True to Your Word: Thoughts for Matot/Masei

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Angel for Shabbat, Matot/Masei

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“When a person makes a vow unto the Lord or swears an oath to bind one’s soul, one shall not break one’s word; one should act according to one’s words” (Bemidbar 30:3).

Jewish tradition stresses the importance of keeping commitments. This is true not only for “vows unto the Lord” but for all our interactions. When we give our word, people should be able to rely on our integrity to fulfill our agreements. When we fail to live up to our commitments, we are dishonorable to ourselves, to others, and to the Almighty.

A member of my congregation was a highly successful international banker. He once told me: “When I deal with honorable people, I can trust their word. They won’t renege on their commitments. But when dealing with others, I not only can’t rely on their word, I can’t even rely on their written contracts. They will find loopholes and reinterpretations. I avoid dealing with people whose words are not trustworthy.” I think this policy was a major factor in his success!

How people keep their word is a key indicator of their general trustworthiness. Honorable people will meet their commitments. If they take on a responsibility, they will fulfill it to the best of their ability. You can count on them.

Rabbi Benzion Uziel (1880-1953) was a young student when his father passed away. In order to earn income, he sought jobs as a tutor. He soon realized, though, that he was unable to devote himself properly to his students since he was tired by the end of his own school day. Although he needed the income, he decided it was unfair—and dishonorable—to take pay for tutoring when he was not able to do so with fullness of effort. Rabbi Uziel recognized that being “religious” entailed doing one’s best to fulfill commitments. In his writings, he stressed the importance of working to one’s capacity to fulfill responsibilities as rabbis, teachers, employers, employees.

Just as employers are obligated to deal fairly with employees, employees are obligated to deal fairly with their employers. Halakha demands that workers be paid fairly and on time. It also demands workers to fulfill their duties with diligence. When people renege on their commitments, they not only reflect badly on their own character but they undermine the proper functioning of society in general.

In delineating responsibilities of employers and employees, Maimonides (Hilkhot Sekhirut 13:7) writes: “Just as the employer is warned not to steal the wage of the poor person [employee] or to

withhold it from him, the poor person [employee] is forewarned not to steal from the work due his employer and neglect his work slightly here and there, spending the entire day in deceit. Instead, he is obligated to be precise with regard to his time….Similarly, a worker is obligated to work with all his strength, for Jacob the righteous man said (Genesis 31:7): I served your father with all my strength."

When we give our word and make commitments, our personal honor is at stake. Halakha expects us to be our best and do our best. Falling short of this standard is a sign of moral—and religious—deficiency.