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The Male Vow
30: 1-2

The male vow DIG: What is the difference between a vow and an oath (to see link click Fi – The Fulfillment of Oaths and Vows)? Why should vows be quickly fulfilled? How does a person swear falsely today? What does Yeshua say about making a vow or taking an oath?

REFLECT: How do you feel when someone breaks their word to you? Why? Why is speech so powerful? Why is speaking the truth and keeping your word so essential? Why do you think God places so much importance on vows? What does that say about God and His promises?

Parashah 42: Matot (Tribes) 30:1 to 32:42

(See my commentary on Deuteronomy, to see link click Af – Parashah)
[In regular years read with Parashah 43, in leap years read separately]

The Key People are Moshe, tribal heads, Midianites, Israelites, Phinehas, the kings of Midian, Balaam, Eleazar, army officers, Levites, Reubenites, Gadites, Joshua, family leaders, the half-tribe of Manasseh, Amorites, Bashan Machirites, Jair and Nobah.

The Scenes include Midianite towns, Mo'av, the Tabernacle, Jazer, Gilead, the list of captured towns, the kingdoms of Sihon and Og, the towns rebuilt in the east, Havvoth Jair and Nenath/Nobah.

The Main Events include mitzvot about husband/wife, father/daughter vows, slaying Midianites and Balaam, dividing plunder, no casualties, the gift of gold, the request for grazing territory east of the Jordan, the warning not to discourage conquest, the tribe of Gad's pledge to help fight in the west and the land granted to the tribes of Reuben and Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh, east of the Jordan River.

The principal for today is that vows and oaths are meant to be kept,

because we are ambassadors of the Messiah (Second Corinthians 5:20).

This section was probably placed here because **vows** were mentioned at the end of the previous chapter: **You are to offer these to ADONAI at your appointed times in addition to your vows and voluntary offerings (29:39a)**. This connection is further strengthened by the fact that the payment of **vows** generally took the form of an offering: **whether these are your ‘Olah Offerings, Grain Offerings, Drink Offerings or Peace Offerings (29:39b)**.[687] The subject of making **vows** is dealt with quite frequently in the Scriptures **(Leviticus 5:4-6, 7:16-18, 22:17-25** and **27:1-19; Numbers 6:1-21** and **15:1-10; Deuteronomy 12:11** and **17; Psalm 66:13-15; Malachi 1:14** and **Matthew 5:33-37).**



Vows and Oaths (Numbers 30:1-2): **Moses said to the heads of the tribes of Isra’el,** saying: **This is what ADONAI commands: When a man makes a vow** (Hebrew: *neder for a positive vow, to do something*) **to the LORD or takes an oath** (Hebrew: *shevu’ah*) **to obligate himself by a pledge** (Hebrew: *‘issar for a negative vow, to keep from doing something*)**, he must not violate** (Hebrew: *yachel*, meaning *to pollute or defile the sacred*) **his word** by failing to fulfill it, **but shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.** These mitzvot are traditionally interpreted to mean that any utterance should be regarded as binding in a **vow**-like formula. For example, “If such-and-such happens, I’ll eat my hat.” The standards of Torah would suggest that if “such-and-such” did happen, that person should look into getting a new hat. The command to **do according to all that** goes **out from your lips** requires that we fulfill every obligation that we have spoken, whether it is **an oath**,

a vow, a promise or just a statement (**to see link click Fi – The Fulfillment of Vows and Oaths**).

As a precaution, traditional Jews often hedge their statements with plenty of "God willing" and "*B'li Neder*," which means "*without* *an oath*." For example, "When I am feeling a little better, God willing, I will wash the car, *b'li neder*." The "God willing" acknowledges ADONAI's sovereign hand in our affairs. The "*b'li neder*" recognizes that even our best laid plans often go astray.

The mitzvot regarding keeping one's **vows**, **oaths** and utterances teaches us about the nature of **the Holy One**. If **He** commands us to be true to our every word, even those words spoken casually, then **He** is certainly true to **His** own **Word**. **He** has spoken, **He** cannot disobey **His Word**, reverse it or abolish it (see **The Life of Christ Dg – The Fulfillment of the Torah**). **His** integrity is absolute. Unlike mankind, there is no disconnect between the utterance of **God's** mouth and **God Himself**. A man may say words that are not true, but every word spoken by our **Lord** is the very truth of **the Father**. **His Divine Word** cannot be understood as something separate from **Him**. **The morning prayers of *Baruch SheAmar* declare, "Blessed is He Who speaks and does; Blessed is He Who decrees and fulfills; Blessed is He Who has mercy on earth . . . who lives forever and endures to eternity; Blessed is He who redeems and rescues – Blessed is His Name!**[688]

