

Keeping Promises that You've Made
Rabbi Daniel Gropper
Kol Nidre, 5778

On the last day of his life which according to tradition was also his birthday- Moses said to the children of Israel, "I am a hundred and twenty years old this day; I can no more go out and come in." (Deut. 31:2). While he is far from 120, very healthy and very much with us, in Mid August Rabbi Rothman called me and essentially said what Moses did. I can no longer stand on the bima and offer the sermon on Kol Nidre.

He asked me to share the following with you: "Dear congregants and worshippers; As has been the case for many years, Rabbi Gropper has graciously invited me to offer the sermon on Yom Kippur Eve. I have declined to do so since my health this year has not been commensurate with my willingness. This day I will be in prayer side by side with my wife, Miriam, and those of my children, family and you, our congregants. My heartfelt prayer remains centered on my hope that we all will meet again next year to continue drawing closer to God through our tradition's teaching, with prayer, penitence and tzedakah. Doing so, we extend our life and enhance the meaning of our being. Shanah tovah to each of you and to your dear ones." Rabbi, we are glad you are with us. May you, may all of us live, not to 120, to Meah V'Esrin but to Meah **K'Esrin**, to 100 like we are 20.

In 1930s America, when our Rabbi Emeritus was a young boy, young Jewish artists had few places to publish their work. Because of the antisemitism inherent in the newspaper industry, these young Jews did what Jews have often done. They turned to members of their own tribe for support. They found Jews who would publish their work. Thus the comic book

industry was born, with a particular focus on superheroes.



In fact, nearly all the great superheroes were created by Jews: Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created Superman, Joe Simon and Jack Kirby created Captain America, Bob Kane and Bill Finger invented Batman, while Kirby, together with Stan Lee produced a particularly impressive line of heroes such as Spider-Man, The Hulk, the Fantastic Four, Ironman, the X-men, Thor and the Avengers.

While not necessarily religiously observant, these artists all became bar mitzvah. Eking out a living in the Depression, especially as a graphic artist, was very hard. They probably didn't make it to shul all that much. But the one night they would come would be tonight, Kol Nidre, a night of vows, a night of making promises.

Between hearing that prayer on an annual basis and knowing the value Judaism places on keeping vows and oaths, it is perhaps no accident that the one characteristic these comic book authors embedded in their *ubermenschen*, in their heroes is the ability to make and keep a promise.¹ Whether it is Bruce Wayne, who witnesses both of his parents die in front of him and vows, to avenge their deaths by spending the rest of his life warring on criminals, and becomes Bat Man; or Peter Parker who is unable to stop his Uncle Ben from being killed, learns that with great power comes great responsibility and vows that as Spiderman, his role is to fight for good; the ability to make and keep a promise is what ties all superheroes together. Making a promise is easy. It's a particularly human act as it allows us to dream of a different future. But keeping a promise. That's harder. Of course, as we grow in soul, as we choose to be heroes the potential exists for us all.



¹ <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/the-psychology-behind-superhero-origin-stories-4015776/>

Of course, there's an irony to the notion of promise we make tonight. We don't vow to make and keep a promise, l'havdil, the opposite. We offer a prayer that annuls vows. "May our vows not be vows. May our oaths not be oaths." And yet, who among us, in the darkened quiet of this room, does not make some sort of promise? Who among us doesn't quietly say things like, "this year I'm going to come to services more often. Or study more Torah. Or volunteer more hours. Or give more to tzedakah. Or finally make that pledge to our Kadima campaign I've been meaning to make. Or bring flowers home on Friday afternoon for my spouse. Or listen more carefully to what is being said. Or be kinder, gentler, compassionate... even vulnerable? Who among us hasn't said these sort of things here? Tonight? To make and keep a promise. It's an act that makes us human.

Besides with 613 commandments to observe, would Judaism let us off so easily? I don't think so. So why the need to annul vows before we've even taken them? I think it says more about us than about the vows themselves.

