

# Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



## What's Your Mitzva?

### Matot

As this week's Torah reading opens, it presents us with a fascinating issue: vows and oaths. Really!?! Our ancestors are on the banks of the Jordan; the very threshold of Eretz Yisrael. We've just anointed Yehoshua as the leader to replace Moshe Rabbeinu, and the Jews are gearing up for the great invasion. But, first, we must be told to fulfill all of our promises. Don't those rules belong in a less exciting (more boring?) section of the Torah? Well, yes and no. Let's investigate.

First of all, the simplest approach to the placement of these rules does fit the context of the narrative. A major issue in this week's Torah reading is the request of the two tribes of Reuven and Gad to remain on the eastern side of the Jordan. After Moshe recovers from his shock at the petition, the two tribes declare: We will be the 'shock troops' (CHALUTZIM) of the invasion. Our laws of oaths must be seen as an intro to that story! Their assurance to Moshe must be seen in the context of this introduction to the parsha: One must carry out everything that leaves one's mouth (Bamidbar 30:3).

So, just before these two Tribes (soon

to be joined by part of the Tribe of Menashe) make this momentous assurance, we are taught how important it is to fulfill one's utterances. Therefore, there is contextual logic in the placement of this Mitzva of fulfilling one's oaths and promises. Remember, the filing system of Bamidbar is that Mitzvot and Halachic material often appear near the pertinent narrative.

Okay, but what do we think about this Mitzva? The authorities are actually quite mixed in their comments. There are many respected scholars who denigrate people who make oaths. Rebbe Eliezar Hakapar calls a NAZIR a sinner for making that oath (Ta'anit 11a), and, more generally, there are Rabbis who denigrate the act of abstention. While others (Rebbe Elazar) call these individuals 'holy'.

Clearly, there's a lack of clarity. I can understand any Jew who would ask: Are we masochists? Aren't 613 Mitzvot enough? Professor Moshe Greenberg pointed out that in the blessing given to Eisav, Yitzchak said: When you are restive (TARID), you will throw off his (Ya'akov's) yoke. (B'reishit 27:40). The term TARID has the numerical value (Gematria) 614, meaning TARID (perhaps 'bothered') alludes to taking on more than the 613 Mitzvot.

Not surprisingly, many Chassidic Masters heartily approve of these

added practices. Perhaps, one could describe Chassidim as those who discover new Mitzvot and customs, and then claim that they have rediscovered ancient practices and returned them to their proper 'throne'.

Thus the Mei Shilo'ach avers: Any time one takes a vow upon himself, delineating his actions by refraining from something, he is completing the entire structure of the Torah. This is as we have in the Gemara (Shabbat 119b), "all who say, '[thus the heavens and the earth] were completed,' it is as if he is made a partner with the Holy One, blessed be He, in the act of creation."

The Noam Elimelech adds that the true Tzadik (the Chasidische Rebbe) is always looking for new ways to glorify God, because he feels that he has fallen short of the complete obligations to God. But I think that the S'fat Emet stated this idea in the most powerful manner:

And these are, indeed, Mitzvot of God. It was the will of God that the scholars of Yisrael should bring these precepts from the potential to the actual. This is the true meaning of every ASMACHTA (the rabbis finding a support for a rabbinic law in verses) in the Talmud. In truth, every instance of an oath is really one who straightens (M'YASHEIR, perhaps improves) their actions until they

arrive at the EMET. At that point, the acceptance was truly the Divine Will. It is just that this individual merited to institute (M'CHADEISH) the rule himself.

Even in my MISNAGD'SHEH soul, I find this idea very moving. Being one who came to Torah observance on my own over many years (basically from age 11 to 18, after that I sort of blended in), it was often very cool to discover new customs. I remember well when I heard the custom to recite my name's verse (T'hilim 105:4, still love that verse) before stepping back at the end of Amida. I thought: Wow! I sign my signature to all the declarations I've just made in my T'fila!


From that conclusion, I've come to connect to certain Mitzvot very personally. There were years when sitting and sleeping the Sukka was the pinnacle of spiritual commitment and connection to Hashem for me. Since Covid, I've been davening outside, and my TEFILOT have been markedly improved. I wouldn't have imagined that trees swaying in the breeze and birds chirping nearby would have this effect on my pleas to God. They have!

Rebbe Nachman is quoted as saying that the greatness of NEDARIM is that they enable one to turn anything in the world into Torah and Mitzvot (Likutei Halachot Nedarim 13:23).

**That's absolutely life changing.**

**Rav Aharon Lichtenstein wrote a beautiful essay about NEDARIM at the end of the year in which the Yeshiva had learned tractate Nedarim, and he concluded:**

**As we have seen, the theological status of NEDARIM is a most delicate one. Specifically for this reason, motivation takes on critical importance: to what extent does the individual take upon himself new obligations in order to enhance his AVODAT HASHEM, or does this perhaps symbolize, from his perspective, a rebellion against the Torah and He who transmitted it? ... However, one must remember that even if he can add onto the prohibitions of the Torah, he and the Master of the world do not share equal standing. Nedarim are a remarkable tool that the Almighty provided for us. When we use them inappropriately, in an attempt to equate ourselves with the Giver of the Torah, with the intent of rebellion, then the NEDER becomes disgraceful; but when they are used properly, with sincere intentions and appropriate dosage, then the NEDER is proper and praiseworthy.**

**I think that we can accomplish something very similar by choosing certain Mitzvot which we find meaningful and emphasizing them in our behavior and lives. I try to do this. So, I turn to you, my dear reader and ask: Nu, what's your Mitzva? **