

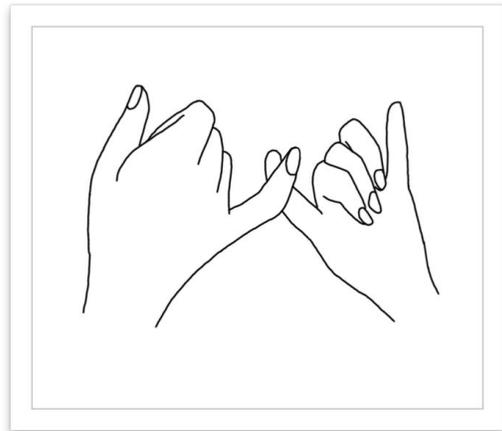
## Pinky promises and Unbreakable Vows

*Text 1 – by an anonymous but fairly handsome synagogue development manager*

“If you’ve taken the nazirite oath,”  
Moshe Rabbeinu has quoth,  
“You must not drink wine  
Or eat fruits of the vine,  
And your hair will see substantial growth.”

*Text 2 – Numbers 6:1-5*

God spoke to Moses, saying: “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘If anyone, man or woman, explicitly utters a nazirite’s vow, to set themselves apart for the Eternal One, they shall abstain from wine and any other intoxicant; they shall not drink vinegar of wine or of any other intoxicant, neither shall they drink anything in which grapes have been steeped, nor eat grapes fresh or dried. Throughout their term as nazirite, they may not eat anything that is obtained from the grapevine, even seeds or skin. Throughout the term of their vow as nazirite, no razor shall touch their head; it shall remain consecrated until the completion of their term as nazirite of the Eternal One, the hair of their head being left to grow untrimmed.’”



### *Text 3 – Rashi, Mishneh Torah, Nezirut, c 1180*

If one says: “I am a nazirite from dried figs” or the like, they are forbidden to partake of the article specified, but they are not a nazirite.

If a person who is as drunk as Lot says, “I am a nazirite,” they are not a nazirite. If they are as drunk as Lot their statements are of no consequence and they are not liable for any transgression.

When a person takes a nazirite vow inadvertently or is compelled to take one by forces beyond their control they are exempt.

If the person says: “I know that a nazirite is forbidden to do the above, but I thought that it would be permitted for me to drink wine, because I cannot live without wine,” they are not a nazirite, because their vow was made in error.

When a person says: “My hand is a nazirite,” or, “My foot is a nazirite,” their words are of no consequence. If, however, they say: “My head is a nazirite,” or, “My liver is a nazirite,” they are a nazirite. Whenever a person designates as a nazirite an organ whose removal from a living person would cause them to die, they are a nazirite.

A nazirite vow can take effect in the following situation: Two people were walking on the road and saw another person approaching them. One of the said: “The person approaching us is Shimon.” The other said: “He is Reuven.” The first replied: “I will become a nazirite if it is Reuven,” and the second responded: “I will become a nazirite if it is Shimon.” If he reaches them and he is Reuven, the first is a nazirite. If it is Shimon, the second is a nazirite as per the vows. If the person did not reach them, but instead turned backward and disappeared from their sight and they did not discover his identity, neither of them are nazirites.

### *Text 4 – Student Rabbi Deborah Blausten, 2016*

This parasha is about vows. We make vows all the time, from mundane business transactions to not-so-mundane marriage proposals. These vows, the Torah tells us, are binding. They are not to be broken. Or at least, that is, unless they are made by a woman.

For, as the Torah details, the vows of women and girls can be annulled by their fathers or their husbands – depending on whose jurisdiction they are under. Male custodians have 24 hours to annul a vow a woman makes, after which time it stands: plenty of time to pull back an unruly woman from whatever trouble she’d got herself into through the dangerous exercise of her own free will.

So, how do we deal with a text like this, seemingly a lesson in patriarchy and denying women’s agency?

One crucial detail for me is the fact that whilst the Torah tells us that women's vows can be annulled, it doesn't instruct that they should be. It places a huge amount of power in the hands of the men in the story, but does not prescribe how they use that power.

The lesson I take from our text is rooted in this: as much as this parasha is a lesson in patriarchy, it also contains a lesson in what it means to be an ally, to acknowledge the role you can play in someone else's liberation.

When we hold positions of power and privilege we can wield those over others, or we can use that power to give them a voice.

### *Text 5 – Nazir 33b*

A group of people came across a koy, an animal which they were not sure how to classify.

- One of them said: "I am hereby a nazirite if this is a non-domesticated animal."
- A second individual said: "I am hereby a nazirite if this is not a non-domesticated animal."
- A third person said: "I am hereby a nazirite if this is a domesticated animal."
- A fourth said: "I am hereby a nazirite if this not a domesticated animal."
- A fifth person added: "I am hereby a nazirite if this is a non-domesticated animal and a domesticated animal."
- A sixth person said: "I am hereby a nazirite if this is neither a non-domesticated animal nor a domesticated animal."
- A seventh person, who heard all the above statements said: "I am hereby a nazirite if one of you is a nazirite."
- An eighth individual stated: "I am hereby a nazirite if not one of you is a nazirite."
- Finally, a ninth person said: "I am hereby a nazirite if all of you are nazirites."

In this case, [REDACTED] are nazirites.

*Text 6 – J K Rowling, ‘Harry Potter and the Half-blood Prince’, 2005*

“Certainly, I shall make the Unbreakable Vow,” Snape said quietly.

“Will you, Severus, watch over my son?”

“I will,” said Snape. A thin tongue of brilliant flame issued from the wand and wound its way around their hands like a red-hot wire.

“And will you, to the best of your ability, protect him from harm?”

“I will,” said Snape. A second tongue of flame shot from the wand and interlinked with the first, making a fine, glowing chain. A third tongue of flame shot from the wand, twisted with the others, and bound itself thickly around their clasped hands, like a rope, like a fiery snake.

“What does it mean?” asked Harry.

“Well, you can’t break an Unbreakable Vow...”

“I’d worked that much out for myself, funnily enough. What happens if you break it, then?”

“You die,” said Ron simply.

*Text 7 – Joseph Raz, ‘Is there a reason to keep a promise?’ 2014*

The value of a promise is that it expands people’s ability to fashion their lives, or aspects of their lives, by their actions. Through their promises they commit themselves to others. Promises are ways of opening up options through closing other options.

Promises facilitate undertaking complex activities (giving a ball, writing a symphony, etc) that require a series of actions or concerted actions. Promises, being commitments to others, facilitate cooperation, the forging of relations that presuppose dependence, trust and joint actions, and more.

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