Rabbi Naomi Levy, in her wonderful new book *Einstein and the Rabbi* writes, "We all start life off with an open, curious, loving heart, and then inevitably we get hurt. Life can be cruel. Someone lets you down, someone shames you, betrays you, someone breaks your heart, someone abandons you. God does not answer all your prayers. So we start making vows - mostly about the things we won't do - *I'll never get fooled like that again. I'll never talk to him*

again. I'll never forgive her for what she did to me. I'll never put myself on the line like that again. And there are vows that we make about God too: I'll never pray again.

“These vows we make, we take them to heart. We take them into our hearts and slowly, day by day, year by heart, that open, curious heart gets turned to stone” It’s what happened to Pharaoh. “It makes sense, doesn’t it? Who wants to get hurt like that again?” And we stop making promises. Or we make them. But we know that if we don’t keep them, it really won’t matter. We say things like, “Oh sorry. My bad,” without thinking how our renegeing on our promise hurts others, hurts the balance of the universe... because our hearts have turned to stone.

Rabbi Levy continues, “Of course, there is only one problem with our plan. The heart of stone isn’t just armor that protects us from incoming attacks. It also makes us less receptive to incoming love and surprise and blessings. And the heart of stone prevents all the goodness inside our souls - all that love and forgiveness and joy and spontaneity and romance - from ever getting out.

“We become cautious, controlling, judgmental, cynical and rigid. We find ourselves living within a very carefully defined range of emotions: happy/sad, interested/bored. But your soul is capable, your soul is aching to experience its full range of emotions. And that’s why I believe we recite the Kol Nidrei prayer each year.



We come together to annul those vows we made that have caused our hearts to constrict.² To allow us, at the Prophet Ezekiel³ taught, to turn our heart of stone into a heart of flesh - to soften ourselves, to allow ourselves to become more curious, more loving and to allow us, in that openness, to make promises worth keeping, to make promises we can keep. When we do, when we keep our word, even when it's really hard we can, as the Psalmist declares, "dwell in God's house, we can reside upon God's holy mountain."⁴

We know that keeping promises are hard. For example: Over 40% of Americans regularly make New Year's Resolutions but studies show that only 8% actually keep them⁵. While the divorce rate has declined since the 1980s, huge numbers of marriages in American end in divorce. And then there those elected to govern us... We laugh and snicker. We know that breaking political promises is as American as baseball and apple pie.

² Naomi Levi, Einstein and the Rabbi, p. 133

³ Ezekiel 36:26

⁴ Psalm 15

⁵ <http://www.statisticbrain.com/new-years-resolution-statistics/>

And here's a truth. Making unrealistic promises often helps to get you elected because those promises tell people what they want to hear. But when it comes to governing, those same unrealistic promises can hurt you, especially if they remain vague and lack clarity.

Perhaps this is why I am so incensed about the freezing of the Kotel agreement by the Israeli government last June. This was a political promise made by the Israeli government to the Jewish people. It was anything but vague.



In January 2016, the Israeli cabinet agreed to a plan that would have redesigned the *Kotel* plaza and created an egalitarian space for women and men to pray together near Robinson's Arch instead of granting us the second-rate, hidden prayer space that currently exists. This was a milestone for compromise and unity. It meant that I could stand at that Wall, that Wall that has heard so many prayers and felt so many tears, with my mother, with my wife, with

my daughter. Yet, on June 25, the Israeli cabinet capitulated to extremist pressure and froze its agreed-upon plan.

As vocal critics from Jewish circles on both the right and the left have maintained, Prime Minister Netanyahu's succumbing to ultra-Orthodox pressure is a tragic selling-out and betrayal of non-Haredi Jews for the sake of political expedience. It is something Theodore Herzl warned against 120 years ago⁶. Reneging on the Kotel compromise is an abandonment of the principle of *klal yisrael*. It is also a rejection of Zionism itself, which is premised on the idea of collective Jewish peoplehood⁷.

