

PARASHAS MATTOS

The Human Ingredient

Oaths and vows are very sacred things, so sacred that it is unthinkable that someone would violate them. In fact, no matter how skeptical and distrustful we may generally be, if we hear someone, anyone, make a solemn vow by all that is holy, we tend to believe it.

But what if the one making the vow could rescind it at will? Would a vow still have the same credibility? Obviously not. The force of a vow derives from its permanence and inviolability. And yet, the Torah laws regarding vows, about which we read in this week's Torah portion, feature a mechanism by which one can be released from a vow. Surely then, this mechanism reveals a very fundamental flaw in the vow.

What is the mechanism? And what is the flaw?

They are as follows. If the one making the vow encounters an unexpected situation in which the vow creates complications, it may be possible to obtain a release. For instance, a person vows not to eat a certain type of food and afterwards he discovers that just this food will be served at his son's wedding. In retrospect, had he known he would not be able to eat at his own son's wedding he would never have made that vow in the first place. In this case, he must present his argument to a rabbinical court, and if it meets the specific criteria, the court can release him from his vow.

What is the basis for this release mechanism? The Talmud derives it from the verse, "Everything a person expresses in an oath." It would have been sufficient to say, "Everything expressed in an oath." Why the inclusion of the words "a person"? This seems to indicate that only someone considered "a person" can make binding oaths and vows. Oaths and vows that do not take future developments into consideration are not valid. Why? Because they were made without the human ingredient.

Let us reflect for a moment. What are we accustomed to thinking of as the human ingredient? In what way does our society consider human beings superior to animals? It is in our creativity, our intelligence, our ability to think and reason. Homo sapiens. Thinking man. But the Torah uses an altogether different criterion. "A person," according to the Torah, is someone who has foresight, who considers not only the instant gratification of the here and now like an animal but also the future ramifications of all his actions.

Why is this the ultimate human ingredient? Because what truly sets a human being apart from an animal is his soul, the indestructible spark of the divine that will continue to exist after the body perishes, that draws its sustenance from the spiritual world rather than the physical.. A person with foresight, therefore, realizes he cannot allow himself to be distracted by the immediate gratification of his physical impulses. He knows that he must use the short time allotted to him in this world to accumulate merit which will stand him in eternal good stead in the next world. This is the mark of a true human being.

A father was sitting on a park bench watching his young sons at play. Nearby sat an old man.

The boys were exceedingly rough in their play, pushing and grabbing things from each other, and the father looked on with concern.

“Are you worried about them?” asked the old man.

“A little,” replied the father. “But I have foresight. I came prepared with paraphernalia from my medicine cabinet in case they get hurt.”

The old man laughed. “That’s foresight? Thinking of bringing paraphernalia when you’re already standing at the door? If you really had foresight you would have started years ago by bringing them up to be more courteous and considerate of each other.”

In our own lives, we are all aware of the importance of preparing for the future. But for which future are we preparing, the temporary future we will encounter in a few years or the eternal future of our indestructible souls? It is all good and well to make financial investments that will secure our physical well-being when we grow old, but it even more important to make spiritual investments that will secure the well-being of our souls for all eternity.