



Parashat Matot begins with an overview of some basic laws of *nedarim*, voluntary vows, beginning with the command to abide by all vows that one has uttered by fulfilling whatever voluntary obligations he takes upon himself. The Talmud in Masekhet Nedarim (22a) cites a famous remark by Rabbi Natan strongly discouraging the practice of making *nedarim*: "Whoever takes a vow is as though he constructed a *bama*, and whoever fulfills it is as though he offered a sacrifice upon it." Once the Temple was constructed, it was forbidden to construct or make use of *bamot*, private altars. Rabbi Natan likens *nedarim* to the forbidden practice of *bamot*, in that it constitutes an attempt to serve God and achieve spirituality through different means than those prescribed by the Torah. Even once a person takes a vow, he is urged to seek its annulment through the process of *hatara*, rather than fulfilling it.

Maimonides cites Rabbi Natan's comment in the closing passage of his *Hilkhot Nedarim*, but he adds one important qualification, distinguishing in this regard between the two categories of vows: *nidrei issur* – prohibitions that one accepts upon himself (such as not to eat a certain food for specified period) – and *nidrei hekdes* – promises taken to bring a sacrificial offering or make a donation to the Temple. According to Maimonides, Rabbi Natan discouraged fulfilling vows only in situations of *nidrei issur*, when a person forbids upon himself something that the Torah allows. With regard, however, to pledges made to the Temple, then to the contrary, Maimonides rules, it is deemed a *mitzva* to fulfill one's pledge. Only under extenuating circumstances, such as severe financial hardship and the like, is one encouraged to seek the annulment of this kind of vow.

This distinction is Maimonides' original ruling, and does not appear in Talmudic sources. He does, however, cite as a source for this position a famous verse from the Book of Tehillim, with which we are familiar from the *hallel* service: "*Nedarai le'Hashem ashalem*" – "I shall fulfill my vows to the Lord" (Tehillim 116:14,18). David declares his desire to fulfill the vows taken during his times of distress, and from the context it emerges clearly that he refers to sacrificial offerings: "I shall offer a thanksgiving sacrifice to You, and I shall call in the Name of the Lord. I shall fulfill my vows to the Lord...in the courtyards of the House of the Lord, in the midst of Jerusalem" (ibid. 17-19). These verses thus clearly suggest that once a person pledges to bring sacrificial offerings to the *Mikdash* he is encouraged and urged to do so, as opposed to other vows, which one should endeavor to have annulled.

Refusing to seek annulment for one's vows reflects an arrogant insistence on the absolute, binding authority and even "sanctity" of one's words. In Megilat Ester (8:8) we read of King Achashverosh's policy that any royal edict stamped with the royal insignia could never be rescinded. In order to assert his infallibility, Achashverosh declared his word as unalterably binding, such that he would never have to confess to having erred or committed a misjudgment. The Sages' admonition to seek the annulment of one's vow is perhaps intended to oppose this tendency among some people to allege this kind of infallible authority. One who has taken a vow is urged to lower his head and submit to the overriding authority of the Rabbinical Court who are endowed with the power (under some circumstances) to declare one's vow null and void.

In the case of *nidrei hekdesh*, however, Maimonides felt that to the contrary, it is preferable for one to follow through on his pledge and bring a sacrifice to the *Mikdash*. The experience of frequenting the Temple and offering sacrifices serves to inspire an individual with a sense of reverence and submission to the Almighty. The act of sacrifice represents the individual's willingness to give of himself for the Almighty, and therefore this kind of vow is not to be annulled. Rather than lead the person to arrogance and conceit, fulfilling the vow will in fact heighten his awareness of his humble stature before God, and lead to a more profound sense of subservience and submission.