

Oaths

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Anyone who has attended a *Kol Nidrei* service will know that there are seven terms in Hebrew and Aramaic for vows and oaths. And three for the meaning of the process of commitment. They must have been incredibly significant once. Nowadays, not so much.

The Bible is full of them. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob all swore to God. They swore to other people and make them swear back. There are places named after oaths as well., God swears back to keep his commitments to His followers. And the Talmud has one large volume devoted to oaths and vows, categories and formulae. And we still can argue about the differences.

What is an oath? Is it just a commitment? Or is it more? Some oaths were and are just curses. But others are supposed to be serious commitments to God. I have never liked oaths. They sound so awesome and yet they are so easily abused.

The one thing I think we can agree on, is that nowadays we do not take oaths or vows nearly as seriously as we once did. People swear using God's name all the time and in most ungodly ways. Oaths are constantly taken in vain and used as common currency. Criminals swear their innocence on the Bible when we know they are lying blind. Politicians swear their probity on their words of honor. I can recall any number of outwardly very, very religious and pious people who were happy to swear blind to other people and to courts with absolutely no intention of abiding by their oaths whatsoever.

I am ashamed to say that I have allowed the odd swear word to escape my lips. Once upon a time, the word bloody was as bad as you could get. Now in the face of other cruder four letter words it is tame. And I agree, that swearing is being linguistically lazy and inadequate. My late father used swear "by the bones of Bohunkus"; but he was having a laugh. As for swearing to believe, that sounds pretty pointless. How can anyone tell what another person really does believe? Most of us do not know ourselves! Surely it is behavior that counts. Any idiot can claim he believes in anything including men from Mars.

In our religious tradition, taking God's name in vain means using God's name when one does not really need to or mean it. Disrespectfully. And it is something really mattered once. But those were the days when one dared not be

rude to one's parents. Oaths, vows were really serious commitments. In the old days they were the most important tools available to try to find out what really happened when there was no other evidence. To take an oath in vain was a crime against God, monarch and country. A challenge to the prevailing order.

In this day and age what really is the purpose of an oath other than to annoy others? After all, if under torture a person will say whatever is required of him, why shouldn't someone who wants to gain citizenship swear loyalty if that's what it takes? Does the Almighty really care if I swear to be faithful to a civil constitution that humans have cobbled together and gets messed about with by whatever brand of politics its legislators are committed to? Indeed, some American Jihadists who have tried to damage their adopted country, swore oaths to become citizens, and on the Koran too. So, what were they thinking? All these national oaths of loyalty and arms placed in symbolic ways only remind me of narrow-minded nationalist bigots.

I was brought up in a country, Britain, where we were not in the habit of swearing loyalty to anyone. I never had to take oaths of loyalty. And yet British history was very much preoccupied with swearing loyalty to church or This has all but been lost, apart from ceremonial occasions nowadays in the UK. But in the USA schoolchildren pledge every day of the school year. New citizens have to pledge loyalty and say that they are prepared to fight for their country if called upon to do so.

There was a move a while back in the Israeli cabinet to impose a loyalty oath on any non-Jew wanting Israeli citizenship. People requesting citizenship were going to be "required to make a declaration in which they commit to being loyal to the State of Israel as a Jewish, Zionist, and democratic state, to its symbols and values, and to serve the state as much as required through military or alternative service."

In Ehud Barak's alternative draft, prospective citizens would have been required to say, "I declare that I will be a citizen loyal to the State of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state, in the spirit of the declaration of independence, and I am committed to honoring the laws of the state."

The Knesset threw it out. Long ago Samuel Johnson said that "patriotism is the refuge of a scoundrel." In which case, it seems to me that Avigdor Lieberman and his party, Yisrael Beiteinu, who initiated this are a bunch of scoundrels. So too were the cabinet for agreeing. The matter is now before the Israeli Supreme Court.

But for the fun of it let us examine this idea. What if we do not subscribe to stated aims of our country? What if I do not subscribe to secular Zionism?

What if I think the pursuit of happiness is meaningless fluff? North Korea is called the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and it is neither democratic nor do its people have any say as to how it is run. And which definition of democracy are we going to have to swear to uphold? Are not American gerrymandered voting districts undemocratic? And values? Which values? Religious? Which version and whose? Do these include economic values? I ask you.

It is meaningless twaddle. It is tokenism mixed with politics, seasoned with prejudice and idiocy. I protest making the distinction between Jew and non-Jew in a civil democracy. It is one thing to claim that Israel is a Jewish state; it is quite another thing to insist that its citizens swear loyalty to it as a Jewish state whatever that means. Just keep the law of the land, for goodness' sake. Isn't that enough? Soon, no doubt, these zealots will try imposing oaths on nonconformist Jews too. Most of the Charedi world shares my objection to oaths. Indeed, they are no fans democracy, and many of them are opposed to the secular state on principle. Just try forcing them to swear loyalty!

We Jews cannot even agree on a definition who a Jew is. Are we really going to ask an Arab Muslim to swear to be a Jew? How are we going to define a Jewish state for a meaningful oath? Will secular Israelis have to swear loyalty to Torah? Oaths are common, it is true, amongst the nations of the world—but they reflect the pettiness of nationalism and rein

Jews cannot agree on anything. Nominally Jewish/Israeli actresses (usually married out of Judaism) lend their names to campaigns against Israel encouraging Jewish identity. It does not surprise me that the gulf between assimilated and committed Jews is growing wider and wider. What, I wonder, have publicity seeking Jews have ever done for the future of Judaism other than furthering their own careers?

Before World War II there was a famous debate in the Oxford Union entitled "King and Country". By a majority vote, the students rejected the notion of "my country, right or wrong". And this apparently persuaded Hitler that the Brits would not go to war. In the end they did, which proved that words are cheap and unreliable. So, it is with defending or undermining the State of Israel. Any formulation of oaths will increase negativity, rather than rally support. When it comes to standing up for one's land, I'll take action any time over words.

My theory is that just as King David, when he ran away from King Saul to Achish, pretended to be mad so as to be left alone, the current Israeli political leadership is pretending to be mad so that the peacemakers will leave them alone too. Loyalty should be tested in actions not words.

Important PS

In my earlier blog about blindness there is a line that says that the Hebrew word *Aleph Vav Reysh* can also mean the same as the Hebrew for skin and several correspondents have pointed out that this is a mistake for "skin" is with an *Ayin*. And of course, it is. But the mistake came from a rushed and careless editing before I left for a trip to Israel. The uncorrupted version should have read

In addition, the Hebrew letters *Aleph, Vav Reysh*, can mean or rather be mistaken for the Hebrew for skin (spelled with an *Ayin*). Michelangelo made a magnificent statue of Moses with horns sprouting out of his head. The Bible (Exodus 34.29) said that Moses, when he came from communing with God, had *Karnei Or* which means "beams of light." But mistranslations of both words, *Karnei* and *Or*, ends up reading " horns of skin." And several commentators have noticed the similarities. Which in fact must be an *Ashkenazi* phenomenon, for Sephardim differentiate the *Ayin* from the *Aleph* quite distinctly.

Sorry. *Mea Culpa* for being so careless.