

THE ROLE OF VOWS IN JEWISH PRAYER

References to vows are absent from Jewish prayer except on the days just before ראש השנה and continuing until יום כיפור. On those days, vows play a role in two forms: התרת נדרים and כל נדרי. In contrast, vows played a very significant role in early Jewish prayer and while the בית המקדש stood. Let us look at several examples of vows, each of which represent an example of prayer, found in תנ"ך:

בראשית פרק כ"ב, וידר יעקב נדר לאמר אם יהיה א-להים עמדי ושמרני בדרך הזה אשר אנכי הולך ונתן לי לחם לאכל ובגד ללבש: (כ"א) – ושבתני בשלום אל בית אבי והיה ה' לי לא-להים: כ"ב – והאבן הזאת אשר שמתני מצבה יהיה בית א-להים וכל אשר תתן לי עשר אעשרנו לך.

Translation: 20. And Jacob uttered a vow in which he promised: If G-d remains with me, and guards me while I am on the path that I am about to follow and provides me bread to eat and clothes to wear, 21. So that I can return to my father's house whole, then the Lord shall be my G-d.

בראשית פרק לא', יג' – אנכי הא-ל בית אל אשר משחת שם מצבה אשר נדרת לי שם נדר עתה קום צא מן הארץ הזאת ושוב אל ארץ מולדתך.

Translation: I am the G-d you approached in Beth-El, where you anointed the pillar, and where you issued a vow to Me, now arise, leave this land, and return to the land of your family.

יעקב אבינו make a vow to G-d after escaping from the danger he faced as a result of receiving the blessing of his father, יצחק, intended for his brother, עשו. The fact that G-d reminds יעקב אבינו several chapters later of the vow that יעקב אבינו made to G-d provides evidence that G-d welcomes vows as a form of prayer.

Prayer in the form of vows was not limited to individuals. The תורה provides an example of communal prayer uttered by the Jewish People that took the form of a vow:

במדבר פרק כא', ב' – וידר ישראל נדר לה' ויאמר אם נתן תתן את העם הזה בידי והחרמת את עריהם. (ג) וישמע ה' בקול ישראל ויתן את הכנעני ויחרם אתהם ואת עריהם ויקרא שם המקום חרמה.

Translation: 2. And the Jewish People issued a vow to the Lord, and said, If You will indeed deliver this people into our hands, then we will totally destroy their cities. 3. And the Lord answered the request of the Jewish People, and caused them to defeat the Canaanites. They totally destroyed them and their cities; and he called the name of the place Hormah.

In this example, the תורה reveals that G-d answered this prayer that was in the form of a vow thus validating the use of communal vows as a form of prayer.

In one well-known example found in תנ"ך, a vow, which led to a military victory for the Jewish People, had the unexpected result of causing a personal tragedy for the leader who

made the vow. This incident serves as an example of the dangers that can develop when a vow is taken:

שופטים פרק י"א, ל'– וידר יפתח נדר לה' ויאמר אם נתון תתן את בני עמון בידי. (לא) והיה היוצא אשר יצא מדלתי ביתי לקראתי בשובי בשלום מבני עמון והיה לה' והעליתו עולה:

Translation: 30. And Yiftach issued a vow to the Lord, and said, If You shall without fail deliver the Ammonites into my hands, 31. Then it shall be, that whatever or whomever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me when I return in peace from the Ammonites, shall then be sanctified to G-d, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering.

Several verses later, we learn that the first person to meet יפתח, the one who uttered the vow, was his daughter. יפתח reluctantly fulfills his vow.

