

# Mattot-Massei | Promises, Promises | Dr. Jon Levisohn (Faculty)

Inbox

Thu, Jul 12, 2018, 2:59 PM

*BronfmanTorah: commentary on the Torah that draws on the lives, skills, and insights of our community*

[View this email in your browser](#)

## Promises, Promises

Dr. Jon Levisohn | BronfmanTorah | Mattot-Massei 2018

*This summer, we are bringing you divrei torah written by the 2018 Bronfman Fellowship educational team.*

*The second contribution in this series is written by Dr. Jon Levisohn, who is teaching a five-session shiur on Autonomy and Obligation. Fellows will study texts from the Tanakh, from the rabbinic tradition, from philosophy, and from modern Jewish thought to help make sense of the tension between these two forces, and to envision ways to embrace both.*

**Jon A. Levisohn** is a professor of Jewish education at Brandeis University, where he directs the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education. An alumnus of the Wexner Graduate Fellowship program, he holds graduate degrees from Stanford University and a BA from Harvard College. He began his career as a teacher in

*a Jewish day school in Marblehead, MA. He lives in Newton Centre, MA, with his wife Emily Beck, a public school teacher, and his two teenagers.*

The first part of this week's Torah reading, known as *Parashat Mattot*, begins with a focus on vows.

*Moses spoke to the heads of the Israelite tribes, saying, 'This is what the Lord has commanded. If a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath imposing an obligation on himself, he shall not break his pledge; he must carry out all that has come out of mouth.'* (Numbers 30:2-3)

Vows, according to the Bible, are to be taken seriously. This is particularly true in the ancient context where vowing had a formal quality—when people took vows by invoking the name of God—but surely it is true for us as well. We ought to be careful when we make promises. Promises have a kind of sacred quality, or at least, they ought to.

Indeed, vows and promises are a fascinating location where free will and obligation meet in one moment. To make a promise, one must have free will. If someone “makes” me promise something, if I am coerced into uttering a vow, then I haven't really committed myself to it. I can legitimately claim that I have made no promise at all. But at the same time, the very act of promising—of uttering words to another person—brings an obligation into being. From that point forward, my freedom is limited by what I myself have said.

In fact, making a promise is an astonishing act of courage and conviction. How do I know what the future will bring? How do I know whether something, or someone, or I myself, will get in the way of my fulfilling the promise? The answer is, I don't. But I make promises anyway.

Moreover, consider the fact that, typically, we make promises to other people—our spouses, our children, our friends, etc. In those situations, the power of the promise rests on the strength of that relationship. We are not always able to fulfill those promises, of course. We're human; we fail. But the reason those failures are so painful is a direct product of the fact that we are in relationship with someone to whom our promise matters. They are not just disappointed that we didn't make it to performance in time or that we didn't return the phone call; they are disappointed in *us*, disappointed in what our failure means in terms of our relationship. In other words, promise-making is a marker of independence, but it is also a marker of interdependence.

In the modern world, we have a tendency to think that independence and obligation are in conflict. Either we are free or we are constrained. And moreover, we tend to associate secularism with the former and religion with the latter. In other words, we think about the way that modern secularism opens up a space for us as individuals to make free choices about how to live our lives, whereas religion seems committed to promoting conformity—doing things the way they've always been done, or how they are "supposed" to be done, whether we as individuals want to live that way or not. There is certainly some truth to this characterization.

But what this characterization misses, I think, is the way that human independence and obligation actually co-exist. Whether we are religious or not, we act independently—but also within a structure of interdependence. We are autonomous agents, making decisions for ourselves—and we are shaped by the norms of our culture(s) in deep and profound ways. We feel free—and we feel called.

In my shiur with the Fellows this summer, we are exploring the twin ideas of autonomy and obligation, studying some classical Jewish texts, some political philosophy, and some modern Jewish theology. We are disrupting the assumptions

that tradition is about obligation with no autonomy and that modernity (or secularism or liberalism) is about autonomy with no obligation. And throughout, I will be providing opportunities to think about the ways that our experience reflects both of these modes—both a sense of freedom and autonomy, and a sense of obligation and calling. I promise!

[Share](#)

[Tweet](#)

[Forward](#)

***Continue the conversation. Send Dr. Levisohn your thoughts:***

[levisohn@brandeis.edu](mailto:levisohn@brandeis.edu)

***P.S.: We're always looking for more dvar torah writers. Interested? Contact [stefanie@byfi.org](mailto:stefanie@byfi.org). We look forward to hearing from you.***

---