



## ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

### “The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

#### 42 Mattot — Women's Vows

#### Text

#### במדבר ל

א וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כֹּכֹל אֲשֶׁר-צִוָּה יְהוָה אֶת-מֹשֶׁה.  
ב וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-רָאשֵׁי הַמִּטּוֹת לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר זֶה הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה. ג אִישׁ כִּי-יָדָר נָדָר לַיהוָה אוֹ-  
הַשְּׁבַע שְׁבַע לְאִסָּר אֶסֶר עַל-נַפְשׁוֹ לֹא יַחַל דְּבָרוֹ כְּכֹל-הֵי צִא מִפִּי יַעֲשֶׂה. ד וְאִשָּׁה כִּי-תָדָר נָדָר לַיהוָה וְאֶסְרָה  
אֶסֶר בְּבֵית אָבִיהָ בְּנַעֲרֶיהָ. ה וְשָׁמַע אָבִיהָ אֶת-נְדָרָהּ וְאֶסְרָה אֶסְרָה עַל-נַפְשָׁהּ וְהַחֲרִישׁ לָהּ אָבִיהָ וְקָמוּ כָל-  
נְדָרֶיהָ וְכָל-אֶסֶר אֲשֶׁר-אֶסְרָה עַל-נַפְשָׁהּ יָקוּם. ו וְאִם-הִנִּיא אָבִיהָ אֶת-הַיּוֹם שִׁמְעוֹ כָּל-נְדָרֶיהָ וְאֶסְרָה אֲשֶׁר-אֶסְרָה  
עַל-נַפְשָׁהּ לֹא יָקוּם וַיְהוֶה יִסְלַח-לָהּ כִּי-הִנִּיא אָבִיהָ אֶת-הַיּוֹם. ז וְאִם-הָיוּ תְהִיָּה לְאִישׁ וְנָדָרָהּ עָלֶיהָ אוֹ מִבְּטָא שְׁפִתֶיהָ  
אֲשֶׁר אֶסְרָה עַל-נַפְשָׁהּ. ח וְשָׁמַע אִשָּׁה בְיוֹם שִׁמְעוֹ וְהַחֲרִישׁ לָהּ וְקָמוּ נְדָרֶיהָ וְאֶסְרָה אֲשֶׁר-אֶסְרָה עַל-נַפְשָׁהּ יָקָמוּ. ט  
וְאִם בְּיוֹם שָׁמַע אִשָּׁה יִנִּיא אוֹתָהּ וְהִפָּר אֶת-נְדָרָהּ אֲשֶׁר עָלֶיהָ וְאֶת מִבְּטָא שְׁפִתֶיהָ אֲשֶׁר אֶסְרָה עַל-נַפְשָׁהּ וַיְהוֶה  
יִסְלַח-לָהּ. י וְנָדָר אֱלֻמָּנָה וְגֵרוּשָׁה כֹּל אֲשֶׁר-אֶסְרָה עַל-נַפְשָׁהּ יָקוּם עָלֶיהָ. יא וְאִם-בֵּית אִשָּׁה נְדָרָהּ אוֹ-אֶסְרָה אֶסֶר  
עַל-נַפְשָׁהּ בְּשִׁבְעָהּ. יב וְשָׁמַע אִשָּׁה וְהַחֲרִישׁ לָהּ לֹא הִנִּיא אֶת-הָאִשָּׁה וְכָל-נְדָרֶיהָ וְכָל-אֶסֶר אֲשֶׁר-אֶסְרָה עַל-נַפְשָׁהּ  
יָקוּם. יג וְאִם-הִפָּר יָפָר אֶת-הָאִשָּׁה בְיוֹם שִׁמְעוֹ כָּל-מוֹצָא שְׁפִתֶיהָ לְנְדָרֶיהָ וְלִאֶסֶר נַפְשָׁהּ לֹא יָקוּם אִשָּׁה הַפָּרָם  
וַיְהוֶה יִסְלַח-לָהּ. יד כָּל-נָדָר וְכָל-שְׁבַעֶת אֶסֶר לְעֵנֹת נַפְשׁ אִשָּׁה יִקְיָמוּ וְאִשָּׁה יִפְרָנוּ. טו וְאִם-הַחֲרִישׁ יַחֲרִישׁ לָהּ  
אִשָּׁה מִיּוֹם אֶל-יּוֹם וְהָקִים אֶת-כָּל-נְדָרֶיהָ אוֹ אֶת-כָּל-אֶסְרֶיהָ אֲשֶׁר עָלֶיהָ הָקִים אֶת-הָאִשָּׁה כִּי-הַחֲרִישׁ לָהּ בְיוֹם שִׁמְעוֹ. טז  
וְאִם-הִפָּר יָפָר אֶת-הָאִשָּׁה וְנָשָׂא אֶת-עוֹנָהּ. יז אֵלֶּה הַחֻקִּים אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֶת-מֹשֶׁה בֵּין אִישׁ לְאִשְׁתּוֹ בֵּין-  
אָב לְבָתוֹ בְּנַעֲרֶיהָ בֵּית אָבִיהָ.