שופטים פרק י"א, לד'– ויבא יפתח המצפה אל ביתו והנה בתו יצאת לקראתו בתפים ובמחלות ורק היא יחידה אין לו ממנו בן או בת: (לה) ויהי כראותו אותה ויקרע את בגדיו ויאמר אהה בתי הכרע הכרעתני ואת היית בעברי ואנכי פציתי פי אל ה' ולא אוכל לשוב: (לו) ותאמר אליו אבי פציתה את פיך אל ה' עשה לי כאשר יצא מפך אחרי אשר עשה לך ה' נקמות מאיביך מבני עמון: (לז) ותאמר אל אביה יעשה לי הדבר הזה הרפה ממני שנים חדשים ואלכה וירדתי על ההרים ואבכה על בתולי אנכי ורעיתי ורעותי: (לה) ויאמר לכי וישלח אותה שני חדשים ותלך היא ורעותיה ותבך על בתוליה על ההרים: (לט) ויהי מקץ שנים חדשים ותשב אל אביה ויעש לה את נדרו אשר נדר והיא לא ידעה איש ותהי חק בישראל: (מ) מימים ימימה תלכנה בנות ישראל לתנות לבת יפתח הגלעדי ארבעת ימים בשנה.

Translation: 34. And Yiftach came to Mizpah to his house, and, behold, his daughter came out to meet him with tambourines and with dances; and she was his only child; other than her, he had neither son nor daughter. 35. And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he tore his clothes, and said, Alas, my daughter! you have brought me very low, and you have become the cause of trouble to me; for I have opened my mouth to the Lord, and I cannot recant. 36. And she said to him, My father, if you have opened your mouth to the Lord, do to me according to that which has come from your mouth; seeing that the Lord has taken vengeance for you of your enemies, of the Ammonites. 37. And she said to her father, allow me to do one thing; leave me alone for two months, that I may go up and down upon the mountains, and bewail that I never married, I and my friends. 38. And he said, Go. And he sent her away for two months; and she went with her companions, and wept for never having married, upon the mountains. 39. And it came to pass at the end of two months, that she returned to her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had uttered; and she knew no man before her death. And it became a custom in Israel, 40. That the daughters of Israel went yearly for four days to lament the daughter of Yiftach, the Gileadite.

In the הפטרה for the first day of ראש השנה, we read of the well-known vow made by חנה. Two facts about this excerpt from תנ"ך should be emphasized. The prayer of חנה, which includes her vow, became the model for standard Jewish prayer. Second, the תנ"ך records that חנה's prayer was said so softly that no one could hear her words. Nevertheless, the תנ"ך, on its own initiative, discloses one section of the prayer; i.e. the vow that חנה made:

שמואל א' פרק א', י'–והיא מרת נפש ותתפלל על ה' ובכה תבכה: (יא) ותדר נדר ותאמר ה'

להבין את התפלה

עב-אות אם ראה תראה בעני אמתך וזכרתני ולא תשכח את אמתך ונתתה לאמתך זרע אנשים ונתתיו לה' כל ימי חייו ומורה לא יעלה על ראשו: (יב) והיה כי הרבתה להתפלל לפני ה' ועלי שמר את פיה: (יג) וחנה היא מדברת על לבה רק שפתיה נעות וקולה לא ישמע ויחשבה עלי לשכרה.

Translation: 10. And she (Chana) was in bitterness of soul, and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly. 11. And she uttered a vow, and said, O Lord of Hosts, if You will indeed pay attention to the affliction of Your maidservant, and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, and will give to Your maidservant a male child, then I will give my child to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor shall come upon his head. 12. And it came to pass, as she continued praying before the Lord, that Eli observed her mouth. 13. And Chana spoke in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli presumed that Chana was intoxicated.

Vows are also mentioned in the הפטרה on **יום כיפור** recited at at **תפלת מנחה**:

יונה פרק א', טז' – וייראו האנשים יראה גדולה את ה' ויזבחו זבח לה' וידרו נדרים.

Translation: Then the men feared the Lord exceedingly. They offered a sacrifice to the Lord and issued vows.

Vows played an important role in the **עבודה** in the **בית המקדש**:

ויקרא פרק ז', טז' – ואם נדר או נדבה זבח קרבנו ביום הקריבו את זבחו יאכל וממחרת והנותר ממנו יאכל.