Dear Heavenly ***Father****, Praise* ***You*** *that every word spoken by* ***You*** *is true and totally trustworthy. What a comfort it is for me to look up lovingly to my heavenly* ***Father*** *and see a completely trustworthy* ***Father*** *who always keeps* ***His*** *word and who always is right there by my side, ready to help and to guide me.* ***For God Himself has*** *said:* ***I will never leave you or forsake you (Hebrews 13:5c).*** *Thank you for* ***Your*** *promise to give the righteousness of* ***Messiah*** *to those who love you so they may be able to enter heaven to live with you eternally.* ***He made the One who knew no sin to become a sin offering on our behalf, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God (Second Corinthians 5:21).***

What a costly and precious gift ***You*** *gave! How wonderful* ***Your*** *promise of mercy and compassion to those who fear* ***You****.* ***He has not treated us according to our sins, or repaid us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His mercy for those who fear Him. As far***

as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so ADONAI has compassion on those who fear Him (Psalms 103:10-13). *What a wonderful and trustworthy heavenly* ***Father You*** *are, who always keeps all* ***His*** *promises! I love* ***You*** *and desire to live my life pleasing* ***You****. In* ***Messiah Yeshua's*** *holy* ***Name*** *and power of* ***His*** *resurrection. Amen*

Fulfilling one's vows quickly (Deuteronomy 23:21-23 and Ecclesiastes 5:4): The Bible makes it clear that we are under no obligation to make **a vow**. If, however, we do make **a vow**, we must be quick to pay it. Tardiness in fulfilling **the vow** is regarded as a sin. **When you make a vow to ADONAI your God, you are not to delay in fulfilling it, for ADONAI your God will certainly demand it of you, and your failure to do so will be your sin**. **If you choose not to make a vow at all, that will not be a sin for you; but if a vow passes your lips, you must take care to perform it according to what you voluntarily vowed to ADONAI your God, what you promised in words spoken aloud** (see the commentary on **Deuteronomy Eg – Keep Your Word**)**.** According to **Ecclesiastes 5:4**, delaying payment of **a vow** is something only **a fool** would do: **When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it; for He takes no delight in fools. Pay what you vow!** This commandment is certainly applicable to us. We might **vow** to give a certain amount of money to a particular ministry, or promise to do a certain thing for **the Lord**. When we do, we should fulfill it quickly.

The Sages teach that when a person who made a vow to bring a sacrifice or gift to the Temple and leaves it unfilled has transgressed the commandment once the three pilgrimage festivals have passed by (see the commentary on **Exodus Eh – Three Times a Year Celebrate a Festival to Me**)**. The extra time was allowed for the person vowing a sacrifice because he would not have the opportunity to fulfill the vow until he went up to the Temple. The pilgrimage feasts afforded him three such opportunities.**

However, in the case of one who has **vowed** to give to charity, he is obligated to give it as soon as possible. **Raba said, "If a person vows to give alms to the poor, he is required to do so immediately. What is the reason? Because the poor are standing in waiting." That much might appear to be obvious, but a person might think that, since charity is mentioned in the passage dealing with offerings, the alms need not be paid until the three pilgrimage festivals have elapsed, as in the case of offerings . . . The sacrificial offerings are dependent on the festivals, but giving charity is**

not, for the poor are waiting (b.*Rosh Ha'Shanah 6a*).

Like all the commandments, the prohibition on tardiness when paying **a vow** teaches us about the very nature of **God**. The mitzvah is a reflection of the nature of its **Author**. For it certainly seems like **Ha'Shem** is often tardy in keeping **His** promises and covenant **oaths**, but if that were so, then **He** could not issue a mitzvah which tells us to be prompt with the same. **The Apostle Peter** reminds us: **The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance (Second Peter 3:9).** In fact, **ADONAI** will fulfill all of **His vows** to **Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob** before the three pilgrimage festivals have passed. The Feast of the **Passover** was fulfilled by the death of **Messiah**; the Feast of **Shavu'ot** was fulfilled by **the birth of the Church** and the great harvest was begun; and the Feast of **Sukkot** will be fulfilled by **the Messianic Kingdom** and all the nations will ascend to **the King** in Jerusalem.[689]

Swearing falsely (Matthew 5:33-36): A child will sometimes justify breaking a promise by saying, "I had my fingers crossed." Adults generally resort to more subtle methods, but the effect is the same. "I never said I would do it *today*, I just said I would do it" . . . and that sort of thing. A person who **vows** to abstain from sweets might later ask himself, "Did I really say that I wouldn't eat those cookies? Surely it was just brownies that I had in mind." We are full of creative rationalizations for our dishonesty.