#### Bamidbar 30

<sup>2</sup> Moses spoke to the heads of the Israelite tribes, saying: This is what the Lord has commanded:

<sup>3</sup> If a man makes a vow to the Lord 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.

<sup>4</sup> If a woman makes a vow to the Lord or assumes an obligation while still in her father's household by reason of her youth,<sup>5</sup> and her father learns of her vow or her self-imposed obligation and offers no objection, all her vows shall stand and every self-imposed obligation shall stand.<sup>6</sup> But if her father restrains her on the day he finds out, none of her vows or self-imposed obligations shall stand; and the Lord will forgive her, since her father restrained her.

<sup>7</sup> If she should marry while her vow or the commitment to which she bound herself is still in force,<sup>8</sup> and her male spouse learns of it and offers no objection on the day he finds out, her vows shall stand and her self-imposed obligations shall stand.<sup>9</sup> But if her male spouse restrains her on the day that he learns of it, he thereby annuls her vow which was in force or the commitment to which she bound herself; and the Lord will forgive her.<sup>10</sup> — The vow of a widow or of a divorced woman, however, whatever she has imposed on herself, shall be binding upon her. —<sup>11</sup> So, too, if, while in her male spouse's household, she makes a vow or imposes an obligation on herself by oath,<sup>12</sup> and her male spouse learns of it, yet offers no objection — thus failing to restrain her — all her vows shall stand and all her self-imposed



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obligations shall stand.<sup>13</sup> But if her male spouse does annul them on the day he finds out, then nothing that has crossed her lips shall stand, whether vows or self-imposed obligations. Her male spouse has annulled them, and the Lord will forgive her.<sup>14</sup> Every vow and every sworn obligation of self-denial may be upheld by her male spouse or annulled by her male spouse.<sup>15</sup> If her male spouse offers no objection from that day to the next, he has upheld all the vows or obligations she has assumed: he has upheld them by offering no objection on the day he found out.<sup>16</sup> But if he annuls them after [the day] he finds out, he shall bear her guilt.

<sup>17</sup> Those are the laws that the Lord enjoined upon Moses between a man and his woman spouse, and as between a father and his daughter while in her father's household by reason of her youth.

#### Context

This parasha opens with rules about making vows, how they are divinely binding - except that women's vows may be over-ruled by their fathers and spouses. Next, Moshe commands a war of retribution against the Midianites. Moshe meets the victorious Israelites upon their return, angry that they did not kill the women. Once they have carried out the orders to slay the women “who have had carnal relations,” and boys, the warriors are instructed to purify from the bloodshed and impurity – themselves, their clothes, and the goods they have captured. Then, the substantial booty is divided equally between the warriors and the community, with a levy from each taken for God (given to the Kohen Gadol), and the Levites.

Heads of the tribes of Reuben and Gad request to stay with their abundant flocks in the land of Gilead, and not cross the Jordan River into Canaan. Moshe agrees that theirs and the half-tribe of Menashe can build their sheepfolds and towns in the conquered areas of Sichon - former sovereign of the Amorites and Og of Bashan. Moshe sets a condition that their fighters enter the land of Canaan as shock-troops, and not return until the enemies are subdued for the rest of the tribes of Israel. These tribes do not receive a portion inside the Promised Land.

