



## How Important is Keeping Your Word?

### The Challenge to Implement Torah Law on the Matter of Keeping Our Word

“Once a word has been allowed to escape, it cannot be recalled” wrote the Roman poet, Horace, almost a millennium ago. These words, that assumed universal ethical status, reflect the teachings of our Torah sages. Thus, it has always been important for me to keep my word, although, admittedly, it is not always as simple as that. This week, I caught myself a couple of times in words that escaped my mouth which I afterwards realized weren’t so easy to implement. Once, was when I took my students on a special hike, to one of the natural wellsprings in Bat Ayin. After a 40-minute strenuous hike, which gradually reduced our group from 10 to 8 and in the end to 6. We finally arrived at our destination: A beautiful natural pool, large enough to swim 3 strokes across! As we were splashing, swimming, singing and enjoying the cool water under the blue sky, with a contrasting backdrop of various shades of green herbage and trees, a man arrived at the site. He and his girlfriend were also looking forward to dunk in the wellspring, so I told them, “We will be out in 10 minutes with Hashem’s help!” Yet, when I tried to get us all out of the pool 10 minutes later, my students convinced me to let them stay in the pool a bit longer, saying: “The couple said that they are enjoying themselves at the picnic table. They are not in a rush.” Although I’m sure the couple was fine, I still felt a bit uneasy about not keeping my word. Another time this week, I had agreed to pay for a certain service. I was about to take out my VISA card from my purse, when the provider said that she didn’t need the payment until later. “In that case,” I asked her, “May I therefore wait to commit to the payment until after I have discussed the matter with my husband? Since I already agreed to pay you, I have obligated myself. Only if you are willing to absolve me from my word, am I permitted, according to Torah law, to reconsider my commitment.” The lady conceded and all was fine, but if I hadn’t learned the law about keeping my word, I might have inadvertently transgressed it numerous times.

### The Torah Laws Regarding Keeping Your Word

One of the basic principles of civil law is the distinction between ‘promises’ and ‘contracts.’ Whereas a contract must be honored and failure to do so can be penalized by law, an oral promise is not binding, and there is no legal sanction for breaking a promise. In contrast, honest dealing in thought, words and action is part of the Torah business law. Therefore, the Torah obligates us to keep our oral promises in business transactions. In this matter, the *Shulchan Aruch* repeats Rambam, *Hilchot Mechira* 7:8, word for word and rules as follows:

שו"ע חושן משפט - סימן רד הלכה ז

הנושא ונותן בדברים בלבד, הרי זה ראוי לו לעמוד בדברו אף על פי שלא לקח מהדמים כלום, ולא רשם ולא הניח משכון. וכל החוזר בו, בין לוקח בין מוכר, אע"פ שאינו חייב לקבל מי שפרע ה"ז ממחוסרי אמנה ואין רוח חכמים נוחה הימנו:

“A person who conducts a business transaction in word alone – it is proper for him to keep his word, even though he did not take any money, and although nothing was written, and no collateral exchanged. A buyer or seller who retracts, although he does not receive a curse [which is applied to somebody who backs out after money was exchanged] is considered lacking in faith, and the spirit of the wise is not at ease with him” (*Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat* 204:7).

The *Meiri* (*Bava Metzia* 49a) extends this principle to being faithful to obligations undertaken even in our thoughts. This, however, is only for the pious, who – after having decided in thought to complete a transaction or give a gift – stick to their decision even when the other side is unaware of

it. They are strict to fulfill whatever they have decided in their hearts as it states, "...and speaks truth in his heart" (*Tehillim* 15:2). This is a very high level to attain, yet it is a lofty ideal of honesty and integrity for which we can strive.

### Speech: The Underlying Foundation of Life

The main theme in *Parashat Matot* is vows, elucidating how we are obligated by the words that we express.

ספר במדבר פרק ל פסוק ג

אִישׁ כִּי יִדַּר נֶדֶר לַהֲשֵׁם אוֹ הִשָּׁבַע שְׁבַעַת לְאַסֹּר אֶסֶר עַל נַפְשׁוֹ לֹא יַחַל דְּבָרוֹ כִּכְל הֵיצָא מִפִּי יַעֲשֶׂה:

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

Since I verbalized that I am going on a juice-fast next week, and my husband didn't object, I must fulfill my words and carry out that which I have taken upon myself. This is in accordance with the continuation of the section: "...and her husband hears it but remains silent on the day he hears it, her vow shall stand, and her prohibition which she has imposed upon herself shall stand" (Ibid. 8). Why does the Torah attribute such power, to words? We cannot underestimate the power of speech – a defining human quality. The ability to articulate our thoughts into specific words distinguishes human beings from the animals. Onkelos, the authoritative Aramaic translator from the Talmudic era, defines humanity as a "speaking spirit" in his translation of the creation of man (Onkelos, *Bereishit* 2:7). Speech is not only a defining human quality. It is the manifestation of the Divine breath which resonates within us, ever since G-d breathed a living soul into the first human being. G-d Himself chose to use the power of speech to create everything in the universe, teaching us the vital role of speech as the underlying foundation of life.

