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The Power of Speech

[By Mordechai Plotsker | July 13, 2023](#)

In years past, and occasionally in our own time, deals are solidified with a handshake. “I’ll bring the contract tomorrow, and if everything looks good, we’ll shake on it.”

In this week’s parsha, we are introduced to a similar practice, albeit one with a stronger implication and lesson: *“When a man vowed a vow to Hashem, 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,”* (Bamidbar, 30:3). Rashi - citing Sifri 7-8 — provides salient instruction and a valuable lesson; one should not become practiced in speaking idly, i.e., swearing and making frivolous use of Hashem’s divine name.

More specifically, the Gemara (Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim 9a) explains that we learn from this verse a subtle nuance: it states *neder l’Hashem*, to remind us that one is forbidden to say, *“L’Hashem korban - To Hashem, I offer this sacrifice.”* The distinction of order is, indeed, delicate but our rabbis learned and instructed us to be mindful how we choose our words, and the order in which they are conveyed. Life is far too fickle and there is concern that an individual who, initially, states Hashem’s name may suddenly be niftar and pass away prior to saying the following word, “korban.” In such an event, the niftar would be in violation of desecrating Hashem’s name, as the verse states, *“You shall not take the name of Hashem in vain,”* (Shemot, 20:7). As the saying goes, “a smart person knows what to say; a wise person knows whether or not to say it.”

Although *nedarim* should only be used as a last resort, nevertheless, there are times one may invoke a *neder* in order to overcome temptation. For example, Boaz had said to Rus, *“Tarry this night, ... as the Lord liveth; lie down until the morning,”* (Ruth, 3:13). In this example, the *neder* served as a means of positive reinforcement to Boaz, one that secured and prevented him from sin.

We find that Yaakov Avinu made a *neder* when on the run from his estranged twin brother, Esav (Bereishis 28:20-21). As the verse states, *“And Jacob uttered a vow, saying, ‘If God will be with me, and He will guard me on this way, upon which I am going, and He will give me bread to eat and a garment to wear and if I return in peace to my father’s house, and the Lord will be my God.’”* Rav Moshe Dovid Tendler, zt”l, explains that Yaakov Avinu was not making a vow upon himself. Rather, the *neder* was placed for the future benefit of his descendants in order to usher in the ultimate redemption and arrival of Moshiach.

When Yaakov said that if my children are provided with “bread to eat” he was intimating to God that if my children are provided with the opportunity to witness the miracle of the *lechem hapanim*, bread that always remained warm and fresh — for the entire week — despite being exposed to air which would normally render the bread unfit for consumption after a day.

Second, if my children can have “garments to wear” such that they can witness the *kohanim* wearing the *bigdei kahuna* — priestly vestments — what a timeless, indelible impression this would provide the children of Israel!

Last, if my children can “return in peace to my father’s house,” or simply put, feel welcome, “returning home to the *batei midrashos* and *batei kinisiyos* — houses of learning and prayer, then surely, we will be able to usher in the arrival of Moshiach, when all of the Jewish people will resonate the adage, ‘and the Lord will be my God!’”

Concludes the Kedushas Levi, were one to consider the majesty and governance of Hashem over heaven and earth, one would question the general practice of swearing, i.e., making a neder. Life is so futile ... *How can one say with any degree of confidence that in three years’ time, they will purchase or lease a vehicle, or buy/sell stocks, bonds or treasuries? What do we know about the future?* It is precisely why the above verse concludes, “He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth,” can also be interpreted as: לֹא יַחַל, לֹא יַבְרֵר — “One who does not make his words into *chulin* — mundane,” but, rather, uses his words wisely to effectuate fear of Hashem, כִּכְל הַיֵּצֵא מִפִּיו — “Whatever words emanate from his mouth,” יַעֲשֶׂה — “Hashem will fulfill!”

Mordechai Plotsker runs a popular 10-minute nightly shiur on the parsha with a keen interest on the invigorating teachings of the Berditchever Rav, the Kedushas Levi. Plotsker resides in Elizabeth with his wife and children, and can be reached by email at marc.plotsker@gmail.com.