

The Rebbe's Discourses

Summaries of points from the Rebbe's Chassidic Discourses בלי אחריות כלל וכלל
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BEYOND VOWS?

THE SEDRA BEGINS WITH MOSES INSTRUCTING THE LEADERS OF THE TRIBES IN THE LAWS concerning vows. A vow might be a declaration that one vows not to eat a certain kind of food, which otherwise is permitted by the Torah. The Rebbe cites the Jerusalem Talmud² which asks why one should make vows at all: 'aren't the prohibitions commanded by the Torah enough for you?'. Why should you add to these prohibitions by making a vow?

Two further questions are 1) why should the laws about vows be addressed specifically to the heads of the Tribes? Rashi states that the mention of the heads of the Tribes hints at the idea that a Sage is empowered to annul vows in certain circumstances, but this still needs further explanation 2) how does the passage about vows relate to the section on Festivals at the concluding part of the previous Sedra?

Regarding the general question of making vows, the purpose of Creation is that 'G-d desired to have a dwelling in the lower world'³. This means that people *should* interact with the physical world, following the guidance of the Torah, in order to purify it and elevate it. This is also expressed in a teaching of the Baal Shem Tov⁴, commenting on the verse 'if you see the donkey of someone you do not like struggling under its load, you must help him' (Exodus 23:5). The donkey of 'someone you do not like' signifies the attractions of materiality. The

¹ Maamar Vayedaber Moshe el Roshei HaMatot 5726 (1966). Printed in Dvar Malchut of Matot-Masei 5777. It was not edited by the Rebbe.

² Jerusalem Talmud Nedarim 9:1.

³ See Midrash Tanchuma Naso sec.16, Tanya Part 1 ch.36.

⁴ Printed in Hayom Yom 28 Shevat.

Baal Shem Tov taught that you do not avoid this completely, following an ascetic mode of life. Instead you engage with it and ‘help it’, meaning elevate it spiritually.

These teachings on the importance of positive involvement with the physical pleasures of life also suggest, as was said by the Jerusalem Talmud, that one should not make vows, which would lead to increased abstinence and disengagement from the physical.

However, the Rebbe explains that this approach is only true for someone who has never put a foot wrong. If someone has strayed from the path and has succumbed to temptations, he or she should be extra careful and in this case vows of abstention, or their equivalent, might well be appropriate. This attitude is expressed in a saying by the Previous Rebbe: ‘what one may not do, one may not do, and what one is permitted to do, one does not have to do’⁵. For in many cases, rather than elevate the food, or other physical activity, the person is dragged down by the physical pleasure to a lower level of being.

The two modes – that of being beyond temptation and beyond vows, and that of being challenged by temptation, and therefore needing the added security provided by a vow – are expressed in certain other spiritual polarities. One is the distinction between Atzilut and the lower worlds: Atzilut is beyond vows, there is no hint of evil there, whereas the lower worlds include the possibility and actuality of evil, which one has to try to avoid. In specific Sefirot, Wisdom, Chochmah, is the essence of selflessness beyond evil, while Understanding, Binah, is the source of the down chaining of the Sefirot and therefore also can be tainted with Evil.

Just as there is this distinction in ‘space’, the realm of the spiritual worlds, so too in the case of ‘time’. Hence the same division is seen in the distinction between Shabbat, beyond vows, and the ordinary week days. We find that physical enjoyment of food and other aspects of life – even sleeping during the day! - are recommended by the Sages for Shabbat, while in the week a person may be advised to be more restrained.

Further, even with regard to the Festivals, the Sages warned that the joys of the Festivals can lead to selfish indulgence or even impropriety. This could explain why the laws of vows in this week’s Sedra Matot, are juxtaposed with the list of offerings for the festivals in last week’s Sedra, Pinchas. The Festivals need restraint, like vows; but Shabbat is on a higher level, beyond vows⁶.

But we are still left with the question about the leaders of the Tribes. In terms of the polarity between the one who is beyond vows and the one who needs to be restrained by them, surely the heads of the Tribes are in the former group? If they are beyond vows, why should these laws be addressed to them?

⁵ Printed in Hayom Yom 25 Adar II.

⁶ Of course, some measure of self-restraint is always required.

The Rebbe explains that the point is, as mentioned by Rashi, their power to annul vows. The heads of the Tribes have the responsibility to elevate the rest of society, to bring them too to the level where they are 'beyond vows'. This will be achieved with the coming of Moshiach when it will be a time 'which is completely Shabbat', beyond vows. At that point the spiritual and the physical will be joined.

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