Parashat Matot/Masei: The Fault In Our Vows

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Bemidbar 30:3	
אִישׁ֗ כִּֽי־יִדֹּ֤ר נֶ֙דֶר֙ לַיהוָ֔ה אוֹ־הִשָּׁבַ֥ע שְׁבֻעָ֖ה לֶאְסֹ֣ר אִסָּ֑ר עַל־נַפְשׁ֔וֹ לֹ֥א יַחֵ֖ל דְּבָר֑וֹ כְּכָל־הַיֹּצֵ֖א מִפִּ֥יו יַעֲשֶֽׂה׃	If a householder 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.

1. **Nahum of Mede**

Mishnah Nazir 5:4	
מִי שֶׁנָּדַר בְּנָזִיר וְהָלַךְ לְהָבִיא אֶת בְּהֶמְתּוֹ וּמְצָאָהּ שֶׁנִּגְנְבָה, אִם עַד שֶׁלֹּא נִגְנְבָה בְהֶמְתּוֹ נָזַר, הֲרֵי זֶה נָזִיר. וְאִם מִשֶּׁנִּגְנְבָה בְהֶמְתּוֹ נָזַר, אֵינוֹ נָזִיר. וְזוֹ טָעוּת טָעָה נַחוּם הַמָּדִי כְּשֶׁעָלוּ נְזִירִים מִן הַגּוֹלָה וּמָצְאוּ בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ חָרֵב, אָמַר לָהֶם נַחוּם הַמָּדִי, אִלּוּ הֱיִיתֶם יוֹדְעִים שֶׁבֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ חָרֵב הֱיִיתֶם נוֹזְרִים. אָמְרוּ לוֹ לֹא, וְהִתִּירָן נַחוּם הַמָּדִי. וּכְשֶׁבָּא הַדָּבָר אֵצֶל חֲכָמִים, אָמְרוּ לוֹ, כֹּל שֶׁנָּזַר עַד שֶׁלֹּא חָרַב בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ, נָזִיר. וּמִשֶּׁחָרַב בֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ, אֵינוֹ נָזִיר׃	If one vowed to be a nazirite and went to bring his animal [for the sacrifice] and found that it had been stolen: If he had taken the nazirite vow before his animal was stolen, he is [still] a nazirite. But if he had taken the nazirite vow after his animal was stolen, he is not a nazirite. It was this mistake that Nahum the Mede made. When nazirites arrived [in Jerusalem] from the Diaspora and found the Temple destroyed, Nahum the Mede said to them, “Had you known that the Temple would be destroyed, would you have become nazirites?” They answered, no, and Nahum the Mede released them [from their vow]. When the matter came before the sages they said to him: whoever vowed a nazirite vow before the destruction of the Temple is a nazirite, but if after the destruction of the temple, he is not a nazirite.

Yerushalmi Nedarim 9:2:3	
אָמַר רִבִּי יִרְמְיָה. הָדָא דְאַתְּ אָמַר עַד שֶׁלֹּא נֶשְׁאוּ וְנָתְנוּ בַּדְּבָרִים כְּבָנוֹלָד הֵם. חִייְלֵיהּ דְּרִבִּי יוֹסֵי מִן הָדָא. זוֹ טָעוּת טָעָה נַחוּם הַמָּדִי. מַה טָעָה. שֶׁפָּתַח לָהֶן בְּנוֹלָד. אָמַר לָהֶן נַחוּם הַמָּדִי. אִילּוּ הֱיִיתֶם יוֹדְעִין שֶׁבֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ עָתִיד לִיחָרֵב נוֹדְרִין הֱיִיתֶם לִהְיוֹת נְזִירִין. אָמַר רִבִּי זְעוּרָה. הָכִין הֲוָה צָרִיךְ מֵימַר לוֹן. לֹא הֱיִיתֶם יוֹדְעִין שֶׁנִּיבְּאוּ לָכֶם נְבִיאִים הָרִאשׁוֹנִים בִּזְמַן שֶׁבֵּית הַמִּקְדָּשׁ קַיָּים שֶׁעָתִיד לִיחָרֵב. לֹא הֲוָה כְנוֹלָד. אָמַר רִבִּי הִילָא. עוֹד הוּא בְּנוֹלָד. יָכְלִין הֲווֹן מֵימַר. יָדְעִין הֲוֵינָן אֶלָּא דַּהֲוֵינָן סָבְרִין דִּמְיַלֵּייא רְחִיקִין. הֶחָזוֹן אֲשֶׁר הוּא חוֹזֶה לְיָמִים	Rebbi Jeremiah said, what you say is only that there are changed circumstances before the matter is discussed. The force of Rebbi Yose is from the following: “That was the error of Naḥum the Mede.” What was his error? That he found them an opening by changed circumstances. “Naḥum the Mede said to them: ‘Would you have made a vow to become *nezirim* if you had known that the Temple would be destroyed at some future time?’ ” Rebbi Ze‘ira said, the following he should have said to them: Did you not know that the earlier prophets had prophesied while the Temple was standing that eventually it would be destroyed? Then there are no changed circumstances. Rebbi Hila said, still it is changed circumstances. They could have said

[1] All translations are from Sefaria, unless otherwise noted.

