

SHEVUOT and NEDARIM

A Commitment to Personal Growth

The Psychology Behind Promises, *Psychologists World*

What is a promise?

To make a promise it takes more than just words. It is an **intention statement**, a social contract that is said to be a modified interpersonal relationship. According to studies done by psychologists, **promises are essential to social cohesiveness**. By making a **commitment**; we demonstrate cooperation and reliability, which are essential traits for establishing and preserving solid bonds with others. As a result, a feeling of mutual reliance and common objectives strengthens communities, which is what holds them together.

Our sense of self is significantly impacted by promises as well. **Integrity and self-worth are fundamentally based on our ability to keep our word**. According to research, keeping your word opens up reward regions in the brain, which elevates your mood and sense of value. On the other hand, breaking a promise can result in uncomfortable thoughts caused by conflicting beliefs, as well as thoughts of shame, remorse, guilt, and cognitive dissonance. This inner struggle drives us to make the necessary corrections and bring peace back into our own lives.

Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, “Hilchot Nedarim” 13:23-24

מי שִׁנָּדַר נְדָרִים כְּדִי לְכוֹנֵן דַּעוּתוֹ וּלְתַקֵּן מַעֲשָׁיו הָרִי זֶה זָרִיז וּמְשַׁבֵּחַ. כִּי־צַד. כְּגוֹן מִי שֶׁהָיָה זוֹלֵל וְאָסֵר עָלָיו הַבֶּשֶׂר שָׁנָה אוֹ שְׁתֵּי־מֵאוֹת שָׁנָה אוֹ מִי שֶׁהָיָה שׂוֹגֶה בֵּינָן וְאָסֵר הֵינָן עַל עֲצָמוֹ זְמַן מְרֻבָּה. אוֹ אָסֵר הַשְּׂכָרוֹת לְעוֹלָם. וְכֵן מִי שֶׁהָיָה רוֹדֵף שְׁלֵמוֹנִים וְנִבְהָל לְהוֹן וְאָסֵר עַל עֲצָמוֹ הַמַּתְנוּת אוֹ הַנִּית אֲנָשֵׁי מְדִינָה זוֹ. וְכֵן מִי שֶׁהָיָה מַתְגָּאָה בִּפְיוֹ וְנָדַר בְּנֶזֶר וְכִי־צֵא בְּנְדָרִים אֵלָּו. כָּלֵן דֶּרֶךְ עֲבוּדָה לְשֵׁם הֵם. וּבְנְדָרִים אֵלָּו וְכִי־צֵא בְּהֵן אֲמָרוּ חֲכָמִים נְדָרִים סִיג לְפָרִישׁוֹת:

If a person has made vows in order to adjust his characteristic traits and to improve his behavior, he is indeed alert and deserves praise. Examples: One who was a glutton forbade himself meat for a year or two; or one who was addicted to drinking forbade himself wine for a long time, or vowed never to become intoxicated. So too, one who ran after bribes, hastening to get rich, forbade to himself the gifts or the favors coming from the residents of a particular town. So too, one who became arrogant because of his good looks vowed to become a nazirite. Such vows are designed to serve God, and concerning them the sages declared: "Vows are a fence around self-restraint" (Avoth 3:13).

וְאִם עַל פִּי שֶׁהוּא עֲבוּדָה (לְשֵׁם) לֹא יִרְבֶּה אָדָם בְּנְדָרֵי אִסּוּר וְלֹא יִרְגִּיל עֲצָמוֹ בָּהֶם. אֲלֵא יִפְרֹשׁ מִדְּבָרִים שְׂרָאִי לְפָרֹשׁ מֵהֵן בְּלֹא נֶדֶר:

Even though they are a form of divine service, **one should not impose on himself many vows** of prohibition nor make frequent use of them, but should rather abstain from things that are to be shunned, without making vows.

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, "The Words of Your Mouth You Shall Guard and Fulfill"

There are two positive and unique aspects to this parasha of vows: firstly, from a general perspective, we have before us a person who is ready and willing to take upon himself new tasks and obligations. Secondly, from a specific and subjective point of view, the obligations involved here pertain to Divine worship; **by means of assuming new responsibilities this person aspires to reach greater spiritual heights.** After all, after making his vow he becomes like a person who is commanded to act according to those new obligations, and as we know, "One who is commanded and fulfills is greater than someone who is not commanded but nevertheless fulfills."

However, despite this positive description, our parasha also contains a great danger. For it is easy for a person to declare that he is taking on certain obligations, **but often it becomes difficult to fulfill them**, and the person - with all his good intentions - is then considered to have transgressed, as stipulated in the pesukim above.....A person dare not remain static and rest on his laurels. **He must continually strive higher, both in Torah and in other realms; he must set himself goals and then attain them. However, he must think about his goals carefully and set them at the appropriate level, in order that he will in fact be able to achieve the goals he sets for himself.** If he sets himself goals that are too far removed from his abilities, then by not fulfilling them he faces a two-fold danger: on one hand, he could end up disdaining and scorning the goals he previously held in such high respect; on the other hand, he could suffer profound disappointment and spiritual crisis in the face of his inability to fulfill his tasks.

Erica Brown, *Leadership in the Wilderness; Authority and Anarchy in the Book of Numbers*

With the word traps of oath-making and oath-taking, **it would make more sense to commit ourselves in deed than in word to a desired outcome.** To achieve a good test score or lose a certain amount of weight, a promise is not an outcome. It is only a method, and a shaky one at that, of attaining an outcome. Somehow, the words seem to secure for us a greater emotional commitment. Their mere expression anchors us in the realm of possibility. If I take an oath, then surely I will study or I will put back that pint of ice cream without tasting even a spoonful. But because **we know the**

emptiness of words, we just might find ourselves saying that we'll study a little later or start the diet tomorrow. If we attach God to these words, however, and a verbal structure of enforcement, then it will add heft to our promises, weight to our words. God becomes the divine police squad and enforcer. That is what the oath-maker hopes for, that the vow will offer the discipline that may not come naturally. Discipline is not a function of word, but of deed. **We take oaths because we do not trust ourselves to be true to our deepest wishes.**

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Redemption, Prayer and Talmud Torah"

What is *hatarat nedarim*? One takes a vow or an oath, to engage in or refrain from an action. Later he discovers the difficulties connected with the execution of his vow or oath. He appears before three people, and they dissolve the vow or the oath, by subjecting him to a cross-examination which results in the conclusion that, had he anticipated the hardship engendered by compliance with the vow or oath, he would never have committed himself.

The question arises: why is he absolved? The taking of the vow or oath was a free act; nobody constrained him to do so..... **In substituting the pseudo- I, with its wrong table of needs, for the true self and the right table of needs, the individual has ceased to be the author of his own deed, of his vow or oath.**