In the First Century, there were apparently a few adept rationalizations as well. **The Master** quotes two passages from the Torah that were apparently used with each other to imply that only **vows** made in **the Name of ADONAI** were binding. **Again, you have heard that our ancestors were told, "You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord" (Matthew 5:33** quoting **Leviticus 19:12** and **Num 30:2).**

The first passage **He** quotes in **Leviticus 19:12** which says: **Do not swear by My Name falsely, which is profaning the Name of your God; I am ADONAI.** The second passage is **Numbers 30:2**, which says: **When a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.** Apparently, those who were misusing the passage to rationalize false **oaths** were reading it as if *only* **vows** made to **ADONAI** or in t**he Name of the LORD** were binding. Therefore, by using other phrases such as "**vowing by**

heaven," "**vowing** by earth." or even "**vowing by Jerusalem**," they felt less bound to their **vow**. **Yeshua** soundly corrected this notion when **He** said: **But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the City of the Great King (Matthew 5:34-35).**

The same issue is at work behind **the Master's** rebuke in **Matthew 23:16-22**. In that passage, those who had sworn by **the altar** or by **the Temple** felt that, since they had avoided directly using **God's Name**, they were not bound by their **vow**. **Woe to you, blind guides! You say, "If anyone swears by the Temple, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold of the Temple is bound by that oath." You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the Temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say, "If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath." You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? Thus, anyone who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. And anyone who swears by the Temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. And anyone who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it.**

The Mishnah (see **The Life of Christ Ei – The Oral Law**) **records similar oath-taking foolishness that were going on in the days of the Apostles. The following passage from tractate *Nedarim* contains three cunning ploys by which a person might make a deceptive vow and feel exonerated in doing so. If a person vows something to be korban, or dedicated to the priesthood, but then later says, "I did not vow it to be anything but a fishing net;" or if he vowed a gift dedicated to the Temple, but later says, "I did not vow it to be anything other than a gift fit for a king;" or if he vows, "Forfeit to the Temple is anything my wife might receive from me," but later says, "I meant my ex-wife," they are to be punished and treated strictly . . . so that they do not regard taking vows as a laughing matter (m.*Nedarim 2:5*).**[690]

Do not swear at all (Matthew 5:34): The Master commands us not to **swear** at all. Some people take **Messiah's** ban against taking **oaths** as contradicting the teachings of the Torah. It is not. The Torah's mitzvot regarding **oaths** and **vows** place no obligation upon us to make **vows** of any type. Instead, they are warnings against making false **vows** or breaking **vows** and **oaths**. **Regarding the practice of vowing to abstain from something otherwise permissible, the Sages**

said, "Are not the prohibitions laid down in the Torah sufficient for you, that you should seek to impose upon yourselves still other prohibitions" (y.*Nedarim 9:1*). Similarly, **Paul** took a dim view of self-denial in general. **He** said: **Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence (Colossians 2:23).**

The Sages regarded taking a vow or oath as risky business that was best avoided. Several passages from the Oral Law might be cited which seek to discourage people from the practice of taking vows.

> **Is it not written, "If you refrain from vowing, it would not be a sin for you?" And it is further written, "It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay." And it has been taught, "Better than both is he who does not vow at all!" This is the opinion of Rabbi Meir (b.*Chullin 2a*** quoting **Deuteronomy 23:22 and Ecclesiastes 5:5).**
>
> **It was taught, "Never make a practice of vowing; for ultimately, you will violate the oath" (b.*Nedarim* 20a).**
>
> **Rabbi Nathan said, "Whoever vows is as though he built a high place of pagan worship; and if fulfilled, is as though he burnt the incense on it" (b.*Nedarim* 60b).**

There is also a great danger in taking **an oath** in **God's Name** for purposes of verification. Though it was a common practice sanctioned by the Torah to take **an oath** in **God's Name** to prove one's honesty, **the Sages discouraged it**. A man might be so certain of the truth that he swears in **God's Name**. Yet at the same time, he might be mistaken or misled. Better not to swear at all. In the First Century, the Essene community had sworn off swearing **a vow** or **an oath** altogether. Instead, they insisted on such a high level of integrity that their simple word was regarded as binding as **an oath** or **a vow**. **Josephus writes of the Essenes as follows: Any word of theirs has more force than an oath; swearing they avoid, regarding it as worse than perjury, for they say that one who does not believe without an appeal to God stands condemned already (Josephus *Jewish War* 2.8.6).**

It is obviously necessary to make some **vows** like marriage, and **the Master's** prohibition should not be regarded as a ban on contracts or promises. Instead, we are to be a people of such immense integrity that our simple **yes** is to be equivalent to **an oath** taken in **the Name of God**. Our simple **yes** is to be as binding as an eternal contract between heaven and earth. We are to be a people of such integrity, that no further verification is needed from us other than a **yes** or a **no**. **According to Rabbinic standards of the Master's day, an emphatic yes or an emphatic no should be regarded as binding as an oath.** Moreover, as **Messiah** commands us: **Do not swear [a vow or make] an oath at all (Matthew 5:34a).**[691]

But suppose a man makes a rash and foolish vow. Who may he turn to for release? The traditional Halachah of Judaism determined that a court of three Elders of Isra'el could release anyone from a vow or an oath, so long as another party was not involved by the oath (for example, marriage or business contract). The three Elders vows adopted for the sake of, or involving another party cannot be annulled by rabbinical court without the consent of the other party. But, an oath placed upon oneself could be annulled.

