

“Circles of Responsibility”

Rabbi Jonathan Freirich

Temple Beth El, Charlotte, NC

Parashat Matot 5771 - Saturday, July 23, 2011

On the occasion of Gabriel Hansen’s Bar Mitzvah

Rabbi Judy spoke last night of the power of vows in this week’s portion, and the antiquated ideas of men being able to veto a woman’s vow. Let’s look at another aspect of these laws.

The Torah tends towards a strong degree of sexism, and we egalitarian Jews often find it jarring. Reading for a different lesson, we might see that the nature of these relationships teaches us also about the nature of communal protection and responsibility.

Yes, a woman’s father, and then her husband, as it reads in Numbers, Chapter 30, can annul her vows, providing he does so quickly. Should the man keep silent, not protest, for a full day, then he must abide by the vows made by the woman.

Remembering that Ancient Israelite society holds a man responsible for all the people in his household, including the women, allows us to see this in a different context. The man must agree to whatever obligations the woman makes, because in that society the ultimate responsibility for the welfare of the household was not shared, the man bore it alone.

In truth, this follows the way of all obligations and contracts - agreements of any sort do not occur in a vacuum. A vow impacts those around us. When we get called upon to uphold that agreement, we may have to subtract from the rest of our life - sometimes money, sometimes time, sometimes objects - and that subtraction will force changes upon those with whom we share our lives.

An egalitarian relationship often benefits from clear communications and discussions about obligations entered into - how we spend our free time and our money, for example. Time and effort obligated outside of a parent’s relationship with a child clearly changes the nature of the time and effort that the parent can offer the child.

In each of these cases, we show loyalty and responsibility to those around us through thoughtful engagement and maintenance of our obligations. We create a circle of responsibility through which we celebrate and attend to the value we place in each other.

When we act responsibly or irresponsibly we can alter each other’s lives drastically.

I heard a story on NPR about a 59-year old Jordanian-American professor, Omar al-Omari. Al-Omari wasn’t just any professor though, he ran a Muslim outreach program for the State of Ohio that the Department of Public Safety considered so effective at combating Muslim extremism, that officials in Washington sent al-Omari overseas to promote it.

In the course of a training on anti-terrorism given to the Columbus Division of Police in April 2010, the instructor, who was neither certified nor vetted by other anti-terrorism officials or experts, named al-Omari as a person with links to terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Hamas. One of the most visible Muslims in Ohio, who had worked closely with law enforcement throughout the State, had now been fingered as a person of suspicion, and despite everyone in the room knowing him, al-Omari's reputation would never recover. This led to al-Omari's firing, on account of the tiny matter of omissions in his application to the State of Ohio. He had left off courses he had taught that he considered irrelevant to the position for which he applied. This would be recommended procedure for any of us putting together a resume.

The head of training at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point identified this as part of larger problem: "The Muslim-American community is being preyed upon from two different directions. One, the jihadist recruitment and radicalization that is actively preying on their sons and daughters; and two, the elevated levels of Islamophobia — Islamophobia at worst and distrust and alienation at best."

When a person known by others gets impugned to the point of losing their livelihood because people don't honor their obligations to another community member - even when those obligations may be nothing more than honestly reporting on a person's integrity, a circle of responsibility has been broken.

All of those people who knew al-Omari failed him by allowing someone to abuse his reputation in public. Jews call this *lashon hara*, evil speech, and we see it as a serious violation of the circles of responsibility between all of us.

Gabriel, on the other hand, you have upheld your responsibilities today. Everyone here knows the seriousness with which you have fulfilled your obligations to yourself, your family, your friends and your Beth El community. By so profoundly completing the work of your Bar Mitzvah, you honor your relationships. You show us that you understand the weight of responsibility that comes with being a young adult, and we celebrate that and wish you and your family a hearty *mazal tov*!

I feel most honored to share the *bimah* with you, to call you a fellow Jew, and to include you, and be included by you, in a circle of supportive responsibilities for each other and for all of us here today.

*Mazal tov* again, and Shabbat Shalom.

[The NPR news piece mentioned here can be found at this link:

<http://www.npr.org/2011/07/18/137712352/terrorism-training-casts-pall-over-muslim-employee>]

