I HAVE TAKEN AN OATH BEFORE GOD
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Temple Sholom – Vancouver BC
February 7, 2020

Harei at mikudeshet li b'tabat zo kidat moshe v'yisrael

"I do"

"I'll pay you back by Thursday. I promise."

"The person whose signature appears above agrees to repay the debt according to the terms of the credit card agreement."

"I swear that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Queen of Canada, her heirs and successors, and that I will faithfully observe the laws of Canada and fulfil my duties as a Canadian citizen."

"I swear that in all things appertaining to the trial of the impeachment of Donald John Trump, president of the United States, now pending, I will do impartial justice according to the Constitution and laws, so help me God."

How many promises do each of us make every day? What kinds of solemn, binding oaths do we routinely witness? How are our decisions constrained by agreements we have made with other persons — or with commercial enterprises like banks, credit card issuers and insurance companies?

How many of us have made a vow like this: "Please, G-d, let my loved one recover. If he (or she) comes back to us, I promise I will never, ever, ever…," or "…always, always, always…"?

I have most frequently taught that Judaism is a religion of action not creed. In Jewish tradition what you think and what you say generally are inconsequential in the eyes of God, we are judged on what we do.

As I've shared with you before, the question we are asked when we die according to the Talmud is not do you believe in God, did you pray and attend synagogue, rather the question we are asked in our final judgement is were you honest in your business dealings. Implied in that is were you a person of integrity? When given the opportunity to take advantage of a client did you do the right thing.

Judaism is a moral ethic; it focuses on behaviour not belief.

BUT there is one great exception, we take vows and oaths really seriously, or at least we are commanded too.

Numbers Chapter 30 begins with a discussion of vows and oaths. It reads, "that if a man makes a vow to the Eternal or takes an oath imposing an obligation upon himself, he shall not break his pledge; he must carry out all that has come out of his mouth".

The prohibition on swearing falsely is one of the Ten Commandments. And an entire tractate of the Talmud, Nedarim, deals with the laws of vows.

The Talmud states that the punishment for breaking a vow is the death of one's children. The Shulchan Aruch, a later codification of rabbinic law explicitly warns people not to regularly make vows, and states that someone who does — even if they fulfill the vow — is called wicked and a sinner, because they increase the risk that they will violate this most sacred of commandments. Many observant Jews have the practice of saying *b'li neder* ("without a vow") whenever they promise to do something to make explicit that they are not making a vow.

Given the seriousness of oaths and vows, and the fact that Jews during some periods of history were compelled to make declarations of fealty to other religions, the rabbis developed formulas for the dissolution of vows. The best-known of these is Kol Nidrei performed in advance of the High Holidays.

The prayer literally means All Vows and it was created to free the individual from thoughtless promises they made before God, vows that we make between one another, the Kol Nidrei does not remove the obligation until you go to that person and seek forgiveness from them. Yes not keeping your word to another is as grave a sin in Judaism as all of the horrible acts we normally associate with sins and bad behaviour.

And so it was that this past week I watched with true respect and admiration as US Senator Mitt Romney, a Republican from the very Red State of Utah, cited his deeply held Mormon faith with explaining why he would vote to convict the president of the United States on the first count of impeachment, abuse of power.

I have no desire to talk about the president or his actions, the impeachment or the politics around it. Enough has already been said and it is quite clear to me that people only hear what they want to hear on that subject. BUT I do want to talk about the incredible example of what the great mid 20th century American rabbi, Joseph Soloveitchik, once called "The Lonely Man of Faith" – the title of his master work.

In it Soloveitchik explores the example of the biblical Adam in the Garden of Eden, and identifies the struggle we all must undergo as human beings in this ethereal existence of life that is both spiritual and material, mystical and scientific, redemptive yet empowered.

Are we here to master over the world, accountable to no one but ourselves, or are we here in the garden to tend and to till the soil, contractually bound to God and constrained by that relationship, guided and directed in our actions?

Romney's answer and that of Jewish tradition is clearly the latter. We are not free to just do as we please, we are in covenant with God, there are rule to life that we must follow, some of those are set by God and some, vows and oaths are set by human beings but witnessed by God. In the eyes of Judaism and in the eyes of Senator Romney that is a distinction without a difference.

If one makes a vow or an oath before, it is said before God and it is as binding on the one who makes it as any of the commandments in the Torah. BTW for our Lutheran visitors here tonight, Judaism counts 613 commandments in the Hebrew bible, 613 times God says do this or don't do that. The 10 commandments are just one collection of some of them, and arguably Jewish tradition says those are not necessary the most important, it's not a Top Ten List.

In his passionate and courageous speech on the floor of the US Senate Romeny declared,

"As a senator-juror, I swore an oath before God to exercise impartial justice. I am profoundly religious. My faith is at the heart of who I am. I take an oath before God as enormously consequential. I knew from the outset that being tasked with judging the president, the leader of my own party, would be the most difficult decision I have ever faced. I was not wrong. …But my promise before God to apply impartial justice required that I put my personal feelings and political biases aside. Were I to ignore the evidence that has been presented and disregard what I believe my oath and the Constitution demands of me for the sake of a partisan end, it would, I fear, expose my character to history's rebuke and the censure of my own conscience."

There are moments when witnessing another person's heartfelt practicing of their faith, affirms my own. This was for me, this week one of those moments. When a Mormon, conservative Republican reminded me of the power of words, the covenant we have with God and the charge we are all given as human beings to be worthy of being created, *Btzelem Elohim***,** in God's image.

Sen. Romney went on to say that he knew his vote would be but a footnote in the annals of history, that it would not change the verdict on the president's actions and would undoubtably result in political retribution. And indeed all of that has already proven to be true, but his vote and his reasoning behind it, that he took an oath before God to apply impartial justice which required that he put his personal feelings and political biases aside; did something that is far greater than a footnote. He taught all of us, because I think few give much heed to the whole vows and oaths section of the Torah or the Talmud on a daily basis. He taught all of us that we are accountable for our actions if not in this world and lifetime then we will be held accountable in the world to come. We are not free agents, free to make up our own rules, and to change them as we see fit so as to win the game.

To life a life as a Moral Ethic as Judaism demands is to not only aspire to a high standard but to hold our selves accountable to that standard, in word and in deed. And I will say this which is perhaps over the line but I think it needs to be said, had the president or for that matter many of the politicians at the center of the events surrounding the president's actions held themselves to that standard, had they valued their oath of office or of service as faithfully as Sen. Romney did Wednesday evening, and as the civil servants and military officers who courageously and honourably stepped forward because of their oath, because of their sense of duty, had those other characters in this Faustian drama similarly honoured their oath I am certain that this whole chapter in American history would have been written very differently, indeed it may never have needed to be written at all.

This 2500 year old book and tradition – it is not irrelevant, it is not entirely out of step with the times, it's not perfect, that is true also but as a moral code, it still has much to teach us; I pray that we are wise enough to heed its lessons, particularly now.