The Severity of Vain and False Oaths

The prominence of many of the *dibrot* in our tradition, such as Shabbat and honoring parents, means that others receive less attention, for example the third one: “You shall not take the name of the L-rd your G-d in vain; for the L-rd will not hold him guiltless that takes His name in vain.”¹ The Torah’s terminology here suggests we should take this commandment quite seriously. The unusual phrase “ki lo yenakeh Hashem” attributes a particular severity to the sin of vain oaths. The Torah also relates to false oaths as a significant transgression, referring to them as a *chillul Hashem*.

“And you shall not swear by My name falsely so that you profane the name of your G-d: I am the L-rd.”²

Our prophetic books further reveal the severity of oaths. The people of Yavesh Gilead are killed due to their ignoring a communal oath to fight against the tribe of Binyamin.³ Shaul wanted to kill his son Yehonatan for violating an oath not to eat until the battle with the Pelishtim was finished.⁴ Shaul’s descendants are put to death because the house of Shaul violated an old oath from the time of Yehoshua not to harm the Gibeonites.⁵

Talmudic tradition adds further evidence.⁶ A sinner does not receive lashes for verbal crimes (*lav she‘ain bo ma‘aseh*) with a few solitary exceptions, one of them being vain or false oaths. Another Gemara⁷ states that it is particularly difficult to achieve atonement for violation of this Commandment. What makes these sins so problematic?

On a most basic level, oaths involve the name of G-d and someone who takes a vain or false oath demeans the reverence required towards the Master of the Universe. Two of our classic Biblical commentators add more layers to this iniquity. Chizkuni⁸ points out that whereas a thief can easily compensate for his crime by returning the stolen item, a person who makes a vain oath cannot pay back the victim. Although his point is true, it would seem that many sins resemble vain oaths in this regard and it remains unclear why this transgression receives such harsh treatment.

Secondly, Ibn Ezra notes the foolishness of this crime. The adulterer and the thief procure pleasure in their sins while the murderer and the bearer of false witness avenge themselves upon their enemies. What enjoyment is achieved by making vain or false oaths? No overwhelming temptation leads individuals to such sins but rather a simple lack of care and concern regarding the substance of their speech.

I imagine that acts of murder or adultery, two death penalty crimes, are more grievous than violations of *lo tisa*. At the same time, certain aspects of vain and false oaths make them particularly problematic. They cannot easily be undone, they quickly turn into constant failings, and they do not emerge out of strong temptations.

May attention to this *dibra* help us grow more sensitive to the content and mode of our speech.

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¹ Shemot 20:7.
² Vayikra 19:12.
³ Shoftim 21.
⁴ Shmuel Alef 14.
⁵ Shmuel Bet 21.
⁶ Shavuot 21a.
⁷ Yoma 86a.
⁸ Commentary on Shemot 20:7.
⁹ Commentary on Shemot 20:7.

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