#### Explorations

For many commentators, this passage in Mattot about vows refers to imposing extra strictures on oneself. Strictures can either be in the form of,

- more demanding observances that go beyond those commanded by the Torah, or abstaining from accepted and permitted practices.

The most common kind of vows discussed by the sages is refraining from eating a certain food. According to Rambam, while trying to correct ourselves through self-disciplinary practices is praiseworthy, taking on extra separate and regular observances is not (*Hilchot Nedarim* 13:23 & 25).



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Parashat Matot instructs about the status of oaths/vows made to God by young women living in their fathers' homes, married women, and widows and divorcees. The general rule is that if a young woman in her father's house makes a vow that binds herself, her father has the power to uphold it or to annul it on the same day that she makes the vow. Similarly, if a married woman makes a vow,

Every vow and every oath to afflict the soul, her spouse upholds it or her spouse annuls it.  
(Bamidbar 30:14)

The Torah over-rules women's autonomy under the dominion of their father or spouse. The rule for widows and divorcees is different.

But every vow of a widow and a divorcee, and every oath that she takes on her soul, these shall be binding upon her.” (Bamidbar 30:10)

Concerning widows and divorcees, the Torah upholds women's independent religious commitments. Therefore, the Torah does not subordinate women's freedom (to make vows and oaths) to their fathers and spouses on account of women's incompetence or unworthiness – otherwise, the vows and oaths of women who are widowed and divorced would also not be binding. When the text asserts the power of fathers and spouses to override the choices of their daughters and spouses, it organizes gender roles in families. The Torah law both asserts and institutes men's entitlement to control over women. These rules effectively put the home domain under patriarchal rule. Though both a man's and a woman's vow stands to impact his or her family, spouse, and children, the Torah does not provide the possibility for a woman to annul a man's vow or oath if she finds it objectionable. In our parasha, a man's vow stands before God, independent of his relationships with his family.

The attitude of the sages is somewhat different. Talmudic tractate Nedarim deals with annulling men's vows. In tractate Hagiga, the sage, Shmuel claims that, “He shall not profane his word (Num 30:3) – but others may” (Hagiga 10a). This statement summarizes the rabbinic attitude that a man's vow can, and under certain conditions, *must* be annulled – by a competent authority or quorum, a *beit din*, a rabbinic court.

One infamous example in the Tanakh of a man whose vow ruins lives is the military general Yiftach. Before leaving on his campaign against an enemy people, Amon, Yiftach makes a vow to offer as a sacrifice to God, “the first that leaves the doors of my home to greet me upon my peaceful return from [war against] the Amonites” (Shoftim 11:31). When Yiftach returns to his home after God grants him victory over Amon, his daughter runs to greet him, singing and dancing. Though the text is not completely explicit, some midrashim suggest that Yiftach sacrifices his daughter to fulfill his vow. Some commentaries such as Radak suggest that Yiftach demands his daughter's celibacy as fulfillment of his vow. She expresses her acquiescence:

“My father, you have opened your mouth to the Lord, do to me according to that which has issued



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from your mouth, since the Lord has done for you vengeance from your enemies, from the children of Ammon" (Shoftim 11:36). The text states that she “bewails her virginity” for two months (Shoftim 11:38).

A midrashic tradition deals harsh criticism to Yiftach and Pinchas, the Kohen Gadol, who together ought to have over-turned the sacrifice.

Yiftach made a request from God in an improper way and he was answered improperly. Yiftach said that if he were victorious that whatever came out of his house he would offer as a sacrifice (Shoftim 11:31). God said if a camel or donkey or dog had come out would he have offered it as a sacrifice? Therefore God answered improperly and caused Yiftach’s daughter to come first out the door. And when Yiftach saw his daughter he ripped his clothes (Shoftim 11:35). But why didn’t Yiftach have his oath annulled by going to Pinchas [who served as the Kohen Gadol at the time]? That is because Yiftach felt that since he was the king, Pinchas should come to him. So why didn’t Pinchas go to Yiftach? That is because Pinchas felt that since he was the High Priest and the son of a High Priest it was not proper for him to go to an ignorant man. Therefore between the two of them an unfortunate young woman perished and both bear the responsibility for her death. Pinchas was punished by the loss of his holy spirit (ruach hakodesh). Yiftach was punished in that his limbs fell off and they were buried separately. (Vayikra Rabba 37:4. See also midrash *Tanchuma*, at the end of Parashat Bechukotai)

