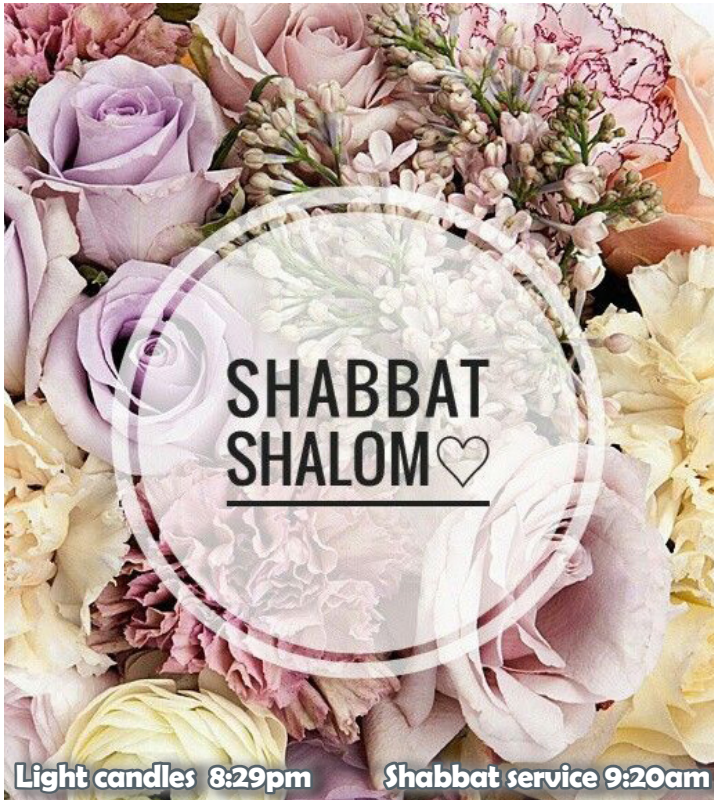




Carnegie Shul Chatter

July 16, 2020



Who To Believe?

Sometimes you just don't know who to believe anymore. There was a time when most Americans could turn to good old "Uncle Walter" Cronkite for their news and feel very comfortable that they were getting, as Sgt. Joe Friday on *Dragnet* would say, "Just the facts, please." But now, especially with social media, you just don't know what to believe.

Today, a Black friend of mine posted on Facebook the following about the word "picnic": "Many African

Balance in the News? Sadly, No.

Last year, I had the pleasure of attending an event where Bari Weiss, then the Op Ed editor for the New York Times, was the guest speaker. Bari is a Pittsburgh native who was hired by the Times, in her words, "with the goal of bringing in voices that would not otherwise appear in your pages: first-time writers, centrists, conservatives and others who would not naturally think of The Times as their home. The reason for this effort was clear: The paper's failure to anticipate the outcome of the 2016 election meant that it didn't have a firm grasp of the country it covers. Dean Baquet and others have admitted as much on various occasions. The priority in Opinion was to help redress that critical shortcoming."

Yesterday, it was revealed that Bari resigned from her position at the Times. In a lengthy letter to the paper, which Bari made public, she said that the Times was not open to differing opinions and was not interested in always seeking out the truth, and that she experienced bullying and anti-Semitism for seeking to present differing views.

It is a shame that truth and justice do not always seem to be the American way anymore.

If only we would do as the Torah tells us.

American history professionals acknowledge that the English origin of the word picnic was used to describe festive events attended by racist whites. Unaware Black men were released from jail and told to run off, only to be caught by mobs of white men who would lynch or burn them alive in front of cheering crowds, often with children present. Picnic is derived from the whole term, 'Pick a Nigger.'"

The information was attributed to the Smithsonian African American archives.

A few minutes later, another friend said that the fact checking site, Snopes. Com, said that this was not true. He also cited <https://www.allabouthistory.org/origin-of-the-word-picnic>, which says the following:

"You may have read the gossip sweeping the Internet on the origin of the word picnic. Some claim that picnic is derived from lynching parties of blacks. This is incorrect.

Instead, the origin on the word picnic is French (pique) and was invented long before the atrocities towards blacks took place in America. This French word - pique - signifies an outing with food - similar to the word's meaning in English. At these piques, the attendees would all bring food to the occasion, similar to what we call potlucks today. The outdoor concept of a picnic did not originate until the 19th century.

So, how did this word originate? We are unsure what the word pique actually means. There are two options: leisurely eating (picking) or a delicacy of food. Pique was selected since it rhymed with Pique.

Historians have found this French word in references outside of the French language as early as 1748 and into English by around 1800."

What to believe? What is truth?

This week's Torah portion, Matot, talks about truth in the form of honesty in keeping our vows. Below is an article by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks about Keeping our word.

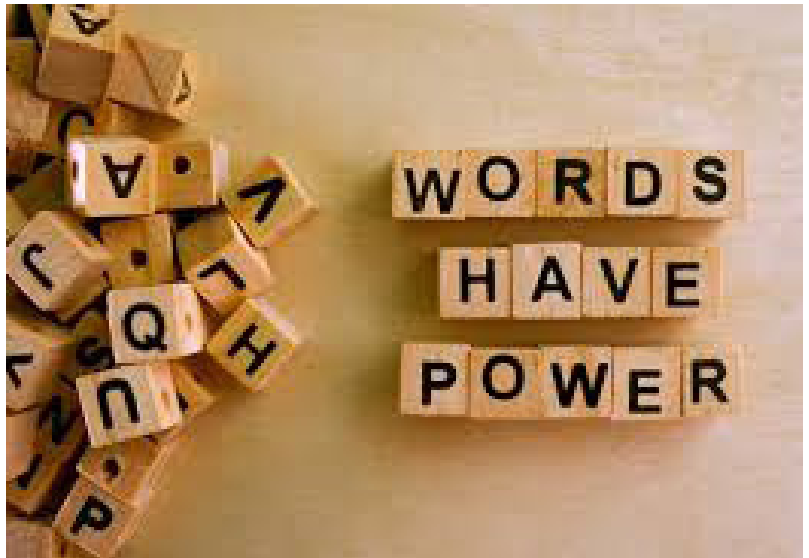
Keeping Our Word (Matot 5776)

This week's parsha opens with an account of the laws of vows and oaths. What is it doing here near the end of the book of Numbers, as the Israelites approach the destination of their journey to the promised land?

