

“Maimonides 613 Series”

The Ten Commandments: Third Commandment: Don't Take My Name in Vain

Exodus 20:5

לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת שֵׁם ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׁוֹן

"You shall not take the name of the L-rd, your G-d, in vain..."

Maimonides Negative commandment #62

The 62nd prohibition is that we are forbidden to swear a *sh'vuas shav* (a vain oath).

The source of this commandment is G-d's statement, "Do not take the name of G-d your Lord in vain."

Pshat – The Surface Level

Rambam says that four basic types of oaths are covered by this prohibition:

1. Do not swear in G-d's Name about something obviously false, i.e. that a pillar of marble is made of gold.
2. Do not swear about something obviously true, i.e. that a table is a table.
3. Do not swear that you will neglect the performance of a mitzvah. We already swore at Sinai to uphold the Torah; therefore we cannot swear a contradictory oath to violate the mitzvohs.
4. Do not swear an oath that is impossible to fulfill, i.e. I will not eat any food or drink any liquid for the next seven days straight.

Remez – The Level of Hints

G-d made an oath to our forefathers to give them the Land of Israel, as we affirm in the Shema twice each day. In the Psalms, Dovid haMelech tells us that, “the children will take the place of the fathers.”

Since G-d must uphold the oath that He swore in His own Name, he will

return us, the children, in peace to our land.

***Drush* – The Homiletic Level**

The Kli Yakar asks: when it comes to the violation of this commandment, why do we find the terminology, “G-d will not absolve anyone?” What is so terrible about violating this commandment? In the Talmud, Tractate Shavuos 39a, it says that when G-d gave the Third Commandment, the entire world trembled. Why? Normally, when a person sins, that person alone is punished. When it comes to violating the Third Commandment, however, the entire world bears the punishment. This can be understood through an analogy: a tree has many branches; if you want to lift the roots of the tree, you are lifting not just the roots and trunk, but also all the branches. The Hebrew terminology for “Do not take” used in this commandment literally means, “Do not lift up.” G-d created the entire world with His divine name; if it is taken in vain, it affects all of creation.

***Sod* – The Level of Secrets**

My grandfather, Rabbi JJ Hecht, of blessed memory, teaches on the meaning of the Third Commandment: “Upon each of us in G-d's Name. He creates each and every Jew with a part of His very Self. He blew into our nostrils and gave us life. Therefore, do not carry G-d's Name in vain – use it productively and for the good, for everywhere we go and everything we do, we carry the Name with us.” This is supported by a teaching of the Maharash: In the soul of every Jew, we find the Four-Letter Name of G-d. The *yud*, shaped like a dot, is *chochmah* – wisdom, a seminal idea. The first *hei* is *binah* – understanding, developing that seminal idea. The *vav* is the six *middos* – emotional attributes of the soul. The final *hei* is the power of speech and breath. In the body, the *yud* corresponds to the head, the first *hei* to the five fingers of the hands, the *vav* to the torso, and the final *hei* to the five toes of each foot. G-d's Name is imprinted and signed on every human being – we have the awesome responsibility and obligation to carry this Name with dignity and pride, to use it to carry the message of peace and tranquility to the rest of world.

***Chassidus* – The Fifth Level**

There are three types of oaths connected with mitzvot:

- 1) We all took an oath at Mount Sinai to fulfill all 613 mitzvot, so we are

obligated to do so.

- 2) The Talmud says that before every person is born, an angel administers an oath to them to be righteous and not wicked.
- 3) If we feel we need encouragement in performing a certain mitzvah, we can take an oath to improve our performance, and this oath gives us encouragement.

When it comes to this third type of oath, the Gemara asks: how can a person take an oath to perform a mitzvah? We already took this oath at Sinai – you can't take the same oath twice! In truth, this oath is solely for encouragement in our growth.

What are the differences between these types of oaths?

A. The first two types of oaths we were obligated to take are (1) at Mount Sinai and (2) just before our soul incarnated. The third type of oath is voluntary.

There is also a difference between the first and second type of oath:

B. The oath we took at Sinai only covers actual mitzvot that we are obligated to perform, but not *hiddur* mitzvah, the beautifying of a mitzvah that we go beyond the letter of the law to achieve (i.e. the law obligates a woman to light just one Shabbos candle; *hiddur* mitzvah is lighting a candle each for her husband and children).

C. We take an additional oath before birth to be a *tzaddik*, to observe the commandments and mitzvohs beyond the letter of the law.

D. The oath taken at Sinai is revealed; every person knows about it. The oath before birth however, is not something everybody knows about, and

therefore it does not have the same strength. On this oath, then, we have the right to take another oath, the third type of oath, to help us do *hiddur* mitzvah, to perform the mitzvohs scrupulously with the same vigor as Scriptural mitzvot, etc.

Who Remembers This Oath?

Why is this oath taken before birth, which covers everything in our service to G-d, hidden and forgotten?

The Hebrew word for “oath”, *shavua*, is connected to the word *sovea*, which means, “to satiate.” The very act of taking the oath before birth satiates the soul with all it needs to fulfill its every obligation. This oath reveals to the soul that it is really one with G-d. Because of this unity, it is expected to be perfect. And just as G-d permeates all reality, so must we permeate our reality with holiness by going beyond the letter of the law, beautifying our mitzvot in all their details. Because this oath comes from such a high place – the place where the soul is united with G-d – it is beyond time and space, beyond revelation; therefore, it is concealed. If a person feels a lack of desire to do a mitzvah or feels incompetent, they can take a new oath to perfect their mitzvot and go beyond the letter of the law, and it is considered a new oath! This oath reveals the essential state of the soul's unity with G-d and reveals that the soul is satiated by G-d and can therefore fulfill His mission here in this world perfectly, in every detail.

A Story

A parable is told in the name of the Chofetz Chaim: In a town, there lived a man by the name of Rabbi Baruch. Rabbi Baruch was both the town's rabbi *and* the wealthiest man in the area; he helped every person who came to him for financial assistance. Early one morning, the town's poorest man, Shlomo, called on Rabbi Baruch and inquired at length about his health and family. After several minutes of this, Rabbi Baruch asked, “Shlomo, what's wrong? What do you need?” The poor man answered, “I have a daughter who I need to marry off, but I have no money for her wedding. I need 300 rubles.” Rabbi Baruch said, “Okay, come back tomorrow at noon, and I will give you the money.” The next day, the rabbi sat, waiting for Shlomo, but he did not come to collect his loan. The following morning, Shlomo called Rabbi Baruch, again asking about his health and then about the loan. Rabbi Baruch

replied, “I was waiting for you to come for the money! I was worried about you! Come today at noon and I'll give you your loan.” Again, Rabbi Baruch waits and waits, and Shlomo does not come. And again, Shlomo calls the next morning, asking about the rabbi's health, then the loan. This scenario repeats itself several more times until Rabbi Baruch is quite sure that Shlomo is crazy!

Every morning, we wake up and thank G-d for returning our soul, for satiating us with the ability to conquer the day and make the world a better place. But then, we forget to go to shul, forget to give tzedaka, forget to learn Torah. And we repeat this every day, again and again, until we realize that we are crazy! G-d tells us that He will give us the loan, the strength to complete our mission, but then we do not show up to collect it, we do not use it. We need to remember that at the giving of the Third Commandment, the whole world trembled – we can uplift the entire world with a single mitzvah! As the Rambam says, one mitzvah can tip the scale of the entire world to salvation and redemption. May we each tap into our G-d-given strength and beautify the world with our mitzvot, and may this tip the scale to the Ultimate Redemption with the coming of Moshiach now!