

Bechukosai

Deception and Idols

...a man who will speak and give his word, promising the value of a person to Hashem...

Vaykira 27:2

A boy who is not Bar Mitzvah is not obligated to keep the mitzvos according to biblical law. We are obligated to educate him, and according to some, he may have a Rabbinic responsibility to fulfill mitzvos himself, but according to the strict law of the Torah, he is not responsible. And yet, according to the Torah, once a person can express himself properly, he is obligated to fulfill his commitments, should he promise “the value of a person to Hashem.”⁶⁰¹ This is not only true about commitments of the value of a person, but about all commitments. Even before the responsibility to keep the rest of the Torah comes the responsibility to keep one’s word.

Tosafos⁶⁰² is of the opinion that even a Gentile has the responsibility to keep his word. Now, a Gentile is not responsible to keep anything in the Torah beyond the seven Noachide laws and several other restrictions. But he is responsible to keep his word!

The Ramban⁶⁰³ tells us that when a community gets together to make a decision as a community, they have the ability to create obligations not only upon every of their members, but even upon their descendants. He offers three examples: the national acceptance of the Torah, of the Megillah, and of fast days. We are all under obligation to keep those commitments that our ancestors made en masse. It is interesting to note that even before the Torah was given, we were bound to our word. After all, it is only since the Torah tells us that we must keep our word, that we indeed must do so, right? So what binds us to the Torah then; what is it that forced us to keep our promise to keep the Torah? Even before the Torah was given, we had to keep our word.

The Talmud⁶⁰⁴ tells us that there is a special curse that affects those who back out of their business commitments. “May the One Who paid back the people of the generation of the Flood, and the generation that was dispersed [due to their

601 Arachin 2a; Nazir 62a. See Nazir (ad loc.) regarding whether this is a biblical responsibility or a rabbinic one.

602 Tosafos to Avoda Zarah 5b, s.v. *minayin*. Note the shock of R. Akiva Eiger in his *Gilyon Hashas*, ad loc. See also Tosafos to Nazir 61b, s.v. *baneicha*, as well as *Mitzpeh Aisan* to Avodah Zarah, *ibid.*, and *Nitzotzei Obr*, *ibid.*, paragraph 16. See also *Mishneh Limelech* to *Hilchos Melachim*, ch. 10, and *Arnei Miluim* 1, as well as the comments of R. Zalman Nehemia Goldberg in his footnote to *Sheva Mitzvos Hashem*, vol. 1, p. 81, n. 163.

603 *Mishpat Hacherem* (published after commentary to Gittin in *Chiddushei Haramban*).

604 Bava Metziah 44a

attempts at building the Tower of Babel] pay back the fellow who does not stand by his word.” R. Zvi Elimelech of Dinov explained⁶⁰⁵ that both the generations of the Flood, and of the Dispersion, were not explicitly commanded by God to refrain from what they were doing. Those who brought on the Flood were, nevertheless, punished for their theft and coercion of others in business matters, for their behavior was of the sort that any sane person can see brings destruction to the world. So, too, the generation of the Dispersion acted against God in a way that the rational mind should know is counterproductive to humankind, even in absence of any explicit divine command. It is just the same when any person does not keep his word. When a person does not keep his business commitments, he is expected to know that although he has not violated any law per se, he has, nevertheless, done a terrible thing. Every person is expected to know certain things, even without the enlightenment that comes from the Torah. Just by having the basic intellectual tools that human were given, a person knows that he is meant to keep his word.

“He who changes his words, it is as if he worships idols,” says the Talmud.⁶⁰⁶ R. Menachem Meiri⁶⁰⁷ explains that this refers to one who does not keep his commitments. Idolatry is the most egregious of sins.⁶⁰⁸ After all, man was placed in this world in order to worship G-d, do good and accomplish as much as he can. It is only possible for one to do that when one knows what is true and what is false, what is good and what is bad. Following a false system, with false values and false gods, is understandably a cardinal sin. A fellow promising to make it to his Grandma’s birthday party who instead goes to the movies has, indeed, committed an offense; but can we compare that to idolatry? It is certainly not the kindest thing to do, nor does it display integrity – but is it really even close to the worship of idols?

