

Parenting in the Parsha

פרשת מטות - מסעי

Promises

וידבר ה' אל-משה במדבר סיני באהל מועד באחד לחדש השני בשנה השנית לצאתם מארץ מצרים לאמר שבעה לאָסר לאָסר על-נפשו לא יחל דברו ככל-היצא מפיו יעשה:

Moses spoke to the heads of the Israelite tribes, saying: This is what the L-RD has commanded: If a man makes a vow to the L-RD or takes an oath imposing an obligation on himself, he shall not break his pledge; he must carry out all that has crossed his lips.

יכול שלא נאמר פרשה זו אלא לנשיאים בלבד פי' דאע"ג דכתב לבני ישראל הייתי מפרש ראשי המטות של בני ישראל שכן מצינו במקומות הרבה למ"ד משמשת בראש התיבה במקום על והואיל והפרת נדרים ביחיד מומחה כלומ' שמצוה מן המובחר כך היא הייתי חושב שלא נאמרה אלא לראשי המטות בלבד:

It is possible that this *parsha* was said to the *nesi'im* alone, meaning that although it states to *Bnei Yisroel* I would explain that to mean the heads of the tribes of the *Bnei Yisroel*. We find in many places that the letter *lamed* at the beginning of a word serves in the place of the word *al* (upon). And, since the nullification of vows is ideally done by a single expert I would have thought that it was said to the heads of tribes alone.

- Bartenura

וא"ר זירא לא לימא איניש לינוקא דיהיבנא לך מידי ולא יהיב ליה משום דאתי לאגמוריה שיקרא שנא' (ירמיהו ט.ד) למדו לשונם דבר שקר

And Rabbi Zeira said: A person should not say to a child: I will give you something, and then not give it to him, because he thereby comes to teach him to lie, as it is stated: "They have taught their tongues to speak lies" ([Jeremiah 9:4](#)). One must not accustom a child to fail to honor commitments.

- Succah 46b

Keep every promise you make, and only make promises you can keep.

- Anthony Hitt

The entire Torah, and all the *mitzvos* contained therein was taught in a defined and consistent process. That process, or at least the description of the process, seems to differ in the *mitzvah* of *nedarim*. Here, the Torah indicates that this mitzvah was given specifically to the heads of the tribes, the political leaders of the Jewish people. While the mitzvah was most certainly later shared with the rest of the people, the emphasis on its having been taught to the tribal leaders begs explanation.

The current political climate may offer insight on the perspective that the Torah and Moshe Rabbeinu were trying to share with tribal heads regarding leadership. In our political world, candidates make their way to office riding empty and false promises that they the abandon once in power. Those broken promises leave a jaded and cynical electorate who no longer trust or feel comfortable with their political leaders, and that, in turn, leads to national insecurity and anxiety. The Torah wanted to prevent that cynicism from creeping into the political life of the *Bnei Yisroel*. This *parsha* warns the leaders that their word is their bond with the people, and the violation of that bond is the violation of their trust. To be a leader in the Jewish world, you must carry out the promises that escape your lips.

For children as well, the word of adults in their lives is their bond. The child takes any statement as a promise, even if the word promise is never used. When the adults in a child's life, especially when those adults are the child's own parents, fail to follow through on the things they have said they would do, children become jaded, disillusioned, and cynical. Never promise something to a child and then fail to deliver on that promise. If you do so, you teach the child distrust and falsehood. Children feel safe in the secure knowledge that they can rely on their parents' word. When that word fails them, they feel unsafe and insecure.

Many times, parents are busy, frazzled, and stretched way thinner than they can possibly handle, and their children often suffer from lack of attention because of it. To assuage their guilt, those parents sometimes make promises to their children of their time or of gifts that they will give them to make it up to them. But, many of those well-meaning parents will be unable to keep those promises, leaving their children even more hurt and disappointed. Other parents will promise children elaborate or lavish rewards for tasks completed, benchmarks met, and good behavior. But those rewards are sometimes beyond the means or capabilities of those parents.

In addition, sometimes parents will threaten specific consequences or punishments for misbehavior and will fail to follow through on those threats. While the child is certainly happy to avoid punishment, the realization that the parents word is not reliable or trustworthy is a very unsettling and disturbing discovery for a child.

What to do? Choose your words and your promises very carefully. Follow the dictum of the *Mishna* in *Avos*: Say little and do plenty. Don't promise, just do. Don't threaten, just calmly and clearly impose fair and just consequences. Perhaps the single most important thing you need from your children is for them to trust you. Be careful what you say so that you don't lose that trust.

Good Shabbos,

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