The explanation for this amazing ruling is based on the words: he must not break his word. The Sages interpreted it to mean, "He may not break it, but others could dissolve it for him (b.*Chagigah 10a* quoting Numbers 30:2). It is a noble effort to find the scriptural authority of the rabbinical court to nullify vows; but in reality, there is no such proof. The Mishnah (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Ei – The Oral Law**) **agrees that "the mitzvot concerning the annulment of vows float in the air and have no basis to rest upon" (m.*Chagigah* 1:8). This means that they have no scriptural foundation. They are simply a matter of the traditions of men (Mark 7:8). According to that tradition, if a person has taken a vow they regret taking upon themselves, they may convene a court of three elders functioning as a *beit-din* (court of law), and have the authority to lose the person from the vow, or, if they so choose, to bind the person to the vow.**

The assumed power to bind or lose vows is the basis for a ritual called *Hatarat Nedarim*, or the annulment of vows. It is a ritual of introspection and spiritual meditation that some perform on the evening before Rosh Ha'Shannah and on the eve of Yom Kippur. The ritual is done twice during the high holy days because the Chachamin (the Sages, or Elders of Isra'el)

consider it a serious matter to approach the Day of Atonement (see the commentary on **Leviticus Ef – Yom Kippur**) **with a broken vow.**

A person may have taken a vow upon himself during the course of the year, such as, "I will never again look with desire on a young woman," or perhaps take an inadvertent vow, "I will never shop there again!" The Jews view vows of this type place a person in jeopardy before the judgment. As if one's accumulated sins were not sufficient, they were creating more sins for themselves. In order to clean the slate before judgment, the ritual of renouncing such vows is carried out before the high holy days.

The ritual took on added significance in the troubled years of the Spanish inquisition (1478 to 1834), which saw whole communities of Jews forcibly converted to Christianity. Given the choice of confessing Christ or dying a slow, torturous death, many chose to renounce Judaism and accept Christian baptism. These forced converts would often live as "Christians" all year long, hiding their real faith, and then sneak to the synagogue to renounce the vows they had taken during the year. In addition, a great diasporic movement began and from 100,000 to 300,000 Jews left Spain and settled in different parts of Europe and the Middle East. When the state of Isra'el was recognized by the United States on May 14, 1948, and later recognized by the UN General Assembly on May 11, 1949, many Sephardic Jews returned to live there. In Sephardic communities around the world today, it is customary to repeal one's vows twice each year; forty days before Rosh Ha'Shanah, on the nineteenth of Av; and forty days before Yom Kippur, on the first of Elul.

In the ritual on the eve of Rosh Ha'Shanah, a court of three elders is convened. The congregants, requesting the annulment of vows, specify that they do not seek annulment of vows that cannot be annulled (for example, marriage or business contract), but rather they request the annulment of inadvertent vows, oaths, nazarisms, prohibitions, cherem, korban types of vows, etc. In the ritual, the court responds as follows, "May everything be lost to you, may everything be permitted to you. There does not exist any vow, oath, nazarism, cherem, binding korban, excommunication or curse. But instead there is pardon, forgiveness and atonement. Just as the earthly court loses them, so may they be lost in the Heavenly Court (Annulment vows, *Eve of Rosh Ha'Shannah* liturgy).

Several parallels are immediately obvious between the court's power to **bind** or **loose** **vows** and the words of **the Master**. **Yeshua** explicitly gave **His apostles** the power to **bind** and **loose**, and **He** did so in a legal context of an assembly of the court of law: **Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven** (see **The Life of Christ Fx – On This Rock I Will Build My Church**)**,** where **witnesses** were called to testify **(Matthew 18:16)** and a formal court was assembled **(Matthew 18:20)**. **The authority of the Sages to lose, forgive, pardon, permit and atone,** sheds light on another difficult saying of **the Master**. In **John 20:23 He** told **His apostles**: **If you forgive sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained.** Taken out of the rabbinical context of a court of law, this passage doesn't make sense. **But when we read in the Jewish context in which the Master spoke it, it is perfectly consistent with the authority extended to the Sages.**[692]