Translation: If the sacrifice he is offering is based on a vow or a voluntary offering, it shall be eaten the same day that he brings his sacrifice and on the next day he may also eat the remainder of it.

במדבר פרק ל', ג' – איש כי ידר נדר לה' או השבע שבעה לאסר אסר על נפשו לא יחל דברו ככל היצא מפיו יעשה.

Translation: If a man issues a vow to the Lord or swears an oath to bind his soul with a bond, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.

דברים פרק כג', כב' – כי תדר נדר לה' א-להיך לא תאחר לשלמו כי דרש ידרשנו ה' א-להיך מעמך והיה בך חטא.

Translation: When you shall utter a vow to the Lord your G-d, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the Lord your G-d will surely require it of you. Your delay will cause you a sin.

Many chapters of **תהלים** contain references to vows:

תהלים פרק כב', כו' – מאתך תהלתי בקהל רב נדרי אשלם נגד יראיו.

Translation: My praise shall be of You in the large congregation. I will pay my vows before those who fear him.

תהלים פרק נ', יד' – זבח לא-להים תודה ושלם לעליון נדריך.

Translation: Offer to G-d thanksgiving and pay your vows to the most High;

תהלים פרק נו', יג' – עלי א-להים נדריך אשלם תודת לך.

Translation: The vows I issue on Your behalf are my responsibility, O G-d; I will bring thanksgiving offerings to you.

תהלים פרק סה', ב'– לך דמיה תהלה א–להים בציון ולך ישלם נדר.

Translation: Praise awaits you, O G-d, in Zion; and all vows on Your behalf shall be fulfilled.

תהלים פרק סא', ו'– כי אתה א–להים שמעת לנדרי נתת ירשת יראי שמך.

Translation: For You, O G-d, have heard my vows. You have passed onto me the heritage of those who fear your name.

תהלים פרק סו', יג'– אבוא ביתך בעולות אשלם לך נדרי.

Translation: I will come into Your house with burnt offerings; I will redeem on Your behalf my vows.

תהלים פרק עו', יב'– נדרו ושלמו לה' א–להיכם כל סביביו יובילו שי למורא.

Translation: Make a vow, and pay to the Lord Your G-d; let all who are around Him bring gifts to Him who is to be feared.

תהלים פרק קטז', יד'– נדרי לה' אשלם נגדה נא לכל עמו.

Translation: I will redeem my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people.

Perhaps an argument can be made that the first reference to a vow found in the תורה, the one cited above involving יעקב אבינו, became the basis for including vows in עבודת ה', service to G-d, through both תפלה and קרבנות. That same incident also provides a lesson on the dangers awaiting anyone who delays the fulfillment of his vows. The days surrounding the ימים נוראים may have been chosen as the time of year to either fulfill vows or to obtain the cancellation of vows so that the failure to fulfill vows does not interfere with G-d granting the person a favorable year. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, in her book: Genesis, The Beginning of Desire, JPS, 1995, pages 220-225, excerpted herein, views the incident involving יעקב אבינו as presenting a primer on vows and on the dangers of not fulfilling vows in a timely manner:

The problem of delay

The problem of delay can be approached obliquely, if we explore the implications of the one surprising criticism leveled against Jacob in the midrashic narratives. The Rabbis, in general, breathe no word of disapproval for any of Jacob's apparently more dubious acts: his acquisition of the birthright, his "taking" of the blessing, his financial negotiations with Laban. The harshest criticism -- and the suggestion that he was terribly punished -- is leveled against Jacob's delay in fulfilling the overt thrust of his vow at Beth El. G-d finally has to tell him, with some exasperation: "Arise, go to Beth El and remain there; and build an altar there to G-d who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother Esau" (35:1). On this, Rashi comments, condensing the Midrash Tanhuma narrative: "Because you delayed on your journey, you were punished by this, your daughter's fate."