According to this rabbinic tradition, there were sufficient halakhic grounds for voiding the vow. Both Yiftach and Pinchas were haughty and stubborn; neither wanted to compromise his honor to initiate the annulment. Each held his dignity to be more precious than the daughter's wellbeing, even her life.



Jephthah's Daughter.



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The sages sought to correct the dangerous open-ended Torah law that seems to uphold any man's vow or oath as binding and sacred. Taking the case of Yiftach, the midrash illustrates the mortal risk of patriarchal power embodied in such a law. Yiftach's daughter is herself completely complicit and submissive – the illustration of the pre-sacrifice embrace makes this point as clear as the dagger Yiftach holds (from [this site](#)). Though the fate of her own child is sealed by Yiftach's vow, Yiftach's spouse is not even mentioned in the text.

#### Questions for Discussion

In the text, as in many communities, marital status clearly affects a woman's prerogative to autonomously undertake commitments. How does marriage today affect a woman's autonomy to undertake professional, economic, social, or spiritual commitments? In our Jewish communities and in society today, what delimits the validity of a woman's spiritual autonomy and choices?

In relationships, workplaces, communities, and political organizations, whose voices does our society veto and how does it exert this control?

This text sensitizes us about the extent to which marriage impinges on personal autonomy because, implicitly, the commitments of one spouse affect the relationship. How do you value the limiting of personal autonomy in the interest of relationships of responsibility and caring? Discuss whether you think that veto power ought to exist? If so, ought it to be mutual? Or, is there an alternate model for negotiating autonomy and personal religious discipline between spouses?

The text does not discuss the vow of a single woman, living neither in her father's nor in her spouse's home. How do our communities, both Jewish and secular, recognize and relate to, or fail to recognize and relate to, the lives of single women and men?

Verbal oaths/vows bind a person to perform as s/he promises, with the affirmation of the divine presence. To what extent do we fulfill our verbal agreements and undertakings with the sincerity and binding force that the witnessing divine presence demands?

#### Study Links

Israeli Rabbi Yehoshua Engelman considers the Torah's attitude toward women's vows to be, “arguably the most blatantly sexist in the Torah, denying women autonomy over their decisions and right to vow.” See his [commentary on Mattot](#) that deals with issues of sexism and holiness.

Rabbi Jacqueline Koch Ellenson's essay, “[The Vows of Women](#)” reflects in a pragmatic way on the contemporary relevance of the Torah restrictions on the autonomy of women to make vows.



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[Here](#) is the text of Byron's famous and tragic poem, “Jephtach's Daughter.”

#### Summary of Issues

The Torah laws about women's vows both illustrate and institute a culture of patriarchy. These rules curtail women's autonomy and accord men unilateral authority over women's personal choices and practices. Men's unrestricted freedom to make vows can have fatal outcomes, as in the case of the daughter of Yiftach. Rabbinic sages do not denounce this patriarchal regime, nor do they address the oppressive inequality of the laws of vows. The sages do affirm their power to enact a due legal process to annul men's vows.

#### Methods & Observations

As human societies evolve over time and place, rabbinic sages and authorities often limit and regulate Torah rules that they consider incompatible with their ethical convictions. Some examples are limitations the sages place on the laws of the rebellious child (Devarim 21:18-21), the law of an “eye for an eye” (Shmot 21:18-19, 22-25 and VaYiqra 24:17-21), and the Sotah ritual (Bamidbar 5:11-31). In the case of vows – as in many other cases old and new – religious authorities neither recognize nor address the ethical offenses of patriarchy. As rabbinic Jews, we are responsible to continue this task of interpreting the Torah in light of our ethical conscience. This is one of the important functions and contributions of Jewish feminist study and practice today.

#### Contact

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