



Torah Reflections on *Parashat Mattot*
Numbers 30:2 - 32:42
23 Tammuz 5768 July 26, 2008

The negotiating or bargaining that we do and the oaths that we make during times of tribulation can both deepen our self-knowledge and also hold great significance. The famous psychiatrist Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross identified bargaining as a common step in the grief process in which we attempt to cut a deal in order to spare ourselves from a challenging situation or prognosis. It is at this moment that turning to God, or perhaps to another concept of a Divine source, to negotiate for improved circumstances sometimes feels appropriate. One might say, for example, "God, if you allow me/my loved one to live/get better/get off of this terrible medication I will devote time to helping find a cure." Such promises and commitments should not be dismissed because they arise out of crises, but can be recognized as potentially leading to a host of important actions not previously considered during our more routine periods of physical and mental "normalcy."

Bargaining under such conditions presents a unique opportunity both to discover meaning and to find new purposes that potentially spur us on to do good works. Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his best selling book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, suggests that the bad things that happen to us in our lives do not necessarily have a meaning in and of themselves, but we can give them a meaning, "we can redeem these tragedies from senselessness by imposing meaning on them." It is because of this motivation to bring redemption from or meaning to their experience that breast cancer survivors become involved in breast cancer awareness, heart attack victims or their loved ones may contribute to the American Heart Association, or those who have been touched by AIDS become AIDS activists. This meaning will often correlate with a sense of commitment that arises out of our experience.

If we inquire of our tradition about our obligations and responsibilities when making an oath, we find a definitive response concerning the gravity of a vow (*neder*) in this week's Torah portion, *parashat Mattot*: "Moses spoke to the heads of the tribes of Israel, saying, 'This is the word that God has commanded. If (a person) makes a vow to God or swears an oath, (that individual) must not permit his (or her) word to remain unfulfilled. That person shall do whatever has come forth from his (or her) mouth.'" It is noteworthy that in the Talmud, our Rabbis comment that one "... who makes a vow is as though he put a chain around his neck." Certainly, however, most of us would prefer to feel responsible for fulfilling a promise rather than continue to endure a challenging medical condition. On the other hand, the Talmudic sage Rava thought that a person "is not held responsible for what is uttered in the hour of distress" (*Bava Batra 16b*). From this we learn that though we make certain vows during times of crises, we should not feel overly obligated to fulfill them. Indeed, as time puts distance between us and a distressing event, we may well feel that the commitment is not ultimately attainable.

Nevertheless, what we promise in exchange for improved circumstances should not be entirely ignored, for what is it that we are offering? It may be to devote more effort to forging better relations with a family member, to becoming active in an organization, or

to comforting others. While we may not be able to re-train ourselves to become a research scientist or donate a vast fortune to find a cure for a particular disease—Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (Rambam, also known as Maimonides) comments that one may, for example, give to a particular charity as part of an oath—we are certainly able to contribute in other very significant ways. Bargaining is a step which can lead us to address situations that need our attention or to use our new perspective to help a fellow human navigate through the same difficulties that we ourselves have encountered.

In the midst of our distress we gain insights that enable us to appreciate aspects of life and relationships that others who have not experienced similar suffering rarely attain. In other words, we now see something that few others can. The urge to negotiate with God or making oaths in the face of uncertainty and with the hope of improvement is not to be dismissed or minimized, but to be embraced as a time in our lives when we have a chance to transform a part of our pain into power, insight, and good for ourselves and others.

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