The extraordinary midrashic claim is that Jacob is delinquent in delaying his return to Beth El, where he had vowed that the stone pillar he had erected would "become a house of G-d." What are the repercussions of this vow? And why is delay in fulfilling it considered so gravely as to be punishable by the agony of his daughter?

Even while he is still in Padan Aram, G-d has to remind him of his vow: "I am the G-d of Beth El, where you anointed a pillar and where you made a vow to Me. Now, arise and leave this land and return to your native land" (31:13). Rashi reads this as implicit reproach: "'Where you made a vow to Me': -- and you must [lit.] pay it, since you said, 'It will become a house of G-d' -- that you would offer sacrifices there." This reference to Jacob's vow does not appear in the original account in which G-d tells Jacob to return home (31:3). It is Jacob, in fact, who fills in this detail -- he must pay off what he has promised -- when he explains to his wives why he must return. The narrative thus suggests, most subtly, the workings of Jacob's subconscious mind, the guilt that he feels at a profound ambivalence he senses in himself.

Specifically, however, to "pay off" a vow has a precise meaning, which Rashi here indicates. At root, a vow is a *vow to sacrifice*. When one is in trouble, one promises to give of oneself, of one's real resources, to G-d, if He will act to save one's life. The animal sacrificed, the money allocated to the Holy Temple, is a metaphoric, even a metonymic, displacement for the life of a person. "When you make a vow to the Lord your G-d, do not put off fulfilling it, for the Lord your G-d will require it of you, and you will have incurred guilt" (Deuteronomy 23:22). The statutory period of "delay" is declared to be a cycle of three pilgrim festivals. Once this period has passed, a person finds himself guilty of delay (*ichur*) in "paying" his obligations of sacrifice, be they animal or money equivalents.

Even before he returns to the Holy Land, therefore, Jacob is aware of a reluctance to "pay the sacrifice." Technically, he must transform the place of the dream into a house of G-d, by sacrifice. Symbolically, something unwhole in himself remains unresolved, according to Rashi, until G-d finally and explicitly urges him to "arise, go to Beth El."

Rashi's source, in Midrash Tanhuma, is vividly evocative of the troubled condition of "delay":

There are three conditions where a person's ledger is examined: if one goes on a journey alone, if one sits in a house that is in danger of collapse, and if one vows and does not pay [lit., make whole] one's vow. . . . How do we know about the problem of vowing and not paying? Because it is written, "When you make a vow to the Lord your G-d, do not put off fulfilling it" [Deuteronomy 23:22]; and "It is a snare for a man to pledge a sacred gift rashly, and to give thought to (examine) his vows only after they have been made" [Proverbs 20:25]. If one delays paying one's vow, one's ledger is examined, and the angels assume a prosecutorial stance, and speak of his sins. . . . Come and see: when Jacob went to Aram Naharayim, what is written? "And Jacob made a vow. . . ." He went and became wealthy, and returned and settled down, and did not pay his vow. So G-d brought Esau against him, bent on killing him, and he took all that huge gift from him -- 200 goats, etc. -- yet Jacob did not pay attention. He brought the angel against him; he wrestled with him but did not kill him, as it is said: "Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn" -- that was Sammael, Esau's guardian

angel, who wanted to kill him, as it is said, "He saw that he could not prevail against him." But Jacob was crippled. And when he still did not pay attention, the trouble with Dinah came upon him: "And Dinah went out." When he still did not pay attention, the trouble with Rachel came upon him: "And Rachel died and was buried." Then G-d said, "How long will this righteous man take punishment and not pay attention to the sin for which he is suffering? I must inform him now: 'Arise, go to Beth El.' -These troubles have come upon you only because you delayed fulfilling your vow. If you do not want any more trouble -- arise and go to Beth El, and make an altar there, in the very place where you vowed to Me. In time of distress, you made a vow, and in time of ease, you let it slip from your mind?!"

