

The Give and Take of Biblical Vows

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We live in a world of give and take. Transactions involving the exchange of money for goods and services, which the rabbis explicitly call *משא ומתן*, “taking and giving,” are central to economic life. Successful relationships, whether professional or personal, are the result of effectively balancing the pursuit of one’s own wants and needs with acknowledging and accommodating the needs and desires of others.

It may come as a surprise that biblical vows almost always involve give and take as well. Hannah vows that if God grants her a son, she will dedicate him to God (I Samuel 1:11). The people of Israel promise to donate the spoils of war to God’s service if they prevail against the king of Arad and his army (Numbers 21:2). In this week’s parashah, Jacob makes a conditional vow upon awakening from his dream at Beth El:

Jacob then made a vow, saying, “If God remains with me, if God protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear and, if I return safe to my father’s house—the Lord shall be my God. And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be God’s abode; and of all that you give me I will set aside a tithe for you” (Genesis 28:20–22).

Several of the classical commentators are disturbed by the apparently transactional character of these vows. Some cite the teaching in Tractate Avot, “Do not conduct yourselves like those who serve their masters in the expectation of [literally: conditioned upon] receiving reward” (Mishnah Avot 1.3). Is Jacob declaring that his fealty to God has a price tag attached?

I think that biblical vows are best understood in light of the teachings of the late Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler. Rabbi Dessler was a psychologically astute exponent of *mussar*, a system of religious character formation based on study, self-reflection, and behavioral conditioning. He posited that each of us is called upon to make a fateful decision: Will I be a giver or a taker?

One might object that we are all both givers and takers. What could it mean to choose to be one or the other? For Rav Dessler the answer lies in the manner of our giving and taking. The giver receives rather than takes, and always as little as possible. She expresses gratitude for what is received and uses it to enable further giving. The taker relinquishes rather than gives, letting go of no more than is necessary and always with the goal of taking more than is given.

Keeping this insight in mind, let us look more carefully at the vows made by Jacob and his fellow votaries. They share a striking feature: the votary’s promise can only be fulfilled if his request is granted. Jacob can only build an abode for God if he survives his sojourn in Aram. Hannah needs a child if she is to dedicate one to God. The people of Israel can offer to dedicate the spoils of war to God only if they prevail.

In other words, these votaries are not withholding some expression or act of religious devotion so as to use it as a bargaining chip. Rather, they promise God that if their prayers are answered, they will not forget who it was that answered them. In each case the promised action is a manifestation of gratitude, a larger acknowledgement that God is the ultimate source of blessing, and a commitment to use God’s gifts in the spirit of generosity. These vows are about giving, not taking.

Later in the biblical narrative we are introduced to a taker: Laban. Laban bamboozles and exploits Jacob at every turn while portraying himself as a loving uncle who wants only what is best for Jacob. When Laban catches up with Jacob when the latter flees his father-in-law's home, Jacob releases the pent-up anger and resentment that has accumulated over the twenty years he has spent in Laban's employ.

“These twenty years I have spent in your service, your ewes and she-goats never miscarried, nor did I feast on rams from your flock. That which was torn by beasts I never brought to you; I myself made good the loss; you exacted it of me, whether snatched by day or snatched by night. Often, scorching heat ravaged me by day and frost by night; and sleep fled from my eyes. Of the twenty years that I spent in your household, I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flocks; and you changed my wages time and again. Had not the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, been with me, you would have sent me away empty-handed. But God took notice of my plight and the toil of my hands, and He gave judgment last night” (Genesis 31:38–42).

What is Laban's response? “The daughters are my daughters, the children are my children, and the flocks are my flocks; all that you see is mine” (31:43). Laban is willfully blind to the part that Jacob has played in tending and increasing his flocks. He is oblivious to Jacob's devotion, to his willingness to go beyond what is required in serving his employer. Jacob is nothing but a tool to be discarded after his services are no longer needed.

If we look again at Jacob's tirade against Laban, we will also see that the gratitude Jacob promised on his way to Haran has begun to manifest itself even before his return to the site of his dream and his vow. Jacob has worked hard for Laban; he has been tricked by him and has had to manipulate Laban in return in order to provide for his family. Yet Jacob acknowledges that his success is not solely the product of his own efforts; it is only through God's grace that he, Jacob, has managed to survive and even flourish.

It is easy to take for granted the generosity of others, whether out of a sense of entitlement, self-centeredness, or an unwillingness to acknowledge the role of others in bringing about our successes and achievements. We are particularly prone to be oblivious to the daily divine gift of existence itself. We need not wait for a heavenly dream to realize that God and God's angels, whether heavenly or terrestrial, are always present in our lives, guiding and supporting us in good times and bad. It remains for us to acknowledge what we have received and to use those gifts in the spirit of the love and care with which they have been given.