To understand this, we must explore the nature of a mitzvah. The Rambam⁶⁰⁹ tells us, “Many things were forbidden by the Sages as ‘Rabbinic theft,’ such as gambling...What is gambling? Playing games with wood, stone, bones or any such substance, and making a deal that whoever wins the game will take home a certain amount of money. Our Rabbis declared that this is theft despite the fact that this money is given completely willfully by its owner. *Because it was taken in a playful and silly manner, it is theft!*” This ruling of the Rambam is difficult to understand on the surface – if someone is not taking somebody else’s object against his will or knowledge, how can he be a thief? What on earth has his playful and silly manner got to do with stealing? He may be one who does not fear God, or has transgressed a number of other sins, but how can we call him a thief?

The Chacham Tzvi,⁶¹⁰ in addressing the prohibition of stealing even from an

605 *Bracha Mishuleshes* to Bava Metziah 4:2

606 Sanhedrim 92a

607 Beis Habechira, ad loc.

608 Sanhedrin 50a, “*poshet yado biikar adif*” (denying the existence of God is most severe).

609 *Hilchos Gezeila Viaveidah*, 6:7 and 6:10

610 *Shaalos Uteshuvos Chacham Tzvi*, 26

idolater, explains that there are two purposes to every mitzvah. On one hand, we do not steal because the Torah must protect the fellow with money, and not allow any charlatan to make off with what is not rightfully his. But another purpose, explains the Chacham Tzvi, is to ensure that man will not behave in a despicable way. We therefore cannot steal from anyone, even should there be a person who does not deserve the protection that this prohibition provides, because there is something bad that happens to *us* when we steal! In fact, the Rambam, himself, makes such a statement in his *Pirush Hamishnayos*⁶¹¹ when he says, “Our Sages have taught us that it is prohibited to deceive even the idolater...for this develops in man terrible characteristics.” Mitzvos are here to make sure that we do certain actions, but above all that, they are here to change us. Stealing is both about taking money from another person, and about taking money in an ignoble manner. If one takes money in a silly or uncouth way, it is akin to stealing, for, stealing is not just about taking something from someone else; it can be about taking something even should that taking hurt nobody at all in any (legal) sense, for even then, it hurts the fellow who did the stealing!⁶¹²

Now, we can understand why it is idolatrous to default on one’s word. The Torah is talking to a man. It tells that man to do mitzvos. Those mitzvos have their effect on both the man and his relationship with Hashem. But there must be a man there to talk to. With no integrity, there is no man to talk to, and there is no one to hear the message of the Torah. Just as there can be no worship of Hashem when one denies Hashem, so can there be no worship of Hashem when there is no man. The travesty of idolatry is that man is acting against the entire purpose of Creation. Man is here to worship God – one who denies God, or wrongly defines Him, has committed one of the worst possible offenses. But equally grave is the sin of one who wrongly defines man. If there is no man, there can be no worship of God. The Torah presupposes the existence of a man *with integrity* before it commands anything – it can do no less. Even the Gentile must keep his word, and even the underage boy must follow through. Derech Eretz must come before Torah, for Torah cannot change a man and bring him close to God if he is not a man, and without integrity, man is not much more than an animal.

611 Keilim 12:7; in the standard editions this is found, but it is brought out far more clearly in the newer, more accurate, translations of R. Y. Kapach, and that of R. Ezra Korech (Machon Hamaor).

612 See also *Chiddushei Rabbenu HaGrim* on Chumash (of R. Yechiel Michel Feinstein), where he sees a similar theme in Targum Yonason to the Ten Commandments (Shemos 20:13); for example, where “You shall not murder” is translated as “My nation, Israel, shall not be murderers, nor shall they be partners with them, nor shall they be seen in the gathering places of Israel,” etc. He explains that the Targum understands the ultimate goal of these commandments as creating a society where we are surrounded by others who are filled with positive characteristics – not simply to prevent murder.