

Dear Community,

For most of us, the idea of humans possessing G-d-like qualities evokes the mythical Greek Achilles, the Roman Hercules, Arjuna of Hindu mythology, or Hollywood's Wonder Woman. The notion that Judaism may contain demigods seems heretical to us. At the inception of Judaism, the revelation of the Ten Commandments, we are told of G-d's Singular, unique existence. Belief in other gods is a cardinal sin, whether the anthropomorphic creations of the ancients or the illusion of complete self-determination of the moderns. However, the idea of a demigod is actually intrinsic to the very fabric of Judaism, as we shall see.

In this week's Torah portion, we are introduced to two concepts that at first glance seem almost banal: the laws of committing oaths and the ability to create conditional statements. The fact that the Torah chooses to place such an emphasis on the importance of keeping one's word is, though, not at all surprising: oaths and promises are intrinsic to the very fabric of a functioning society. If we cannot trust each other's promises, productive economic and social activity is doomed. This seems enough of a justification for enshrining these concepts in the Torah.

However, as one begins to study the topic of *nedarim* (oaths) and *shavuos* (promises) further, a novel and an astounding picture emerges. The Talmud writes (Nedarim 2b) that when one swears an oath not to eat a particular piece of bread, one is not merely bound by a sense of commitment: rather, the actual bread is now forbidden to eat. This may seem to us a petty distinction. Yet there are fundamental ramifications to this reality. Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderes, one of the primary Rishonim, writes that if one makes an oath not to eat something that is unkosher, the oath is not valid. This is based on the principle that an item can only possess one prohibitive identity; there is no double jeopardy.

If we think about this for a moment, we should be astounded. A human has the power, through the faculty of speech, to create a forbidden item out of an item innocent of all wrongdoing. How can this be? Doesn't Judaism view prohibitions as interactions with the spiritual reality that overlays our material one? If this is so, how can we create a new law? This is similar to being able to create a physical law, one that applies only to me. All others must be bound to gravity, but I, after a quick change into my spandex, can fly.

Later in the Parsha this concept becomes reoccurs in possibly even more extreme fashion. The Torah relates the episode of the Tribes of Reuven, Gad and half of Menashe asking to be given their portion in the Trans-Jordan. Moshe allows them to receive their portions there, but only after crafting a conditional allocation predicated on their participation in the conquest of Israel. The Talmud (Gittin, 75a) uses this agreement as the source for the legal construct of *t'naim* (conditionals).

To give an example, suppose a couple chooses to get married, but the pragmatic pair wants to make sure that their asset portfolio will provide them with the dream life they anticipate. The act of marriage could theoretically be done conditionally, with an arbitrary event, such as attaining a specific net-worth, determining after the fact if they are in fact married. The marriage ceremony takes place, the happy couple starts their lives together, the Fed raises interest rates, the couple's net-worth plummets lower than the specified amount – and boom-- the marriage never existed.

The Brisker Rav explains that the logic underlying this is that we have the power to insert a new clause into the actual machinery of the marriage ceremony. This applies throughout acquisitions, ritual declarations, and acts of observance. We are given the power through speech to manipulate, to some extent, the spiritual machinery of the Universe. Even more of a demigod-like quality than slaying the Hydra.

We are given these powers to enable us to fulfill our mission as partners with G-d in creation. Our task on this Earth is to take a proactive role in the spiritual development of our world and for this mission, we need a divine toolkit. Appreciating the power, we all

have should motivate a fantastic feeling for the responsibility to utilize our strengths to further our mission in this world.

Good Shabbos,

Rabbi Shlomo Agishtein