Israel's Declaration of Independence states this clearly, "The State of Israel will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of *all* its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to *all* its inhabitants *irrespective* of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee *freedom of religion*, conscience, language, education and culture." The founders of our Jewish homeland made promises to all of us. Members of the Israeli cabinet walk by the original version of that declaration every day. They are bound by the promises made by a previous generation.

Thankfully, other governmental bodies understand the weight of making a pledge. On August 31, the Supreme Court of Israel strongly recommended that the Government "defrost" the agreement. In fact, Chief Justice Miriam Naor bluntly emphasized this in her words: "You

⁶ Herzl, *The Jewish State* 1986

⁷ See the Israeli Declaration of Independence: https://www.knesset.gov.il/docs/eng/megilat_eng.htm

conducted negotiations, you reached an agreement for an outline — but then during the legal proceedings, you made a fuss and said ‘it’s being frozen.’ There is legal process, it’s not a matter of doing whatever you want whenever you want... An agreement that is ‘frozen,’ can also be thawed.” Chief Justice Naor essentially said, “you made a promise. You have to keep it.”

I realize that most of us will never make aliyah but we do have a stake in the kind of country Israel can be and we can ask Israel to fulfill the promises she makes to us. The Talmud says that every Jew has four cubits in the land of Israel. This means that my nine square feet, my Jewish space is as valid as every other Jew’s. It’s up to us to decide if we want to abdicate our Judaism to the Ultra-Orthodox or if we want to do something about it. 100 years ago the Balfour Declaration stated, “His Majesty’s Government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the *Jewish people*.” I think Lord Balfour had all Jewish people in mind, not just those who dress a certain way.

So what can we do? I’ve read that American Jewish money flowing to Israel amounts to more than 5% of Israel’s GDP. That’s a huge amount of leverage. The question is, if and how we want to use it. Some⁸ suggest that we stop sending money to Israeli hospitals; that we stop sitting in meetings with Israeli diplomats; that we stop flying El Al and opt for United or Delta instead. I disagree. It plays into the hands of those who want to delegitimize Israel. Can’t you just see the headlines, “Jews boycott Israel!”

⁸ <http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/How-to-make-Israelis-care-498301>

That said, I believe we do have leverage. We can double down our donations to organizations that speak to our values as Reform Jews: ARZA, IMPJ, Women of the Wall. And we can go farther. While I applaud UJA/Federation of New York's commitment to promote pluralism in Israel and to work to sensitize the Israeli public to the importance of these issues for the Jewish diaspora⁹, what if we approached that same Federation leadership and demanded an itemized accounting of where our donation dollars go? Why should my annual contribution to Federation go to organizations in Israel who seek to undermine my very existence as a Jew? The Torah states that you shouldn't put a stumbling block in front of a blind person. When it comes to my donations to Israel, I want to do so with eyes wide open.

If Bibi Netanyahu continues to claim that he is the Prime Minister of the entire Jewish people he must become something of a superhero. Doing so must begin with him keeping his promises. To do so will require infinite fortitude and moral courage, something that guides most superheroes.

This moment in Jewish life is about a two-way street of pride, strength, and vitality understanding how the two largest Jewish communities of the world are deeply interconnected and interdependent. It can happen but it will require a leader who can unite instead of divide, who can create an ethic of we instead of us and them.

