We Are the Promises We Make
Parshat Va’era 5769
By Rabbi Mark Greenspan

Promises: we all make them. But we don’t always live up to them. Someone once said that “Promises are like babies: easy to make but hard to deliver.”

Politicians make promises to the people, parents to their children, and spouses to one another. Religion is filled with promises for which we patiently wait but which we won’t see fulfilled in our lifetime. One might define religion as ‘promises deferred.’ We define our faith not by what we believe about God but by our willingness to trust that God will someday fulfill His promises to us.

But keeping a promise is not always an easy thing to do. There is a practice among pious Jews of saying b‘lee neder, “without a promise,” any time they make a statement of intent, no matter how trivial. They’ll say, “I’ll meet you for lunch tomorrow, b‘lee neder.” Or, “I’ll call you next week, b‘lee neder.” It’s not that we don’t believe in keeping our promises…its just that we can’t always do so, either because of a lack of resolve, human weakness, or because of conditions beyond our control. Promises, however, define us: our ability to live up to the words we speak is a statement of our character and integrity.

Promises figure prominently in today’s Torah portion. One of the strangest features in Parshat Va’era is that God introduces himself to Moses for the second time. Just a chapter or two before, Moses asks God, “When I come to the Israelites… and they ask, ‘What is God’s name,’ what shall I say?” God answers in a somewhat enigmatic fashion: Eheyeh asher eheyeh, “I’ll be what I’ll be.” A few verses later, God instructs Moses: “Tell Pharaoh: “Adonai, the God of the Hebrews, has manifested Himself to me…” While we pronounce God’s name as Adonai, which means “My Master,” it is written as Yud-Hay-Vav-Hay or YHWH as it is pronounced by bible scholars. The name of God Yud-Hay-Vav-Hay comes from the same Hebrew root as Eheyeh, Aleph-hay-yud-hay. Both words have a core meaning “to be” – Who God is the one who “is,” the one who is defined by the promises He makes and fulfills.

As our parshah opens, Moses has just had his first unsuccessful encounter with Pharaoh. Rather than freeing Israel, Pharaoh punishes the people by increasing their labors: he tells them that they must gather their own straw for their quota of bricks. Discouraged and his confidence shaken, Moses is furious with God. “Why did you send me,” he asks, “Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name he has dealt worse with this people – and still you have not delivered them.” Moses is angry. From his perspective God failed to keep His promise.

But, then, God never promised Moses that it would be that simple!

How does God answer Moses? “I am Adonai! I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob but I did not make myself known to them by the name Adonai.” What a strange statement this is! First, God has already told Moses his name. So why does God have to tell him again. And second, Adonai appears dozens of times in the book of Genesis, so how could God say that ‘he did not make himself known by this name?’
Rashi, the commentator, explains that God introduced himself a second time because he was about to reveal the full intent and meaning of this name. ‘Adonai,’ implies that what makes God, God, is that we can count on Him - He always fulfills His promises.

Our Torah portion teaches us that it’s one thing to make a promise. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were happy to receive promises from God but they knew that these promises would not be fulfilled in their life time. God now says: “I am Adonai – I not only make promises; I fulfill them. That’s what makes ME who I am!!!”

The truth is sometimes even God disappoints us. It’s not that we don’t believe in God – I suspect that there actually very few true atheists in the world. The problem for many of us is not that God doesn’t exist at all but whether God keeps His promises – or at least what we perceive as God’s promises.

Sometimes we feel as though God has let us down. Life is filled with disappointments and bitter ironies. Sometimes our expectations are not realistic and sometimes we have good reason to feel that God has failed us. One of my professors at the Seminary, Rabbi Moshe Zucker was a deeply religious man. He used to say, however, that he was b’royges with God, that he had a quarrel or a disagreement with God. Dr. Zucker felt that God had let him down – he lost most of his family in the Shoah, in the Holocaust.

That’s what makes God’s statement in today’s Torah portion so powerful. “I am Adonai,” is directly connected with the fulfillment of promises. At the Passover Seder we celebrate the fulfillment of God’s promises by drinking four cups of wine in commemoration of the four promises that follow in this passage: “I will take you out from beneath the labors of Egypt,” “I will deliver you from their bondage,” “I will redeem you with an outstretched arm,” and “I will take you to be my people.” The Seder (which is still several weeks off) reassures us that God can be counted on.

One might say that both God and human beings are defined and measured not only by the promises they make but the promises they keep. “God puts his name on the line,” so to speak. In affect, what God tells Moses and the people of Israel is, “If I don’t live up to the promises I made to your ancestors and to you then I don’t deserve to be known as “Adonai.”

The same can be said to be true for us. We are only as good as the promises we keep. Too often we make promises in a moment of excitement and passion – we often have second thoughts when we reconsider these promises at a later, more circumspect moment. But promises cannot be withdrawn so easily. Even ‘Kol Nidre’ which we recite on the eve of Yom Kippur can’t get us off the hook. It can only affect the promises we make to God – not to our neighbor – and even that was problematic. The rabbis were deeply ambivalent about the recitation of this statement – this ambivalence is reflected in a contemporary poem that was added to our High Holiday liturgy:

All the vows of our lips,
The burdens in our hearts,
The pent up regrets about
Which we brooded and spoke
Through prayers without end
on last Atonement Day
Did not change our way of life
Did not bring deliverance
In the year that has gone.
From mountain peaks of fervor
We fell to common ways at the close of the fast

Will you hear our regret?
Will you open our prison,
Release us from the shackles of habit?
Will you accept our prayers, forgive our wrongs,
Though we sin again and again?

In moments of weakness
We do not remember
Promises of Atonement Day
Recall that we easily forget
Take only our hearts intent, forgive us pardon us….

Jonathan Swift once said that, “Promises and piecrusts are made to be broken.” I’d like to suggest something different: a world in which we cannot count on the words of the people around us is a world without trust. And a world without trust simply can’t exist.

Children learn to trust the world around them to the extent that the trust their parents. When we disappoint our children we teach them that the world is not reliable. By the way – that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t make promises to our children; just that we do so cautiously and carefully. Marriage is built on trust. Whether we do so in words or in sentiment, a marriage is built on our ability to live up to the promises we make to one another.

And politicians make or break their careers based on the promises they make and fulfill in public office. It worries me more than a little that our forty fourth president has made more promises than any politician in recent history. At last count he made more than five hundred promises during the campaign (compared with 188 by George W Bush). If there are high expectations in Washington it is because our Commander in Chief has created them with all his promises.

I’d like to suggest this morning that becoming a Bar or Bat Mitzvah is also about making and keeping promises. It’s not simply about reading a Haftorah or giving a good speech. It is about recognizing that each of us is part of a promise made to future generations. It is not enough to be proud to be Jewish – one must live up to that pride by being a part of the Jewish community, by making the practice a part of Judaism a part of one’s life, by pursuing justice and kindness, and being present in spirit and person. A Bar or Bat Mitzvah’s identity is not measured by what they do on this day but what they will do on the next day. Without a continued commitment to Jewish life, the promises are empty and meaningless.

So as we begin a new year, I’d like to suggest that we need to keep two important thoughts in mind. First, that who we would like to be can be defined by what we are prepared to promise. And second, who we really are can be measured by the promises we actually keep.

May this year be one of fulfilled promises; and may we each have the strength to bring ideal and reality together in all the promises we make and in the way we live.

Shabbat Shalom