Vows and oaths are obligations created by words. They are commitments to do something or refrain from doing something. A vow, *neder*, affects the status of an object. I may vow not to eat something. That something is now, for me, forbidden food. An oath, *shevuah*, affects the person not the object. What is now forbidden is not the food but the act of eating it. Both acts bind: that is the primary meaning of the word *issar*.



Such is the sanctity of such undertakings that there are demanding rules that have to be met if they are to be annulled. You cannot do it yourself: the parsha sets out some of the ground rules, the rest of which were supplied by the oral tradition. So seriously does Judaism treat verbal undertakings that one act of annulment, Kol Nidrei, takes place at the start of the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur.



The superficial reason for the law of vows appearing here is that the previous section of the Torah dealt with communal sacrifices. Individuals also brought sacrifices, sometimes because they were bound to do so but at other times because they voluntarily chose to do so. Hence the laws of voluntary undertakings.

But there is a deeper reason. The Israelites were nearing the land. They were about to construct a society unlike any other. It was to be a free society based on a covenant between the people and God. The rule of law was to be secured not by the use of force but by people honouring their moral commitments, their voluntary undertaking to God that what He commanded, they would do.

A covenantal society is one in which words are holy, sacrosanct. This is the principle at the heart of Judaism as a code of collective freedom, a constitution of liberty.

This needs explanation. Any society needs laws. Without that, it descends into anarchy. There are three reasons why people obey laws. The first is that they will be punished if they don't. This is a society based on power. The second is that it is to their advantage to do so. This is a society based on self-interest.

Both have shortcomings. Power corrupts. So, at times, does the pursuit of self-interest. When power is corrupted, there is a loss of freedom. When self-interest prevails, there is a loss of social cohesion. When people care about themselves but not others, the successful thrive while others suffer. Justice and compassion give way to greed and exploitation.

The Torah sets forth a third way, in which people obey the law because they have voluntarily undertaken to do so. This is a society based not on power or the pursuit of self-interest but on freely embraced moral obligation. The Torah is the story of how the Israelites came to this unique and radical idea: the politics of covenant.

Ironically it was one of the great critics of Judaism, Friedrich Nietzsche, who had the insight to see that the capacity to bind ourselves by words is the basis of both morality and human freedom. This is what he says in his book, *On the Genealogy of Morality*:

To breed an animal with the prerogative to promise – is that not precisely the paradoxical task which nature has set herself with regard to humankind? Is it not the real problem of

between what happens by accident and what by design . . . and before he can do this, man himself will really have to become reliable, regular, necessary, even in his own self-image, so that he, as someone making a promise is, is answerable for his own future!

When we bind ourselves by words we are using language not to describe but to create – to create an orderly future out of the chaos of human instincts and desires. What makes humans unique is not just the use of language. Other animals use forms of language. Dolphins do. So do primates. Even bees do complex dances that convey information to other bees.

What is unique to humans is that we use language to bind our own future behaviour so that we can form with other human beings bonds of mutuality and trust. One such bond is the promise. Another is marriage. A third – unique to Judaism – is society understood as a covenant, a set of mutually binding promises between the Jewish people and God.

It is this use of language, not to describe something already in existence but to create something that didn't exist before, that links us to God. God used words to bring the natural universe into being: "And God said . . . and there was." We use words to bring a social universe into being. What the Torah is telling us is that words create because words are holy: that is to say, they bind. When words bind, they generate trust. Trust is to society what predictability is to nature: the basis of order as opposed to chaos.

Social institutions in a free society depend on trust, and trust means that we keep our word. We do what we say we are going to do. If we make a vow, an oath, a promise, a verbal undertaking, then we hold ourselves bound by it. This means that we will actually fulfil our commitment unless we can establish that, due to circumstances unforeseeable at the time, we are simply unable to do so.

If trust breaks down, social relationships break down, and then society depends on law enforcement agencies or some other use of force. When force is widely used, society is no longer free. The only way free human beings can form collaborative and cooperative relationships without recourse to force is by the use of verbal undertakings honoured by those who make them.

Freedom needs trust; trust needs people to keep their word; and keeping your word means treating words as holy, vows and oaths as sacrosanct. Only under very special and precisely formulated circumstances can you be released from your undertakings. That is why, as the



Israelites approached the holy land where they were to create a free society, they had to be reminded of the sacred character of vows and oaths.

The temptation to break your word when it is to your advantage to do so can sometimes be overwhelming. That is why belief in God – a God who oversees all we think, say and do, and who holds us accountable to our commitments – is so fundamental. Although it sounds strange to us now, the father of toleration and liberalism, John Locke (England, 17th century) held that citizenship should not be extended to atheists because, not believing in God, they could not be trusted to honour their word.

So the appearance of laws about vows and oaths at the end of the book of Bamidbar, as the Israelites are approaching the holy land, is no accident, and the moral is still relevant today. A free society depends on trust. Trust depends on keeping your word. That is how humans imitate God by using language to create.

Words create moral obligations, and moral obligations, undertaken responsibly and honoured faithfully, create the possibility of a free society.

So – always do what you say you are going to do. If we fail to keep our word, eventually we will lose our freedom.



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