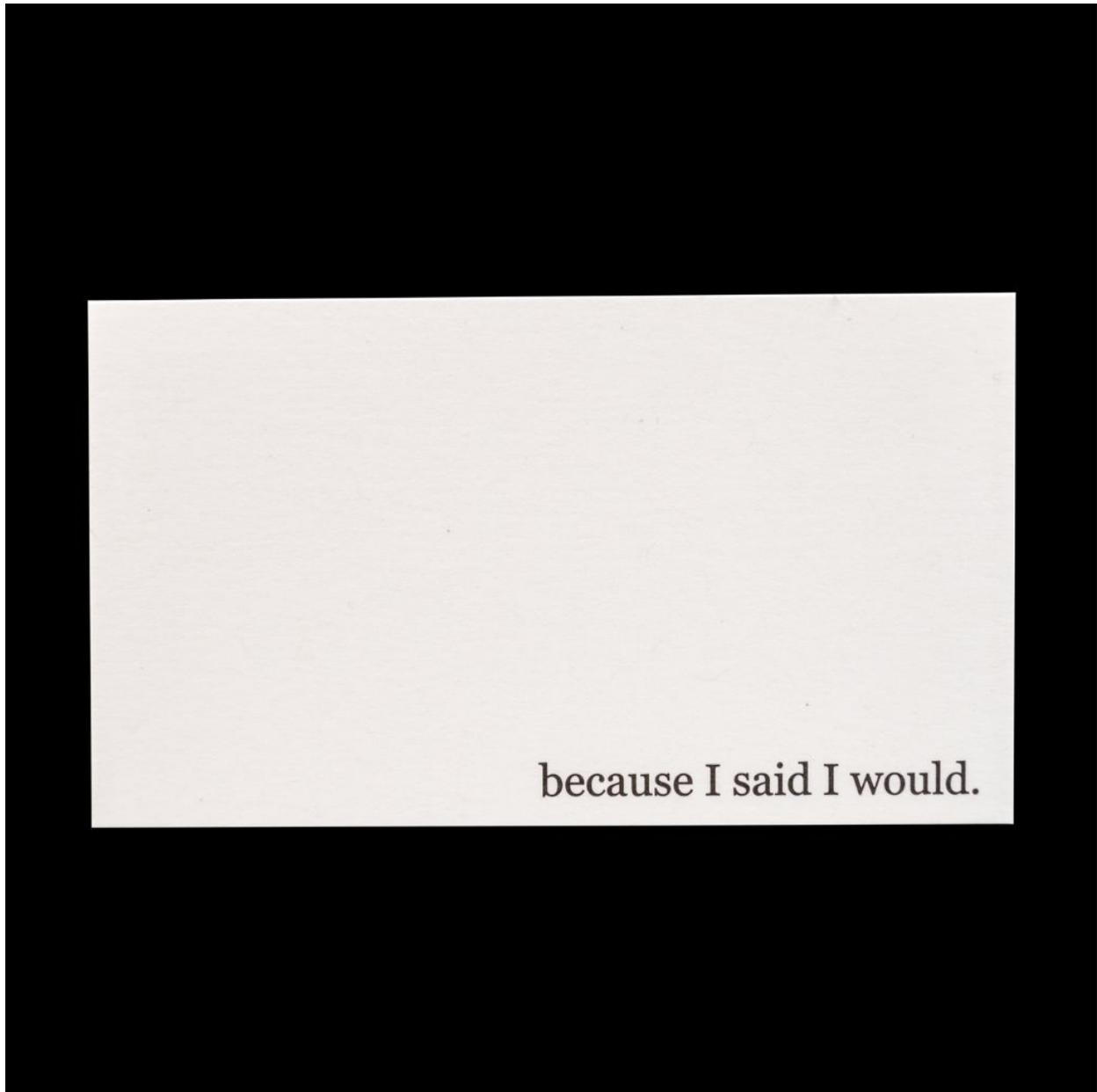
⁹ http://www.ujafedny.org/news/because-israel-is-the-homeland-for-all-jews/?j=29465539&sfmc_sub=787769020&l=2378254_HTML&u=397034725&mid=113902&jb=0&utm_medium=ET_email&utm_content=danielgropper@me.com&utm_campaign=September-15-2017_18_MessageFromOurCEO_WhatHappensinOneWeek_9_15_2017_SendTwo_Priority&utm_source=18_MessageFromOurCEO_WhatHappensinOneWeek_9_15_2017_SendTwo_Priority

It is hard to keep promises because at their heart, promises are behavior changes, or at least intended changes. As we know, maintaining the changes we make in our lives is hard. It's so easy to slide back into old patterns. As a local psychologist put it to me, "When we proclaim our commitment to a change and make a promise, at times we are pushing ourselves into a stage of change that we may not be ready for just yet. So we can make the promise. But unless our motivation to really keep that promise, that change, is a motivation that is felt deep in our soul, it's hard to follow through." Easy to say, "I'll quit smoking," but unless the reality that you might die is put in front of you and you really internalize it, why do it? Same with exercising or studying to get good grades or even taking your spouse out on a date.

