

Rabbi's Column

This week's Torah Portion is a combined one, Mattot-Masei (Tribes - journeys). On the way to the slideshow that comparatively briefly reviews the past 40 years there is an interesting digression concerning vows.

From a 21st century perspective, this section is completely demeaning to women. When a woman makes a vow, if she is still living at home her father can nullify it immediately upon hearing of it. If she is married, her husband can nullify it immediately upon hearing of it. From the perspective of a completely patriarchal society, that word immediately is a monkey wrench flung into male privilege. If the male involved is not perceptive enough to realize that when the current situation changes, the vow his wife/daughter made will make life more difficult, then he is stuck with the consequences of his lack of foresight.

It is really, really easy to translate this into the modern political realm, so I will not yield to that particular temptation.

I will remind you that when a person makes a vow, in the Biblical sense of vowing, it is as if you wrote a private contract with God as either partner or witness. As a matter of integrity, vows must be fulfilled. The need to balance our personal vows with the overriding requirement to "choose life" is one of the reasons that Kol Nidrei on Yom Kippur is recited - to cover the vows a person makes or inherits that the government or the government's church renders null and void. Other vows can also be rendered null and void. For example, the kind of Pesach food associated with the country your ancestors were in is considered as part of a vow you made upon birth to honor your parents. Among communities which are concerned about these issues, when a man marries a woman from a different area (specifically when a man with an Ashkenazi background marries a woman with a Sephardi background) a Rabbinic Beit Din will help nullify the man's vow so he can eat at home during Passover. As a biblical example, when Yiftach made his particularly silly vow, a Priestly court of that day could have nullified the vow so his daughter did not suffer for his stupidity.

The best thing is never to make a vow, and if you do make a vow, make one that you know you will be able to fulfill even if something catastrophic happens.

There are two 25 hour fasts in the Jewish liturgical calendar - Yom Kippur and the Ninth of Av. This year the Ninth of Av falls on August 1st. This year's commemoration will involve helping to feed those for whom fasting isn't a choice. During the next couple of weeks, please bring non-perishable food to the synagogue, and these items will be delivered to COMEA on that day. May the day soon come when all will have enough to eat, and nobody will require help from others just to have something to eat.