

The ability to communicate through language is a powerful tool. Once uttered, words cannot be unsaid, and the Torah constantly warns against misusing this gift. Hence, oaths and vows are very serious matters. We preface Yom Kippur with *kol nidre*, a legal formula in Aramaic that absolves us from vows and oaths made under duress, in error or ignorance, or which are impossible to fulfill. There is an essential difference between oaths and vows. Vows (*nedarim*) deal with promises we make to HaShem to abstain from something (wine and hair cutting for Nazirites, for example), or to perform a certain deed (Jakob's vow in Genesis 28:20-22). The varied aspects of vows take up an entire Talmud tractate, called *Nedarim*. Because breaking vows is subject to severe penalties, our sages found it best to avoid making them. That is why some observant Jews say *b'li neder* (without vow) when making a promise. Oaths (*shevuot*), which are the topic of another, shorter tractate called *Shevuot*, are between individuals in a court of law in civil, but not in criminal cases. They invoke HaShem, but they are solely between human beings. They may contain a self-proclaimed curse, which we know today in its trivialized form: "I'll be damned if I do/will." The story of the suspected adulteress in Numbers 5:19-22 and the lists of curses in Parashiot Bechukotai and Ki Tavo are some of the Torah's most graphic examples of curses. Our parashah contains one of two instances of oaths enacted by having the person swearing the oath place his hand under the *yareikh* (hip, upper thigh, buttocks, genitals) of the person administering it. Both are intended to ensure that a person's dying wish will be upheld. Here, Abraham entrusts his servant with the task of finding a suitable wife for Isaac (24:2-9). Later, Jakob will make Joseph swear to take his remains out of Egypt when he leaves (47:29-30). Because the word *yareikh* (ירך) has so many meanings, opinions vary on what part of the body was actually meant. In the 19th century Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch believed that it was the thigh or buttocks, because they touch the ground first when one lies down. "Therefore, the man about to swear the oath shows the dying man that he can rest in peace, trusting to the power of the swearer's hand." (*The Hirsch Chumash: Bereshit*) We find examples of this usage in the aftermath of Jakob's wrestling match, when he limps "on his hip/thigh" (32:31-32), and in Judges 3:16: "And Ehud made for himself a sword with two edges ... and he girded it under his clothing on his right thigh." However, the word is also a euphemism for the male genitals (testicles) which is the likely origin of the word testament. In a discussion on how to refer to HaShem when administering oaths in a court of law without using the Ineffable Name, Tractate *Shevuot* 38b cites our parashah: "... one is merely required to take an oath using an appellation of God. And the practical ramification is ... that one must grasp a sacred item in his hand (Abraham instructing his servant to grasp his circumcised penis)." Rashi agrees: "Since one who makes an oath must hold in his hand an object with which a commandment is performed, such as a Torah scroll, mezuzah, or tefillin, and since circumcision was his first commandment and he fulfilled it with pain, it was dear to him and he took it to make the oath." For Abraham and Jakob, their circumcised penises were the only "object" available. The importance of reproduction for the individual, and through him the family, is another aspect of this practice. Upon his death, a man with no progeny would disappear without a trace. Indeed, because my sister and I have no grandchildren, our paternal grandfather's family will disappear when we die. This is why levirate marriage (obligating the brother of a deceased man to marry his widowed sister-in-law in order to maintain his brother's family) was practiced for so long. As we know, King David descends from the levirate marriage of Ruth with her kinsman Boaz. Levirate marriage was so important that it too, is the topic of an entire Talmud tractate. No matter what part of the oath-giver's anatomy was used to perform the oath, one who did not uphold his oath could be punished with the inability to father children, a mortal blow indeed. The hand, the other component in oath taking, is also highly significant. The root סמך (to lean, or rest on / to support) appears in cultic practice whenever people or animals are consecrated. During the investiture ceremonies in Leviticus 8 hands are laid on the heads of the sacrificial animals. Pressing hands on the head of an animal signified both ownership and transfer, such as those who had heard the blasphemer laying their hands on his head before he was stoned (Leviticus 10-14), and transferring the confessed sins to the scapegoat. On Yom Kippur morning we reenact the latter in the *Avodah*, and Leviticus 16, which describes the procedure, is traditionally read in the Torah service. Laying hands also transfers authority from teacher to student. In Numbers 27:23, Moses confers leadership upon Joshua by laying his hands on him, and the early rabbis bestowed authority on their students in similar fashion. Today, rabbis, and in some denominations also cantors, are ordained in a *semikhah* ceremony. I still get goosebumps when I think of Hazzan Jack Kessler z'l along with other beloved teachers ordaining me with the words, "May your hands be like ours; your mouths, our mouth; your voices, our voice; your songs, our song; your prayers, our prayer; your blessings, our blessings. And so we ordain you, and call you Hazzanim and Baalei T'fillah in Israel." As a *musmachah* I am a link in an unbroken chain that began in the Torah, and it is my sacred duty to honor this august lineage through my own song, speech, and deed. It is a tremendous responsibility, and I pray to always be worthy of the trust placed in me.

Shabbat shalom!