

Words and the Thought Behind Them

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Parshas Matos deals with vows and pledges that a person undertakes, and the obligation to keep them. Keeping one's pledges is undoubtedly a sacred obligation, but the Torah gives us an "escape" clause. One can ask a court, or a learned expert to "annul" one's vows. Similarly, the father of a minor girl, or a husband, can annul her vows. While one can understand the concept of annulment as being necessary because of the severity of vows, its dynamics still need to be understood.

Although this seems to be one of many *mitzvos*, this *parsha* was specially chosen to delineate two important points that are seemingly unrelated to the particular properties of this *mitzvah*: 1) the unique nature of Moshe's prophecy, 2) the unique role of the leaders of Israel. What is it about this *mitzvah* in particular that makes it the appropriate forum to convey these two points?

Speech is the unique faculty that defines humans, as they are categorized "*medabrim*". The act of speech is very different than other activities of a human. All other activities are "caused" by thought, much the way that pushing a rock causes it to roll. Speech, however, is the very **embodiment** of a person's cognition. While an act done unwittingly is pardonable, a word uttered by accident is simply not even considered to be speech (see *Nedarim* 28a).

The ability to annul vows is a result of this understanding. In the process of the annulment of a vow, the person presents that he did not really understand the ramifications of his words. In effect this means that those words were not the result of an understanding, but in effect a "blurring out" of words. Similarly, the husband or father assumes the role of the "*da'as*" of the spouse or child, and if he disagrees with the vow, it means that the words are lacking proper "*da'as*".

This is the reason that this *parsha* is chosen to delineate the distinction between Moshe's prophecy and that of other prophets. Prophecy is the "word" of Hashem, but its quality is only as good as the understanding of the prophet. All prophets - barring Moshe - do not have a crystal-clear understanding of the message; their words of prophecy are therefore prefaced only with "*koh*", indicating that it's an approximation. Only Moshe, whose understanding was crystal clear, could say words that were precise - "*zeh hadavar*".

This also is the appropriate *mitzvah* to express the unique role of the leaders of Israel. The Jewish nation is like a person, with each of the individuals having a unique role, similar to the organs of a body. The leaders are the mind - and therefore an expert *dayan* can nullify a vow.

This concept sets a high bar for *mitzvos* that are performed by articulation. If we do a *mitzvah* with our hands, as long as we have some cognizance of what we are doing then we have essentially fulfilled our *mitzvah*. But *mitzvos* of articulation - *tefilla* being foremost among them - are a different story. Words said half-thinkingly, or off-handedly, are lacking the very point of *davening*. Similarly, helping someone physically is a *chessed*, no matter how little thought is invested. But kind words need to express true thought and empathy.