When Jacob made his vow, he prayed to be preserved from the three cardinal sins: idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed. Because he delayed fulfilling his vow, he became guilty of all three: idolatry -- "Rid yourselves of the alien G-ds in your midst" (35:2); immorality -- the story of Dinah; and bloodshed -- "They [Simeon and Levi] killed every male [in the city of Shekhem]" (34:25). This teaches you that delaying the fulfillment of a vow is a graver offense than all three cardinal sins!

"It is better not to vow at all than to vow and not fulfill" (Ecclesiastes 5:4). R. Meir said: It is better than both alternatives [vowing and not fulfilling one's vow, or even vowing and fulfilling one's vow] not to vow at all. A person should simply bring his lamb to the Temple Courtyard and slaughter it. R. Yehuda said: It is better than both alternatives [vowing and not fulfilling one's vow, or not vowing at all] to vow and fulfill one's vow, as it is said, "Make vows and pay them to the Lord your G-d" (Psalms 76:12). One then receives reward, both for the vow and for the fulfillment.

The main statement of the midrash is, of course, that the making of a vow creates a sacred, dangerous reality. To delay fulfilling a vow is not so much a moral issue as it is a question of disturbing an essential balance. Like going on a journey, unaccompanied, or sitting in a house that is about to collapse, the unfulfilled vow suggests a state of disequilibrium: the whole structure may collapse around one's ears, the forces of chaos are free to attack, one has exposed oneself to the baneful stare of the accusing angels.

While solitary journeys and dilapidated houses are obviously dangerous, however, the peculiar peril of the unfulfilled vow needs some clarification. It is as though one has enjoyed a special kind of oral pleasure, as in the quotation from Proverbs: one has eaten of the sacred, of the animals set aside for ritual purposes. To vow is to break a rational limitation, a clear boundary between hand and mouth, as another midrash puts it: "Let your hand [the fulfillment of your vow] be close to your mouth. The Sages said: Let your hand be *in front* of your mouth -- that is, hold the object to be vowed, ready in your hand, *before* uttering vows." If the mouth is not underwritten, as it were, by the hand, if words correspond to nothing, then one finds that one has created a reality-that-is-not-reality.

Language has the power to create such marginal -- sacred and dangerous -- realities. In

making a vow, one constructs an image of an intended future, and thereby opens a Pandora's box of conflicts and resistances, of hitherto hidden fears and fantasies: the ledger of one's inner being, in the imagery of the midrash, is exposed to searching angelic gaze. The unbalanced books are audited, and one may find, even if only in subconscious form, the three cardinal sins traced within. The gap between hand and mouth is a perilous space; by bringing trouble after trouble upon him, G-d tries to make Jacob aware of the need to close the gap. But Jacob does not pay attention: he is insensitive to the implications of catastrophe, to the single message encoded in the many blows that rain down on him.

The midrash insists that the root of all Jacob's vicissitudes on his return to the Holy Land is the problem of delay, that dangerous space of *unawareness* that separates the vow from its fulfillment. In the end, G-d gives up on symbolic codes of reminder and -- baldly, literally -- tells Jacob to close the gap between symbolic language and realization: "Arise, go to Beth El." For the vow claims to transcend, to transgress the limits of space and time. It pretends to a stake *now* in a portion of reality that is not, empirically, *now*. This is the great joy of utterance before the fact: it puts into words what must be deferred, and translates the exigencies of action into the freedom of symbolic language.

At times. . . . I would let myself daydream; I would discover, in a state of anguish, ghastly possibilities, a monstrous universe that was only the underside of my omnipotence; I would say to myself: anything can happen! and that meant: I can imagine anything. Tremulously, always on the point of tearing up the page, I would relate supernatural atrocities. If my mother happened to read over my shoulder, she would utter a cry of glory and alarm: "What an imagination!"

