

Secrets, Secrets Are No Fun!

One might think that keeping a promise is just about keeping a piece of information confidential, however, there are many more layers to promises than one thinks. I chose to study the mitzvah of keeping a promise because at first I thought that keeping a promise is just about secrets which is why I wondered what more there was to it. My mitzvah is found in Bemidbar 30:3 in the Torah. In English: “If a man makes a vow to the Lord or makes an oath to prohibit himself, he shall not violate his word; according to whatever came out of his mouth, he shall do.” And in Hebrew: “ה. י ידר נדר ליהוה או השבע שבועה לאסר אסר על נפשו לא יחל דברו ככל היצא מפיו יעשה” פ. These words show that this is a mitzvah ben adam l’chavero because one keeps a promise between themselves and another person(s).

Before diving into the mitzvah, I had a few questions and ideas that I wanted to look for in the commentaries I would be studying. Something I was interested in finding out was why widows and people who are divorced have to keep all promises, no matter what, and why they can never break them. In addition, something that was unclear to me was why Bar and Bat Mitzvahs’ vows are never broken but non-Bar and Bat Mitzvahs’ vows can be broken. Is the difference that Bar and Bat Mitzvahs’ are supposed to be more mature with their promises? Furthermore, How does God come into this mitzvah? What is the punishment for breaking the mitzvah? And lastly, do men and women observe this or just women?

Sefer Hachinuch and JPS Torah Commentary taught me that all vows, oaths and promises are made in the name of God. For my second question, Rambam explained that the punishment for breaking a promise is getting whipped. Sefer Hachinuch and JPS also answer my last question by saying that both men and women are required to fulfill this mitzvah. However, women must keep all vows and promises while they are in their father or husband’s house at all

times unless the woman's father or husband says they can break the vow, which would lead to the father or husband breaking the vow and not fulfilling the mitzvah.

Some of the opinions that were given by the commentators were disagreeable. I think that for my first question, it depends on what the promise is because I don't think all promises are made in the name of God. Also, for my second question, I don't think that whipping is a good punishment for breaking a promise because it does not really go with the mitzvah. I think that feeling guilt and losing something because of the promise or vow that was broken would be a good punishment. I agree that both men and women should observe this mitzvah. However, I don't think that the father and husband rule should be in effect because it is very sexist that women can't keep their own promises and they have to base their oaths on men. Some additional information I learned about my mitzvah was that it has a strong connection to the mitzvah of lying. Breaking a promise is a form of lying because if one breaks their promise, they are lying to whoever they promised to. Also, if someone lies, they should feel guilty, just like my mitzvah about keeping a promise.

In addition to studying the mitzvah of keeping a promise, I also observed it. My experience fulfilling this mitzvah was very straight-forward. When someone asked me to keep a promise, I kept it, and when someone asked me to do something and I said yes; I kept my word and did it. I think that the mitzvah of keeping a promise is very important, although some of the rules are extreme. For example, as I mentioned earlier, it is sexist that women's vows and oaths are based on the household of a man. Women are capable of keeping their vows and oaths without a man by their side. Furthermore, getting whipped as a punishment is very unnecessary in my opinion. I think that I have a big connection with this mitzvah because people are often asking me to keep a promise and keep something private. For example, when my mom asks me

to do the dishes and I say yes, I won't break my word, I will do the dishes. I think that vows and promises surround everyone constantly.

At the end of studying this mitzvah I made some connections to my previous points. I mentioned that women have to keep all of their promises when they are in their father's or husband's house. I thought that perhaps widows and women who are divorced can't annul their vows because they are not in a man's house. This mitzvah means a lot to me since I keep promises every day. I also feel that keeping a promise is really important in any kind of relationship. To me, this mitzvah means that anyone who makes a vow or promise has to keep it out of respect to the person they made it to. Also, I think that promises can be broken as long as one has the person they promised to's consent.

All in all, even though some people say, "secrets, secrets are no fun unless you tell everyone", a promise, vow or oath is sacred according to our tradition. Furthermore, I realized that one of the main ideas of this mitzvah is kind of sexist towards women thinking that women cannot keep a promise on their own. Another main idea I found was that breaking a promise should not be and is not taken lightly. Breaking a promise is breaking someone's trust which is not okay according to Judaism. If someone asks one something and they say yes, they must keep that person's trust.