

***D'var Torah: Parashat Matot-Mas'ei (2018/5778)***

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Let's play a word association game.

When I say "*Yom Kippur*,"  
what comes to mind?

How about "wilderness"?

What about "TV news anchors"?

When I say the word "vow,"  
what comes up for you?

For me,  
I think of marriage vows,  
a vow of silence,  
a vow of poverty...  
I also hear the words "*Kol Nidrei*,"  
literally translated as "all vows,"  
chanted solemnly by the cantor each Yom Kippur Eve.

"*Kol Nidrei*" is a legal text,  
a text that absolves us of the vows we made,  
vows left unfulfilled in the year gone by.  
...But what about vows we want to keep?  
Are there vows we don't want to be,  
or should not be absolved of?  
When we make a vow,  
do we say what we mean and mean what we say?  
Are we committed to keeping our word?

This week's double Torah portion,  
*Matot-Mas'ei*,  
begins with a discussion on vows.  
Numbers, chapter 30, verse 3 reads:

“If a man makes a vow to God  
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.”

Rashi,  
a medieval commentator from 11th-century France,  
understands the verse this way:  
“He shall not profane his word;  
he must not make the words of his sacred vow  
into ordinary words,”  
into unholy words.<sup>1</sup>  
In other words,  
the things we say matter;  
any commitment we make –  
whether to ourselves or someone else –  
is sacred.



*Matot-Mas'ei* brings us to the end of the Book of Numbers,  
*Bamidbar*,  
which is typically translated as “in the wilderness.”  
Avivah Zornberg,  
a modern commentator,  
points out that “*bamidbar*”  
shares a root with the word “*m'dabeir*,”  
to speak.  
“*Ein midbar, ela dibbur*,” say the Midrashists –  
“There is no wilderness, but rather utterance.”<sup>2</sup>

At this moment in history,  
I believe we now sit on this precipice,  
navigating through a dangerous and fragile wilderness,  
bewildered by never-ending streams of words.  
In this age of talking heads and witty posts on social media,

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<sup>1</sup> Rashi on Num. 30:3 – Carasik, Michael. The Commentators' Bible: Numbers. The Jewish Publication Society, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Zornberg, Avivah Gottlieb. Bewilderments: Reflections on the Book of Numbers. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2017.

do we choose our words carefully enough?  
Do we mean what we say and say what we mean?  
Are we committed to keeping our word?

Our Torah portion this week is reminding us –  
A person who follows through on what they say,  
who honors their word,  
is a person with integrity.  
And if they don't,  
if they fail to honor the holiness that their words carry,  
then they are not just lacking integrity,  
they have sinned against God.

What if we considered the weight of our words this way  
each time we spoke?  
What if,  
instead of needing to absolve ourselves of unfulfilled vows  
each Yom Kippur,  
we followed through on our promises,  
fulfilled the commitments we took upon ourselves?  
What if we recognized our words as sacred?  
What would that kind of world look like?

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Earlier this week,  
people around the globe waited,  
collectively,  
with bated breath  
to hear what would come of the children  
who were trapped in the cave in Thailand.  
For 18 days, they huddled,  
bewildered in the damp darkness,  
far from their loved ones.  
Their coach,  
a former Buddhist Monk,  
taught them to meditate –  
to breathe rather than to speak –  
hoping it would help them conserve energy

and stay calm in the face of wild uncertainty  
until they could be found.

Rescue workers flew in from nations around the world,  
deeply committed to helping save these kids.  
These brave heroes vowed to do everything they could  
to ensure that all 13 kids and their coach would live.  
So committed were these inspiring people  
that one diver,  
deprived of precious breath,  
gave his life so that those kids might live.

This story,  
good news that is so needed this week,  
brings me hope –  
hope that there is still goodness in the world  
even when things seem dark and tragic;  
hope that there are people,  
like the diver,  
who utter words purposefully and with integrity,  
who follow through on their promises despite the risks,  
in a world that is often filled with meaningless talk.



So... has your answer changed?

When I say the word “vow,”  
what do you think of now?

I think of Thai kids in caves and immigrant kids in cages.  
I think of our obligation to “love the stranger,  
for we were strangers in the land of Egypt.”<sup>3</sup>  
I think of our commitment to “devote ourselves to justice,  
aid the wronged,  
and uphold the rights of the orphan.”<sup>4</sup>  
I think of meaning what we say and saying what we mean.

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<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 10:19

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 1:17

I think of lifting up the commitments that we make  
to ourselves and others  
as sacred.

The rescue of the Thai children gives us a moment to  
exhale the breath we've been holding,  
a short respite before the next deep breath  
that will give us the strength, resolve, and hope we need  
to get back to work.

Rabbi Tarfon used to say,

"It is not your responsibility to finish the work,  
but neither are you free to desist from it."<sup>5</sup>

May we never absolve ourselves of doing what we can  
with the time that we have

in the place where we are

to help make this world a better and brighter place.

May the commitments we make to our children

be uttered with integrity,

and may we draw hope

from the successful outcomes witnessed in Thailand  
that miracles can happen here too.

Shabbat Shalom.

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<sup>5</sup> Pirkei Avot 2:16