רַבִּים וּלְעִיתִּים רְחוֹקוֹת הוּא נִיבָּא. וְאַתָּיֵא דְּרִבִּי יִרְמְיָה כְּרִבִּי זְעִירָא וּדְרִבִּי יוֹסֵי כְּרִבִּי אִילָא.	to him, we knew it, but it seemed to us that this referred to the far future: “The vision he sees is for many years; for faraway times he prophesies.” It turns out that Rebbi Jeremiah parallels Rebbi Ze‘ira and Rebbi Yose parallels Rebbi Hila.

Kitzur Shulkhan Arukh 67:1	
אַל תְּהִי רָגִיל בִּנְדָרִים. כָּל הַנּוֹדֵר, כְּאִלּוּ בּוֹנֶה בָּמָה בִּשְׁעַת אִסּוּר הַבָּמוֹת. וְהַמְקַיְמוֹ, כְּאִלּוּ הִקְרִיב עָלֶיהָ קָרְבָּן, שֶׁחַיָּב מִשּׁוּם שְׁחוּטֵי חוּץ, כִּי טוֹב יוֹתֵר שֶׁיִּשְׁאַל עַל נִדְרוֹ וְיַתִּירוּ לוֹ. וַהֲנִי מִלֵּי בִּשְׁאָר נְדָרִים. אֲבָל נִדְרֵי הֶקְדֵּשׁ, מִצְוָה לְקַיְמָן, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר נְדָרַי לַה' אֲשַׁלֵּם. וְלֹא יִשְׁאַל עָלָיו אֶלָּא בִּשְׁעַת הַדְּחָק (ר"ג, ר"ל).	Do not form the habit of making vows. Whoever makes a vow, [it is considered] as if he built an altar at a time that [private] altars were prohibited. One who fulfills [such a vow is considered] as though he had offered a sacrifice upon it, which makes him guilty of *shechutei chutz*. Rather it is preferable that you request absolution from your vow and that the *Beis Din* (Court) nullify it for you. This applies only to ordinary vows, but vows made to the sanctuary are meritorious to fulfill, for it is said: "I will fulfill my vows to God," and one should not attempt to annul these vows unless the need is great.

2. The Fault In Our Vows

Kitzur Shulkhan Arukh 67:1	
אַל תְּהִי רָגִיל בִּנְדָרִים. כָּל הַנּוֹדֵר, כְּאִלּוּ בּוֹנֶה בָּמָה בִּשְׁעַת אִסּוּר הַבָּמוֹת. וְהַמְקַיְמוֹ, כְּאִלּוּ הִקְרִיב עָלֶיהָ קָרְבָּן, שֶׁחַיָּב מִשּׁוּם שְׁחוּטֵי חוּץ, כִּי טוֹב יוֹתֵר שֶׁיִּשְׁאַל עַל נִדְרוֹ וְיַתִּירוּ לוֹ. וַהֲנִי מִלֵּי בִּשְׁאָר נְדָרִים. אֲבָל נִדְרֵי הֶקְדֵּשׁ, מִצְוָה לְקַיְמָן, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר נְדָרַי לַה' אֲשַׁלֵּם. וְלֹא יִשְׁאַל עָלָיו אֶלָּא בִּשְׁעַת הַדְּחָק (ר"ג, ר"ל).	Do not form the habit of making vows. Whoever makes a vow, [it is considered] as if he built an altar at a time that [private] altars were prohibited. One who fulfills [such a vow is considered] as though he had offered a sacrifice upon it, which makes him guilty of *shechutei chutz*. Rather it is preferable that you request absolution from your vow and that the *Beis Din* (Court) nullify it for you. This applies only to ordinary vows, but vows made to the sanctuary are meritorious to fulfill, for it is said: "I will fulfill my vows to God," and one should not attempt to annul these vows unless the need is great.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan Swenson
In order to have this kind of command over the future in advance, man must first have learned to separate the necessary from the accidental occurrence, to think causally, to see and anticipate what is distant as if it were present, to fix with certainty what is end, what is means thereto, in general to be able to reckon, to calculate,—for this, man himself must first of all have become calculable, regular, necessary, in his own image of himself as well, in order to be able to vouch for himself as future, as one who promises does!

John Green, *The Fault in Our Stars*
“I kept saying ‘always’ to her today, ‘always always always,’ and she just kept talking over me and not saying it back. It was like I was already gone, you know? ‘Always’ was a promise! How can you just break the promise?”
“Sometimes people don’t understand the promises they’re making when they make them,” I said.
Isaac shot me a look. “Right, of course. But you keep the promise anyway. That’s what love is. Love is keeping the promise anyway. Don’t you believe in true love?”
I didn’t answer. I didn’t have an answer. But I thought that if true love did exist, that was a pretty good definition of it.