women

(ד) וְאִשָּׁה כִּי תִדַּר נֶדֶר לַיהוָה וְאָסְרָה אָסֹר בְּבֵית אָבִיהָ בְּנַעֲרֶיהָ: (ו) וְאִם הִנִּיא אָבִיהָ אֶתָּה בְּיוֹם שָׁמְעוּ כָּל נְדָרֶיהָ וְאִסְרֶיהָ אֲנֹשֶׁר אָסְרָה עַל נַפְשָׁהּ לֹא יִקוּם וְהָשֵׁם יִסְלַח לָהּ כִּי הִנִּיא אָבִיהָ אֶתָּה: (במדבר פרק ל פסוק ד,ו)

“If a woman makes a vow to Hashem, or imposes a prohibition [upon herself] while in her father's house, in her youth... if her father hinders her on the day he hears it, all her vows and her prohibitions that she has imposed upon herself shall not stand. Hashem will forgive her because her father hindered her” (*Bamidbar 30:4,6*).

Before all worked up about the gender disparities let's read the fine print as presented by Rashi. What exactly is the father's role in absolving his daughter's vow? To whom does this apply? The term the Torah uses is *בְּנֵעֻרֶיהָ* / *bineureha* – "in her youth." Rashi explains that the verse does not refer to a minor child, since her vows are not binding, nor to an adult single woman, because she is not under her father's control but responsible for her own oaths. So the only small window when a father can cancel his daughter's vows that is when she is between the ages of 11 and 12. A single woman older than 12, a widow or a divorcee is liable for her own vows (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 30:4; [Chaya Shuchat, Broken Vows](#)).

For the Sake of Protecting the Woman

Now, what about married women? It seems that her independence is greatly compromised. On the surface level, it appears as though a husband's words overrides his wife's. Is a married woman no longer able to take responsibility for her own decisions?

וְאִם בֵּית אִישָׁה נִדְרָה אוֹ אָסְרָה אָסֵר עַל נַפְשָׁהּ בְּשִׁבְעָהּ: (יג) וְאִם הִפֵּר יִפֵּר אַתֶּם אִישָׁה בְּיוֹם שָׁמְעוּ כָּל מוֹצֵא שְׁפָתֶיהָ לְנִדְרֶיהָ וְלֹאֲסֵר נַפְשָׁהּ לֹא יִקּוּם אִישָׁה הַפֵּרָם וְיִהְיֶה יִסְלַח לָהּ: (יד) כָּל נִדֵּר וְכָל שְׁבַעַת אָסֵר לְעֵנֹת נַפְשָׁהּ אִישָׁה יִקְיָמוּ וְאִישָׁה יִפְרֹנוּ: (במדבר פרק לפסוק יא, יג, יד)

"But if she vowed in her husband's house, or imposed a prohibition upon herself with an oath... if her husband revokes them on the day he hears them, anything issuing from her lips regarding her vows or self-imposed prohibitions shall not stand; her husband has revoked them, and Hashem shall forgive her. Any vow or any binding oath of self-affliction, her husband can either uphold it or revoke it (*Bamidbar* 30:11,13,14).

Although nullifying the woman's vow removes the punishment, should she be unable to fulfill it; this does not prevent her from carrying out what she has sworn. Let's say a woman takes upon herself to become a vegetarian. The ability to annul her vow does not give her husband the power to force her to eat meat. It only prevents her from being punished, should she accidentally come to eat meat. Moreover, not every vow can be nullified by her father or husband. Rabbi S.R. Hirsch explains that the right of the husband to annul her vow is limited to the vows through which the woman causes herself hardship and pain. Thus, the ability to annul her vow serves as a protection for the woman.

Women, Sensitivity, and Self Sacrifice

All generalizations have their exceptions. It is especially difficult in our evolving world, to stereotype men and women. Nevertheless, the fact that men and women are created with physical differences alludes to their different emotional and spiritual makeup; since everything in the physical world is a reflection of the spiritual reality it manifests. Whereas it is generally easier for a man to be detached and objective, a woman's role as a nurturer of new life makes her more emotionally sensitive, enabling her to love and identify with others. In her selflessness and zeal to give, she might not always realize her own limitations. A woman could, therefore, easily come to take upon herself more than she can handle. Her husband's ability to annul her vow serves to prevent her altruistic nature from going overboard.

Achieving Divine Forgiveness

Commenting on the phrase "Hashem shall forgive her," Rashi ponders why the woman needs forgiveness, when her vow has already been annulled. He explains that Scripture describes the case

of a woman who vowed to become a Nazarite and whose father heard it and annulled it for her without her knowledge. Although her vow was void, she thought it was still in effect. Therefore, she needed forgiveness when acting contrary to the vow she had taken upon herself. Rashi points out that by revoking the vow of the daughter or wife, she is able to merit forgiveness in case she should accidentally break it. His comment concludes with a fortiori: If those whose vows have been annulled require forgiveness, how much more when someone transgresses vows which have not been annulled (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 30:6; Chana Bracha Siegelbaum, [Women at the Crossroads: A Woman's Perspective on the Weekly Torah Portion](#)).

Eternal Laws of Torah Outweigh Norms of Modern Society

Whenever Torah laws contradict what is socially acceptable in the 'free' Western world, the eternal value of the Torah takes precedence over the ephemeral values of the western world. However, there is a reason why Hashem causes certain perspectives to become more popular at certain times. Each wave of consciousness draws out another aspect contained within the depths of the wellsprings of Torah. Thus our need to affirm the importance of women in Judaism became an impetus for perceiving the Torah laws that seem to belittle women's role in a deeper way.