



Na'aseh V'Nishma: The Duality of Jewish Experience

Sarit Anstandig, Midreshet Yom Rishon

Sponsored by Aubrey Abrams

Also sponsored by Grace Zweig in memory of her sister, Malvina bat Tzvila

1. שמות פרק כד - Exodus Chapter 24

ג וַיבֹא מֹשֶׁה, וַיְסַפֵּר לָעָם אֵת כָּל-דִּבְרֵי ה', וְאֵת, כָּל-הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים; וַיַּעַן כָּל-הָעָם קוֹל אֶחָד, וַיֹּאמְרוּ, כָּל-הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר ה', נַעֲשֶׂה... ז וַיִּקַּח סֵפֶר הַבְּרִית, וַיִּקְרָא בְּאָזְנֵי הָעָם; וַיֹּאמְרוּ, כָּל אֲשֶׁר-דִּבֶּר ה' נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע.

3 And Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD, and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said: 'All the words which the LORD has spoken we will do'...

7 And he took the book of the covenant, and read to the people; and they said: 'All that the LORD has spoken we will do and we will hear.'

2. תלמוד בבלי מסכת שבת דף פה עמוד א - Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat 88a

אמר רבי אלעזר: בשעה שהקדימו ישראל "נעשה" ל"נשמע" יצתה בת קול ואמרה להן: מי גלה לבני רז זה שמלאכי השרת משתמשין בו? ... ברישא "עשי", והדר "לשמע".

אמר רבי חמא ברבי חנינא: מאי דכתיב "כתפוח בעצי היער וגו'" — למה נמשלו ישראל לתפוח, לומר לך: מה תפוח זה פריו קודם לעליו, אף ישראל הקדימו "נעשה" ל"נשמע".

Rabbi Elazar said: When the Jewish people accorded precedence to the declaration "We will do" over "We will hear," a Divine Voice emerged and said to them: Who revealed to my children this secret that the ministering angels use?... At first, the angels fulfill His word, and then afterward they hearken.

Rabbi Hama, son of Rabbi Hanina, said: What is the meaning of that which is written: "As an apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. Under its shadow I delighted to sit and its fruit was sweet to my taste" (Song of Songs 2:3)? Why were the Jewish people likened to an apple tree? It is to tell you that just as this apple tree, its fruit grows before its leaves, so too, the Jewish people accorded precedence to "We will do" over "We will hear."

"נעשה" בבחינת הכח הגופני ששלמותו בפועל מורגש. ו"נשמע" בבחינת הכח השכלי

"We will do" referring to physical ability which is fulfilled in tangible action. And "we will hear" referring to intellectual capacity

4. R. Aharon Lichtenstein, "We Shall Do and We Shall Hear," Har Etzion Virtual Beit Midrash

Admittedly, the Torah requires that a person sacrifice not only an offering, but sometimes also his human intelligence and understanding on the altar of Torah observance. It is inconceivable that a person might perform only those commandments that he understands, or only those to which he accedes. Ultimately, however, what God desires is not blind obedience, but rather that we understand and internalize the values that underlie His commandments.... The level of understanding that is required of each person has been subject to debate throughout the generations, as reflected, for example, in the controversy over finding reasons for the *mitzvot*. Ultimately, though, we accept that God is not looking for robots to serve Him. Rather, He seeks true servants who serve Him out of an understanding and internalization of His values - not only "we shall do," but also "we shall hear."

5. R. Jonathan Sacks, "Doing and Hearing," *Covenant and Conversation*

The modern Western mind tends to put things in the opposite order. We seek to understand what we are committing ourselves to before making the commitment. That is fine when what is at stake is signing a contract, buying a new mobile phone, or purchasing a subscription, but not when making a deep existential commitment. The only way to understand leadership is to lead. The only way to understand marriage is to get married. The only way to understand whether a certain career path is right for you is to actually try it for an extended period. Those who hover on the edge of a commitment, reluctant to make a decision until all the facts are in, will eventually find that life has passed them by. The only way to understand a way of life is to take the risk of living it. So: *na'aseh venishma*, "We will do and eventually, through extended practice and long exposure, we will understand."

6. ספר החינוך מצוה טז - Sefer Ha'Chinuch, Law 16

דע, כי האדם נפעל כפי פעולותיו, ולבו וכל מחשבותיו תמיד אחר מעשיו שהוא עוסק בהם, אם טוב ואם רע. ואפילו רשע גמור בלבבו וכל יצר מחשבות לבו רק רע כל היום, אם יערה רוחו וישים השתדלותו ועסקו בהתמדה בתורה ובמצוות, ואפילו שלא לשם שמים, מיד ינטה אל הטוב, ומתוך שלא לשמה בא לשמה, ובכוח מעשיו ימית היצר הרע, כי אחרי הפעולות נמשכים הלבבות. ואפילו אם יהיה אדם צדיק גמור ולבבו ישר ותמים, חפץ בתורה ובמצוות, אם יעסוק תמיד בדברים של דופי... ישוב בזמן מן הזמנים מצדקת לבו להיות רשע גמור. כי ידוע הדבר ואמת, שכל אדם נפעל כפי פעולותיו.

