



D'var Torah Parashat Matot-Ma'asei – Aug. 3, 2024

By Lori Gilman

The Book of Genesis begins with God using the power of words to create the world. “Va-yomer elohim yehi or, va’yehi or,” God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.”

Here at the end of the Book of Numbers we again recognize the power of words.

Today’s Torah reading describes the final events leading to the Israelites entering the Promised Land. Yes, I know, we still have the book of Deuteronomy to go before we finish reading the Torah for the year, but Deuteronomy is mainly a summary of what has already happened with a bunch more laws thrown in.

So really the action ends here in these last two parashot of the Book of Numbers, as God tells the Israelites the very last things they need to know before they enter the land and start creating their own society. The 40 years in the desert are finally coming to an end and it is necessary for God to guide the people to establish a society in a way that will ensure that the people are not to be corrupted by power, wealth, and conflict, which could lead to war between the tribes and between individuals. The people have to be responsible for self-policing.

But what is the most critical thing needed for a society to function? What are the building blocks that enable people to create a just society where they are able to collaborate and have cooperative relationships?

I would say that the aim of an ideal society is to have both freedom and order. But it’s a difficult balance.

We have seen in the Book of Genesis that freedom without order can lead to the chaotic situation before the flood.

We have seen in the Book of Exodus that order without freedom is like slavery in Egypt.

So as the children of Israel are about to enter the land and live as God's holy nation, you'd expect them to receive some last minute advice regarding how to create this system of balanced freedom and order. But what do we hear?

Our parasha begins with God’s command regarding the making of vows and oaths. See Numbers chapter 30, verse 3:

“If a man makes a vow to the Lord 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.”

You might consider a discussion of vows to be something strange to talk about at this point in the Torah, but let’s think about it.

A vow (or an oath) is what is called a “performative utterance.” A vow is an obligation created by words, a promise. In Jewish law, both vows and oaths are completely voluntary, but they are also binding and can’t be retracted. They have the status of a mitzvah that one puts upon oneself.

By making a vow or oath a person uses language/words to commit to something. One makes a promise to God to behave in a certain way so that God in response will grant one’s requests. A vow could also be a prohibition that a person imposes upon one’s self to abstain from something which is otherwise permitted.

Vows are serious stuff. The enormous importance of the vow and its severe consequences are reflected in the fact that a whole tractate of the Talmud is devoted to it. And during Kol Nidre on the eve of Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, we make a point of declaring that all unintentional vows we may make over the year are null and void. The rabbis actually discouraged vows saying it is better not to vow than to vow and not fulfill.

In Judaism the spoken word is holy. It is also powerful. We use words to generate trust, which then brings order to society. We use language to be able to get along and cooperate with others even though words, thus spoken, might limit our freedom.

When speaking (a vow) an obligation is created and obligations are the foundations of Judaism. Even if one does not use the exact formula of a vow, the sanctity of the word is so highly regarded in Jewish law that the verse in Deut. 23:24, which says, "What issues from your lips, you are to keep, and you are to do" was taken as a separate injunction independent of the words which follow, "as you vowed to the Lord your God..." Even more, it was interpreted as meaning that the "the mere utterance of your lips is equivalent to a vow," giving a simple statement of intention the force of a vow. In response to this understanding, a custom developed of adding to any such statement the disclaimer "beli neder" (meaning "without taking a vow").

The importance of keeping one's word is a moral obligation. Being reliable ensures order—no force is necessary if people fulfill their obligations. And no force necessary means freedom.

When a person makes a vow he must not break his word—he must do what he says. Freedom depends on people keeping their word, and all institutions in a free society depend on trust.

Trust means honoring promises, when there is no trust society breaks down. I'll give you an example from the book of Jeremiah, Chapter 9:

"They bend their tongues like bows;
They are valorous in the land
For treachery, not for honesty...
One man cheats the other,
They will not speak truth;
They have trained their tongues to speak falsely;
They wear themselves out working iniquity
You dwell in the midst of deceit.
In their deceit they refuse to heed me—declares the Lord."

According to Jeremiah, this lack of truth and trust was the cause of the exile to Babylon.

The society broke down when people could not trust each other and did not fulfill their obligations to each other. Instead, the people fell under the power of another and lost their freedom.

Let's not forget: speaking the truth was important enough to be included in the Ten Commandments. The ninth commandment says, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor". We read in Deuteronomy 19:16-19 that false witnesses receive the same punishment that they sought to mete out on the unjustly accused.

