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ADDING RULES?

JEWISH TEACHING HAS MANY POINTS OF INSPIRATION: THE SHABBAT CANDLES, the warmth and beauty of the Shabbat meals together with one's family and/or friends, the joy of a festival, the subtlety of Torah ideas. In order to provide a context and a vehicle for this inspiration and warmth, there are also rules: not to profane Shabbat, laws of Kashrut, things we must do and things we must not do.

The Sedra¹ begins with the idea of *adding* to the rules. A person makes a vow to do something, or to refrain from doing something. The Jerusalem Talmud comments: "Are not the rules which the Torah imposes enough for you?"² Why should a person want to add something more to his or her personal list of do's and don'ts?

One reason might be because the person feels frail. A person who got drunk at a party and then did something really stupid might promise themselves they are never going to drink hard liquor at all. (We try not to make real 'vows' nowadays, in case we come to break them. But we might make positive decisions and promises for the future)³. Now, there are two aspects to this decision. One is that it has an obvious preventative force: since one drink leads to another, the best way to avoid getting seriously drunk, if one is worried that this might be a real and dangerous possibility, is not to take the first drink.

The second aspect, pointed out by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, is that the force of making a decision of this kind can actually add spiritual strength to the individual. The Mitzvot which G-d gives us impart holiness. When we voluntarily accept a further 'rule', for the sake of a

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more wholesome relationship with G-d and with our fellows, as long as this rule is truly sensible, this itself strengthens us spiritually. The effect is that we are even less likely to fall into the sad error of the past, because now our moral and spiritual strength is greater.

So, as described in the Sedra, a person might make a vow. The Sages of the Oral Law explain that there is also the concept of annulling a person's vow. This can be carried out by an individual Sage of true stature, or by a Beth Din, a law court of three. The power to annul a vow springs from a higher level of spiritual consciousness and connection with the Divine, which is able to see beyond the frailties of the individual, and recognise that he or she now has the ability to return to a more 'normal' mode of behaviour, without fear of harm.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe points out that while in terms of Jewish Law we are describing different people, one who makes the vow and the other(s) who can annul it, Chassidic teachings explain that both these qualities are within each individual: the sense of our own frailty, making us wary of moral and spiritual danger; and the higher power within us, which is able to grant us the strength to withstand temptations. We could define these two qualities as our mind and our Divine Soul respectively.

Our mind sees our physical surroundings and is attracted, sometimes not in an appropriate way. From the point of view of the mind, we might need to add some rules. But our Divine Soul perceives the G-dliness in life. The world is a world, and one has to deal with every aspect which comes our way. But we do not get dragged after it. We can take two drinks at the party (anyway, someone else is driving) and that is it.

From the point of view of the Soul, we can agree with the Jerusalem Talmud: the rules of the Torah are enough, we do not need any more. However, those rules, we are actually going to try to keep, properly. In fact, in the context of those rules, there are plenty of positive decisions and steps forward we can make. This will help us keep more focused on, and truly *enjoy*, all the points of inspiration in the details of Jewish life⁴.

1. Exodus 30:2-32:42 2. Nedarim 9:1. 3. When making such a promise, it is customary to say '*bli neder*', 'without a vow'. 4. Freely based on *Likkutei Sichot* vol.4, pp.1076-1079.

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SEDRA MATTOT

PROMISES

“By the way, did you remember to bring back the book you borrowed?” Shira asked Leah on Monday morning as they walked into school together.

“Oh no! I’m so sorry, I totally forgot. I put it in a place to remember but it must have slipped my mind! I promise I’ll bring it tomorrow.” Annoyed at herself for forgetting, Leah mumbled some more apologies, assuring herself that tomorrow she would indeed remember. Then, later...

“Y’know what,” Leah turned to Aviva, after the health expert left the classroom, “from now on I am only going to eat healthy – no sweets or chocolate! And I promise that from today I’m going to run ten laps around the playground every day! I mean did you hear what Mrs Pepper was saying? Being healthy is really important!!”

“Yeah,” agreed Aviva, “it is s-o-o-o important! But don’t you think it’s a bit much to promise all that? I mean it’s a lot to do!”

“Nah,” shrugging off Aviva’s doubts, Leah prepared herself for her ten laps. Ten laps proved to be more difficult than she had reckoned, but after much huffing and puffing Leah had managed. She was definitely going to keep up all her new resolutions. Then, on Wednesday morning....

“So Leah do you have the book?”

“Oh no!! I forgot *again!*” Leah felt her heart stop. She had promised to give back Shira’s book and she still had not

brought it. Just then, to try and comfort herself for having forgotten again, she bit into her favourite chocolate bar. “Hey Leah!” yelled Aviva, just as she bit into the bar. “What happened to only eating healthy? Don’t tell me you forgot about your promise!”

Leah blushed. She had brought the chocolate from the cupboard at home, without thinking. Quickly she pulled the bar out of her mouth and tried to spit out the chocolate. “And I forgot to do my ten laps yesterday,” she moaned. “Why do I always break my promises?”

Suddenly in walked Mrs Levi. Once the class was seated, she began. “Who knows what this week’s Sedra is?” Rachel waved her hand enthusiastically “Mattot!” she said.

“Well done, now in the beginning of the Sedra it talks about the laws regarding promises and vows. According to the Torah if one makes a promise then they must keep to it. In fact there are complicated laws for if someone makes a promise that they cannot keep. That’s why it is important to be very careful about making promises.”

Leah’s hand shot up, “but what if you really, really want to do something and you really plan to do it, can’t you make a promise then?” Remembering all the promises she had made and broken in the past few days really got her thinking.

“Good question Leah. When we want to say we are going to do something, we should say we are going to *try* to do it. Also, some people always say ‘bli neder’ which means ‘without a vow’. So, for instance, suppose I decide I am going to eat an apple every day, I would say ‘Bli neder, I am going to try to eat an apple every day.’ Does that answer your question?”

Turning to Shira, once the bell for break had rung, Leah said, “Bli neder I am going to try to remember to bring your book back to you tomorrow. Okay?”

That night, Leah carefully placed the book into her bag. Although she hadn’t actually made a promise, she would definitely keep her word this time.

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