A person is influenced by his actions, and one's heart and thoughts follow the acts he does, whether they are good or bad. Even one who is a completely wicked person, who constantly thinks of doing bad deeds, if he is inspired for the better and puts time into fulfilling Torah and mitzvot, even if it is not for the sake of Heaven, he will turn to the good and he will overcome his Evil Inclination through the power of these actions, since the heart follows the actions a person does. Similarly, even if one is a completely righteous person who desires Torah and mitzvot but always involves himself in bad deeds... after a certain amount of time he will become a wicked person, for we know, and it is true, that every person is affected by his actions.

7. Dr. Noam Shpancer, "Action Creates Emotion," *Psychology Today*

Many people assume that the link between emotion and behavior is one-way: Emotions shape behavior. You love him, therefore you kiss him. You hate him, therefore you hit him. This view is incorrect. In fact, the relationship is reciprocal. Much of the time, behavior actually shapes emotion. Ever wonder why so often the actor and actress who play a couple in a movie fall in love on the set? Multiple processes are involved, to be sure. Both are usually young and attractive. They have much in common. They hang around each other a lot. All these are known predictors of mate selection. But they also do love scenes together. They have to act like people who care deeply for each other. They look into each other's eyes, they touch each other. They act out the behaviors of love. No wonder the emotion of love often follows... Behavior can create emotion. Recent research in clinical psychology has shown that the fastest way to change an emotion is to change the behavior attached to it.

8. R. Jonathan Sacks, "Doing and Hearing," *Covenant and Conversation*

Judaism is a community of doing rather than of "hearing." There is an authoritative code of Jewish law. When it comes to halakhah, the way of Jewish doing, we seek consensus.

By contrast, though there are undoubtedly principles of Jewish faith, when it comes to spirituality there is no single normative Jewish approach. Judaism has had its priests and prophets, its rationalists and mystics, its philosophers and poets. Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, speaks in a multiplicity of voices... There are norms about how to act as Jews. But there are few about how to think and feel as Jews.

We experience G-d in different ways... We can find G-d on the heights and in the depths, in loneliness and togetherness, in love and fear, in gratitude and need, in dazzling light and in the midst of deep darkness... That is the difference between na'aseh and nishma. We do the G-dly deed "together." We respond to His commands "with one voice." But we hear G-d's presence in many ways, for though G-d is One, we are all different, and we encounter Him each in our own way.

9. *Silver From the Land of Israel: A New Light on the Sabbath and Holidays from the Writings of Rabbi Avraham Isaac HaKohen Kook*, by Rabbi Chanan Morrison

What was so special about this vow, "We will do and we will listen"? On the contrary, would not fulfilling mitzvot with understanding and enlightenment be a superior level of Torah observance? And why does the Midrash refer to this form of unquestioning allegiance as a "secret used by the angels"?

While wisdom is usually acquired through study and contemplation, there exists in nature an intuitive knowledge that requires no formal education. The bee for example, naturally knows the optimal geometric shape for building honeycomb cells. No bee has ever needed to register for engineering courses at MIT.

Intuitive knowledge also exists in the spiritual realm. Angels are sublime spiritual entities who do not require extensive Torah study in order to know how to serve God. Their holiness is ingrained in their very nature. It is only human beings, prone to being confused by pseudo-scientific indoctrination, who need to struggle in order to return to their pristine spiritual selves. For the Jews who stood at Mount Sinai, it was not only Torah and mitzvot that were revealed. They also discovered their own true, inner essence. They attained a sublime level of natural purity, and intuitively proclaimed, "We will do." We will follow our natural essence, unhindered by any spurious, artificial conventions.

10. רשב"ם על שמות כ"ד:ז - Rashbam, Commentary to Exodus 24:7

נעשה ונשמע - נעשה מה שדיבר וגם נשמע מה שיצונו עוד מכאן ולהבא ונקיים.

"We will do and we will hear" - we will do what He has spoken, and also hear and obey what He will command us in the future.

11. R. Yaakov Beasley, "Hearing and Doing," Har Etzion Virtual Beit Midrash

When the Jewish people stated, "We shall do and we shall hear," they expressed a desire to go beyond the simple fulfillment of the commandments ("*Na'aseh* - we shall do" alone). "*Nishma* - we shall hear," meant that they would hold themselves ready at all times for further revelations or understandings of what God wanted. They would commit themselves to listening for not how to perform the commandments, but also how to ensure that their performance of the commandments corresponded to God's will....

As a person grows spiritually, what was once hidden from him ("*nishma*") becomes revealed ("*na'aseh*"); yet simultaneously, a new area of hiddenness emerges before him. Again, the constant quests for growth, the desire to reveal the hidden truths that permeate our relationship with God become embodied within the Jew's faculty of hearing. This desire, to encounter both the revealed and the hidden, becomes the hallmark of the Jew who proudly states "*na'aseh ve-nishma*."