

WHAT ARE YOU SAYING??

Parashat Mattot - The Power of Words & Vows

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"If a man takes a vow . . . according to whatever comes forth from his mouth shall he do." Numbers 30:3



This week's parasha introduces to us the concept of a neder (vow). While vows are considered to be specific proclamations of abstinence, also included in the definition

of a neder vow is any proclamation that one is committing oneself to do. Thus whenever someone says anything, however benign, and commits to a course of action, however insignificant, one's words have the power and obligation of a vow.

For example, if one is asked to take out the garbage and one responds, "OK, I'll take it out right away." "Right away" means now, not later, not when you feel like it, or when you are done with what you are presently doing. Right away means right away. Once the words have come forth from your mouth, you are obligated to fulfill exactly what you yourself have said. Thus, we see that vows are things that we encounter on a daily basis.

In order to avoid the pitfall that every word coming out of our mouths will be a neder vow, our Sages have instituted a very simple solution. Whenever we proclaim anything, whether it be something major, like announcing that one will give a large tzedaka gift, or something small like one will take out the garbage "right now", one should always add to one's words the phrase "b'li neder" (without a vow). In this way we are proclaiming our intent that the words that we saying do not have the force of a vow. In other words, we proclaim our intention to do something, but we are not committing specifically to do it. "Bli Neder" should become a regular part of speech for all of us.

Now, what is all the fuss about words? Why does the Torah hold us accountable for a vow every time we say something, no matter how haphazard or in jest the saying? In order to understand this we must understand the power of speech as the holy Mekubalim and Hasidim discuss it.

The Hakhamim (Rabbis) begin their discussion of this topic with the pasukim (verses) in Bereshit that speak about creation. How did HaShem create His universe? What vehicle or method did He choose to use in order to manifest Being? The Torah itself answers us quite clearly. G-d spoke, and what He spoke came into being. Creation was brought about by speech. Yet, G-d forbid that we would ever interpret a Biblical metaphor literally. G-d has no form or semblance of form. Thus, He has no mouth with which to speak, in a literal sense.

Following the Torah's metaphor we can ask, being that G-d spoke, what did He speak? The answer is clear. G-d spoke words. Words are made up of letters. Letters are representative images of sounds. Thus, G-d "spoke" sounds. The "sounds" emanating from G-d thus gave rise to creation. These sounds were those of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alef-bet. These letters are images of thoughts, which manifest the Mind of G-d. Thus, the two together Sound and Thought gave rise to manifest being.

Throughout Kabbalistic literature, the importance of the Hebrew letters is strongly emphasized. Not only are their sounds important but so also are their shapes. In certain small groups of Mekubalim, the letters of the Hebrew alef-bet are combined with one another, not to form any type of words, but rather to form mystical chants. These combinations of letters are referred to by the Mekubalim as Shemot Kodashim (holy names). They claim that the highest way to fulfill the commandment to bond with G-d (Devekut) is to acquire His attributes and to manifest them here on Earth. One of these sacred attributes is the power of creation.

The holy Mekubalim of today possess an ancient knowledge, passed down to them from the Biblical prophets. They have received the secret sacred keys of which "sounds" G-d used to create the universe. Knowing this sacred secret Torah knowledge, the holy Mekubalim, as trusted faithful servants of their Master in Heaven, guard this special gift and use it only for the most important of tasks.

We are all familiar with the miraculous powers of the great Mekubalim and Hasidim and how they performed outright miracles. The Maharal of Prague created a Golem. Rabbi Shmuel Abuhatzera rode a carpet on top of water. The Ba'al Shem Tov could heal unhealable diseases and travel great distances in almost no time. Even in our generation, the miraculous deeds of the likes of Rav Yitzhak Kaduri, Rabbi Mordechai Sharabi and the great Baba Sali are known to tens of thousands. Because of their absolute devotion to HaShem and His Torah, these holy men were/are the conduits for HaShem's power to manifest here upon the Earth.

I reveal to you a secret. The technique used by these and other holy Tzadikim to do that which HaShem commanded them involves the manipulation of the secret power within sound and thought. When these Tzadikim perform an act above or outside of the laws of nature, they simply focus their minds to create a picture of an alternate reality. Then they channel the image of this alternate reality into the power of speech. In other words, they either speak words of prayer or recited Shemot Kodashim (holy names). Either way, once the energy of sound is activated a change in physical matter occurred at the sub-atomic level. A new reality is created. A miracle is performed. There is no magic here, just a well-founded knowledge of what I call G-d's spiritual technology.

This should not come as a surprise to anyone who is familiar with the latest findings of nuclear physics. According to the latest theories of sub-atomic particles, the smallest conceivable forms of matter are called "super strings." This super-tiny form of matter, millions of which make up a mere single sub-atomic particle are said to be in the form of little strings. What makes matter bond together and to form different patterns is how these super strings are said to vibrate. In other words, the super strings are like the strings on a guitar or violin. When they are plucked music is made and sound is formed. Thus when these super strings vibrate, sound is formed and matter is created. So then, what vibrates the super strings? I don't know if the physicists have discovered it yet, but a Mekubal will tell him that it is the power of thought.

We see here a lesson in Torah, the importance of which is corroborated by both science and mysticism. The sounds we make are the words that come out of our mouths. Our words are never

empty words. We never speak merely for the sake of making sounds. We speak to express what is on our minds. Thus, our words are always connected to our thoughts.

Now here arises a serious problem. If our thoughts are not pure and holy, then neither will be our words. Thus when we speak combining impure words and impure thoughts, what are we creating? G-d created a universe with His form of speech. Do we, with our form of speech, destroy the universe?

Do not underestimate your own power of speech. I do not have to challenge you to remember the last time you said something to someone that either elevated him or her or put them down. Indeed, our speech creates many things. It can create joy or it can create anger. What we say can start a war or avoid one. Speech and words, whether in spoken or written form are the most powerful weapons in the world. Indeed, even the magical word "Abracadabra" reveals this lesson. Unknown to most the word "Abracadabra" is actually a Hebrew phrase, which means "I create (A'bra) what (ca) I speak (dab'ra)."

In light of all this mysticism, we understand now very well why the words we speak have tremendous power. Therefore, when we say that we will do something, our words are creating that reality. When, we therefore, do not keep our word; we are in essence destroying a part of creation. This is a horrible spiritual crime. Yet, in our naïveté we destroy more worlds than we build.

In order to avoid this horrible misuse of speech, we must unite proper thought to our speech. Thus when we recite even the most simple of statements we must impose upon our words the thought "bli neder" (without a vow) which itself must be spoken for it to become manifest.

In every circle of Torah observant G-d fearing Jews, the words "bli neder" are an integral part of our vocabulary. Every one of us should learn to adopt this concept of thought and pattern of speech.

In addition, when we perform mitzvot, it is not enough that we merely perform the action of the mitzvah. Our thoughts must be involved with what we are doing. The Ba'al Shem Tov has written in this week's parasha that this is why the Mekubalim have instituted the L'Shem Yihud prayers for mitzvot that are found in every Siddur.

By taking a moment and reciting a few short words that focus our minds on the mitzvah that we are about to perform, we elevate the mitzvah and turn it into a tool of spiritual creation.

L'Shem Yihud prayers perform a vital spiritual task. Each of us, should endeavor to recite the words, "L'Shem Yihud Kudsha Birikh Hu U'Shekhinteh" (for the sake of the unity of the Holy One, blessed be He and His Shekhina) prior to all of our actions. In this way, we elevate all that we do and bond with HaShem at every moment. This is the best way to fulfill the mitzvah of Devekut.