Glory and alarm

Glory and alarm: the power of imagination and of language arouses ambivalent responses. In the midrashic argument, the alarmed response is that of R. Meir, who declares: better not to vow at all. For there is always risk in utterance, in the work of the mouth. Better simply to act: language is unnecessary and potentially dangerous. Its danger is formulated in the reproach G-d directs at Jacob: "When you were in distress, you made a vow -- now you are at ease, you let it slip from your mind." What could make one utter what is not there, if one were not in such distress as impels one to a vow, rather than die? One offers one's real substance in words, substituting for the life that is under duress. But this offer of words is intrinsically an irresponsible, perilous substitute. It is a gesture of sacrifice without the blood, without the real cost. In the best of cases, even where the gap is eventually closed, one should not do it, says R. Meir: the alarming power of words is too great.

R. Yehuda, on the other hand, insists on the glory of avowals. The highest possibility is that of vowing and fulfilling one's vow, achieving a kind of equilibrium that will contain the originating anguish that led to words in the first place. Such words are informed by the pressure of reality. Just to take the animal and slaughter it is a brief,

inglorious act: to vow the sacrifice, to lay claim to a territory in time not yet one's own, is to be most fully human.

In the vow, imagination and will press for words to embody a radical sense of power. "Every intention is an attention, and attention is I-can," writes Merleau-Ponty. In making a vow ("Man is the only creature who can make promises" [Nietzsche]), one experiences one's identity, one's ability to see and construct a future. But consciously to intend an act -- an act of closure, in particular -- and then to feel oneself incapable of making good on that intention, is to be plunged into a radical despair, in which all the books are opened to the accusing stare of the vengeful angels.

This, I suggest, is the implication of the midrash about Jacob's condition at the time of his return to the Holy Land. Returning is a harrowing experience: vows have to be made good, what was begun in words has to be completed, made whole (*shalem* -- to pay, fulfill, make whole). If Jacob had fulfilled his vow, according to R. Yehuda, he would have received reward both for the vow and for the fulfillment. He would have been the first human being to engage in this most alarming, glorious act of interfusing words and acts, so that each informs the other. Jacob, however, does not make good on his vow; mysteriously, in a way that is never made explicit in the text, he avoids such a closing of the circle.

The notion of delay in fulfilling a vow is profoundly equivocal. Jacob does not, after all, refuse to fulfill his vow: he simply delays, hangs back (*acher*, the word for "delay," is rooted in the idea of "behind, at the back"). This is a passive, not active, denial. But, effectively, repression is the gravest form of refusal (graver than the three cardinal sins), since it will not engage with -- avow or disavow -- the vow. Through all the symbolic bombardments of fate, he remains unaware, not reading the signs of his condition. In the imagery of the midrash, the books are open and fatally unbalanced: he alone fails to decipher the traces of his own debt.

The problem that is called "delay" is most clearly inscribed in the issue of the vow: G-d finally sets aside the challenges and risks of symbolic disclosure and *tells* Jacob to return to Beth El and bring his sacrifices. This issue is then apparently resolved, immediately preceding the death of Deborah and Jacob's renaming (35:7). The main thrust of the vow is fulfilled, language is made whole in action, as Jacob builds an altar and offers sacrifices in the very place of his vow.

The **מדרש תנחומא**, cited by Ms. Zornberg, is a midrash on the Torah from the Land of Israel and ascribed to the Amora Rabbi Tanchuma bar Abba, who is quoted extensively in this midrash. It also contains midrashim from tanna'im, mostly amoraic midrashim, and some things from the Geonic period (Bar Ilan Digital Library). Serious consideration should be given to the possibility of a link between the dissemination of the **מדרש תנחומא**, with its comments about the vow of **יעקב אבינו**, and the institution of the practice of **כל נדררי** and later **התרת נדרים** to be performed during a period of the year in which "one's ledger is examined, and the angels assume a prosecutorial stance, and speak of his sins."