The lack of truth, i.e., lying, has proven to be dangerous throughout the centuries in the form of conspiracy theories influencing millions of people long after these theories first appear. Take for example Thomas of Monmouth, a twelfth-century Benedictine monk who needed pilgrims to come to Norwich Cathedral. Casting around for a patron saint, he chose to write about a young boy called William who had vanished in the woods in the year 1144. In order to explain William's disappearance, Thomas came up with the baseless accusation that Jews were murdering Christian children in order to use their blood for religious rituals. Throughout history, this falsehood has caused Jews to suffer a severe loss of freedom and even loss of life. This lie motivated violence and discrimination in England against Jews, and led to their eventual expulsion; and then the lie spread to other parts of Europe. This "blood libel" accusation is still used as an anti-Semitic slur by the likes of Hamas.

The Jewish community is also affected today by the big lies of Jews being “globalists,” having dual loyalty, controlling the media, controlling the banks, and even starting wildfires by space lasers; and the anti-semitism that often follows it thrives in an environment where flagrant lies are acceptable.

Unchecked lies matter for everyone. Today, words are just as important as in the time of the Torah to maintain a free and orderly society. We constantly hear language that is not truthful and it makes us anxious for the future. Besides conspiracy theories, we’ve all heard the terms, “fake news,” “gaslighting,” “propaganda,” “alternative facts”, “disinformation,” “deep fakes,” and “untruths” bandied about because of the proliferation of untruths in our society. (Not to mention the potential abuse of artificial intelligence.) Who should we believe, if anyone? Lies could be called our greatest social and political challenge and non-response has unfortunately become a norm. Endless lies and distortions undermine trust and seed doubt creating chaos, the opposite of order and impinges on our freedom.

In our parasha the importance of words, vows, trustworthiness, and reliability, and how they can create an ideal society with relative freedom plays out in Numbers, Chapter 32, when the tribe of Reuven and the tribe of Gad come to Moses to request that they be given land on the east side of the Jordan, basically staying put where they are and not crossing over to help conquer the Promised Land with all of the other tribes. After all, they have cattle and the land looks great for cattle. Why go any farther?

Moses answers angrily, “Are your brothers to go to war while you stay here? Why will you turn the minds of the Israelites from crossing into the land that the Lord has given them?” Moses reminds them of what happened when the spies surveyed the land and the people refused to go. God made them wander in the desert for 40 years! And now a new generation of sinful men have taken their place! If you (Gadites and Reubenites) abandon them, you will bring calamity on the people, says Moses.

In turn, the Gadites and Reubenites say they will give their word and promise to fight in the front lines in the battle to conquer the Land. Moses grants their request reluctantly, and adds that they will do this for God's sake, not just for the sake of the Israelite people (because giving their word to God makes it even stronger).

After all, everything depends on this promise that the Gadites and Reubenites have made to fight alongside the rest of the tribes. They are in effect taking a vow that they will fulfill their promises. And we have just learned how significant vows are.

The narrative continues in the first chapter of the book of Joshua when Joshua reminds these tribes, who want to remain on the east side of the Jordan, of their promise; and they answer Joshua “we will do everything you have commanded us and we will go wherever you send us.”

This response bodes well for creating an ideal society where order is created through promises fulfilled.

Eventually, the tribes, under Joshua’s leadership, conquer the Land and Joshua summons the Reubenites and the Gadites to him once again. He says to them (in Joshua, Chapter 22): “You have observed all that Moses the servant of the Lord commanded you and have obeyed me in everything...you have not forsaken your kinsmen through the long years down to this day but have faithfully observed the instruction of the Lord your God. ” They had fulfilled their promise.

Just like everything depended on all of the tribes promising to work together to conquer the land and keeping their word, our institutions today depend on trust, truth, and honoring promises. If trust breaks down, social relationships break down and society loses its freedom. The only way people can form collaborative and cooperative relationships without using force is by using words that all parties honor. Freedom and order need trust and trust comes from people keeping their word and telling the truth.

At the end of the Amida, when we recite the words: “Elohai netzor l’shoni me’ra u s’fatai midaber mirma,” meaning, “My God, keep my tongue from evil and my lips from lies,” each of us is reminded of our own responsibility in recognizing the power of our words to create or to destroy.

Shabbat shalom