

PRECOMMITMENT DEVICES



PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAT MATTOS
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Parshat Mattot begins by introducing the laws of vows and oaths. “When a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said” (*Bemidbar* 30:3). Oaths function to up the ante on commitment. By taking an oath, a person raises the stakes if he or she does not follow through. A person can even decide, the Talmud notes, to take an oath to perform or not to violate a commandment (*Nedarim* 8a). This is so even though the person is already obligated by the Torah commandment. The oath functions as an even more intense motivator than the original Biblical law.

In his classic work *Michtav Me-Eliyahu*, Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler elucidates the psychology behind taking an oath to comply with a *mitzvah* (4:237). At times, he writes, we become aware of our own laxness in Torah observance and we want to self-correct. Often, we try to fight this desire or weakness head on, but in the moment the *yetzer hara* is too powerful and we fail. The fix for this circumstance is to force our hand and avoid the self-control battle in the first place. We need to construct the situation in such a way where we are forced to comply. The classic Biblical way to accomplish this is through an oath. People viewed oaths with such awe and trepidation that adding an oath to a desirous behavior was generally a strong enough intervention to force self-compliance.

Already in times of Chazal, the reverence extended to oaths diminished, so their usage was frowned upon. People would make oaths but still fall short. As a consequence, not only would they violate a regular commandment, but on top of that they would also violate the oath. Yet, even though we generally abstain from taking oaths, figuring out other ways to up the ante and solidify our commitment is essential. We need to think of ways, Rabbi Dessler suggests, to in effect bind ourselves to our commitments without taking an oath. As an example, if someone is struggling to learn Torah, he or she could commit to giving a *shiur* on a topic that requires further research. The pressure to give a powerful presentation will force the person to study.

In the psychological literature on self-control, this concept is called a precommitment device. In a 2002 research article, Israeli-born psychologist Dan Ariely and Klaus Wertenbroch define such a strategy as the “voluntary imposition of constraints (that are costly to overcome) on one’s future choices in a strategic attempt to resist future temptations.” The oft-cited paradigm of this technique in Greek mythology is Ulysses, who tied himself to a mast so that he could not be lured by the song of the Sirens.

Precommitment devices can potentially help with many self-control battles including procrastination, eating unhealthily, drinking too much alcohol, and over-spending. If we spend too much time scrolling through social media instead of working on that important project, we can explore various software programs that would block our internet or social media access for a set period of time. If we know that every time we go to a certain restaurant we end up choosing an unhealthy option, we could precommit to a better choice by going to a restaurant with a less tempting menu.

Whether the goal is to improve our self-control, increase the amount of *mitzvot* we accomplish, or decrease the amount of *aveirot* we violate, we can look to the message behind oaths, and conceive of different ways to bind ourselves to improvement by precommitting to progress.

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