Making a promise is hard because it requires a leap of faith. And I know that Faith isn't easy for some of us. Faith invokes questions of God, belief, science versus religion. But if you boil it down, making a promise is nothing more than saying to another or saying to yourself, have faith in me. Believe in me. Trust me. Many of us did this when at one time or another we said to our beloved, "I do. I will." The ability is within us.

The Psalmist asks, "O God, who may live in your Holy Tent? Who may dwell on your Holy Mountain?" And he answers, "Those who are upright; who do justly; who speak the truth within their hearts; who do not slander others, or wrong them, or bring shame upon them... Who give their word, and come what may, do not retract." Who give their word and do not retract. Who keep their promises. On this night of making vows, how might we begin to live in such a way so that we, "can live in God's Tent?" So that we can "dwell on God's Holy Mountain?" And

perhaps, so that when the voice of inner child wells up from within, saying “*but you promised,*” we will hearken to it?



In preparing for the sermon I came across an interesting organization called Because I Said I Would. Because I Said I Would was founded by a young man named Alex Sheen who left his corporate job to pursue a life of philanthropy and service. One of the simple things he did was to create this card (show card) where at the bottom are the words “because I said I would.” The

idea is that you take a card, write down a commitment you're making, hand it to someone else or take a picture of it and post it on social media. Studies in fact show that the best way to keep promises is to do two things: make a concrete action plan to do it and tell someone else about your plans.¹⁰ Failure to honor explicit commitments recorded on our calendars or made to another creates enough discomfort and embarrassment that we tend to accomplish our intentions

The promises we make don't have to be huge. The promises we make should be ones we can keep. That you will not text and drive. That you will take control of your calendar. That you will bring a smile to a love one's face. Maybe it will be of greater magnitude like supporting refugee families or advocating for sane immigration policies. Perhaps you will commit to cleaning up hundreds of pounds of trash that wash up on our beaches, that you will register for the National Bone Marrow Registry or provide dinner for grieving children. Whatever it is, what you write on your card is something you will do because you said you would. I ordered 900 of these cards. They are waiting for you on the way out. Take one, take more than one, write down a promise to yourself, and if you like, between now and when you go to sleep, take a picture of it and text it or email it to me. Many of you have my email address or my cell number because over the last two years you received birthday or anniversary messages from me. On this day where we engage in self-examination, thinking of promises made, promises kept, and where we missed the mark, I will be able to share some of these promises tomorrow from this bimah, anonymously, of course... just as a way of reminding ourselves that we are responsible for one another

¹⁰ Beyond good intentions: Prompting people to make plans improves follow-through on important tasks. Behavioral Science & Policy, December 2015

Yes, people still make and keep promises. They choose not to quit when the going gets rough because they promised once to see it through. They stick to lost causes. They hold on to a love grown cold. They stay with people who have become pains in the neck. They still dare to make promises and care enough to keep the promises they make. I want to say to you that if you have a ship you will not desert, if you have people you will not forsake, if you have causes you will not abandon, then you one are one who can dwell in God's house, you are one who can sit on God's holy mountain.

Writer and theologian Lewis Smedes says: What a marvelous thing a promise is! When a person makes a promise, she reaches out into an unpredictable future and makes one thing predictable: she will be there even when being there costs her more than she wants to pay. When a person makes a promise, he stretches himself out into circumstances that no one can control and controls at least one thing: he will be there no matter what the circumstances turn out to be. With one simple word of promise, a person creates an island of certainty in a sea of uncertainty.

When a person makes a promise, she stakes a claim on her personal freedom and power. When you make a promise, you take a hand in creating your own future. This Yom Kippur, this year, be a super hero. Be that promise... because you said you would.