### The Need to Undo Past Promises

The obligation to keep our word applies to both men and women. Yet, the Torah uses the language *אִישׁ/ish* – 'man' in order to teach us that according to halacha, one who takes a vow or swears an oath can consult an "ish" – a prominent person with Torah authority and annul it:

[The following rules apply when] a person took an oath (*sh'vuat bitui*) and [then] regretted having taken the oath: 1. If he sees that he will suffer if he upholds this oath 2. His intent changes 3. A factor occurred that was not in his intent originally when he took the oath and he changed his mind because of this. [In either of these cases he may appeal to be released from his oath] from one sage – or from three ordinary people in a place where there is no sage. They cancel his oath and he is permitted to perform the matter that he vowed not to do or refrain from carrying out the matter that he vowed to do. This is called 'release from an oath' (Rambam, *Hilchot Shevuot* 6:1).

Despite the sacred status of our words, there are instances warranting that we re-evaluate our prior promises. In certain situations, things we have taken upon ourselves in the past may no longer be beneficial, but rather morally incorrect by causing needless suffering. The classic example of misguided adherence to our words is the story of Yiftach's daughter (*Shoftim* Chapter 11). Yiftach was a great military leader who, vowed that if G-d would grant him victory in his battle against the Ammonites, he would offer, "Whatever comes out of the door of my house...as a burnt offering" (*Shoftim* 11:30-31). Tragically, it was his daughter, his only child, who came out to meet him. He felt bound by his words, "For I have uttered a vow to Hashem that I cannot retract" (Ibid verse 31), and "He did to her as he vowed" (Ibid 35). Hashem punished both Yiftach for not going to a sage to release his vow, thereby condemning his daughter to live in celibacy all her life, and Pinchas, the sage of the generation, for not taking the initiative to release Yiftach's vow. Pinchas lost his *Ruach Hakodesh* as it states, "Pinchas the son of Elazer was the ruler over them in the past, and Hashem

was with him (I *Divrei HaYamim* 9:20), (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shoftim* 11:68). Yiftach was stricken with boils, and his limbs fell out and had to be buried in various places as it states, “He was buried in the cities of Gilead” (*Shoftim* 12:7); (Rashi, *Shoftim* 11:39). From this we learn, that as important as it is to keep our word, it is equally important to break it when it can cause suffering and moral depravity. In my practice as a spiritual healer, I have come across cases where women have taken upon themselves to never again speak with their sisters or mothers. After having undergone an emotional and spiritual maturing process, it becomes clear that such commitments have become horrendous. As we keep growing the need to reevaluate our past promises and commitments becomes vital.

### Synchronizing Thought, Speech and Action

Rambam clarifies how the leeway to cancel an oath is intrinsically connected with our intention: “A factor occurred that was not in our intent when we took the oath,” or “our intent changed.” This teaches us the importance of mindful intention: unifying thought, speech and action. We are called upon to connect our inner thought, as expressed by words, with actions in daily life. The underlying message of the Torah law – to keep our word – teaches us that our outside must reflect our inside. Therefore, we must refrain from uttering empty words that are not completely anchored in our minds and behaviors. Feeling overwhelmed with so much on my plate, I find it particularly challenging to bring my focused, mindful intention into my prayers and blessings. My mind keeps wandering toward all the chores of my day and I know I’m not the only one with this problem. Disconnection between our thoughts, speech and actions affects our inner world and is, in a sense, being dishonest to ourselves. Thus, the highest way of truly keeping our word is to create consonance between mind, emotion and behavior. But how do we learn to unify our thoughts, words and actions which is so vital for true integrity? The answer may lay in reducing the extra things on our plate. I’ve been working on cutting down some of the excess, repeatedly reminding myself that “less is more.” Let us work on truly focusing on the most important things in life, applying our mind, heart and effort into giving them our all!