

Shabbat Mishpatim 5782

"Naaseh V'Nishma-We will do and we will..."

Shabbat Shalom!

My friend's birthday is on July 24th. Too bad they were born in America. If they were born in Europe, their birthday would be... 24/7!

Joking aside, these two well-known numbers do express a total and complete commitment. Because together, 24/7 communicates a perpetual 'on' switch. When a business says its service is available 24/7, it's a sign of commitment to the customer. You want a plumber that's 24/7 because they are there when you need them for that midnight basement flooding. And when a friend tells you, "I'm here for you 24/7," you feel the fierce commitment of that friend. Only close friends might say that. In short, 24/7 are vital numbers, which is why they are easy for us to remember.

The Torah is the source of the week containing 7 days, but it does not speak of 24 hours. So it is pure coincidence that verse 24/7 is significant and expresses unwavering commitment of its own. What *Pasuk* do we read in Exodus chapter 24:7?

"Then [Moses] took the record of the covenant [that is, the Torah] and read it aloud to the people. And they said, 'All that the L-rd has spoken *Naaseh V'nishma*.'"

"*Naaseh V'nishma*" - those are important words, to say the least. It basically means, "count us in." But it's more than that. I deliberately did not translate those words in the verse because they can be translated in different ways. The first word "*Naase*" means "we will do." That's simple. But the second word "*V'nishma*" can mean several things: We will listen/we will understand/we will obey. Depending on how we translate the word in the verse, we discover a new understanding of what this important phrase means.

First, let me share the classic and dominant Orthodox interpretation of this phrase. The Artscroll Humash translates "*Naaseh V'nishma*" as "We will do and we will obey." At this moment, the Israelites pledged to do whatever G-d commanded them, as seen by the emphatic repetition of a word conveying action. The Rabbis understand this declaration to be placed out of chronological order, to actually occur right before G-d gave the Torah in Exodus 20.

As the Midrash says, "*And [the Children of Israel] said, 'all that G-d has said we will do and we will hear, since they had initially prioritized doing. Moses said to them, 'Is doing possible without understanding? Understanding brings one to doing.' They then said, 'We*

*will do and we will understand,' [meaning] 'We will do what we understand.' This teaches that the people said 'na'aseh v'nishma' before receiving the Torah."*

The upshot of this commitment from the Israelites was that they pledged to obey G-d's Mitzvot *even before* G-d actually specified them. That's how committed to G-d they were after the miracles of Egypt. Truly this is a sign of love and commitment. Imagine this: you need a big favor from a friend, and you approach them and say, "I have a big favor to ask from you." And before you can continue, your friend says, "Consider it done. I'll do it. What do you need?" Your friend just demonstrated tremendous love for you. That's what happened here at Sinai, when the Israelites said "*Naaseh V'nishma.*" The *commitment* is front and center.

While I admire parts of this Orthodox interpretation, I am also captured by a related Conservative take on this verse, as shared in our Etz Hayim Humash. In our book, the phrase "*Naaseh V'nishma*" is translated as, "We will faithfully do." The two verbs reinforce the singular commitment to action. The commentary below the line teaches that it's best to creatively interpret the phrase to read, "we will do and then we will understand": "The Israelites could have responded, as most would today, 'we will seek to understand and, if we are persuaded, we will agree to do them.' Instead, having met G-d in Egypt, at the sea, and at Mount Sinai, the Israelites trusted that G-d's demands would be reasonable and in their best interest. Just as we accept medicine from our physician on trust, without understanding what it is or how it works, and commit ourselves to marriage, to parenthood, and to a career as acts of faith before we fully understand what they entail, so too the Israelites accepted G-d's will. There are many things in life that we cannot appreciate before we have lived them and come to appreciate their value. We must do them first - "*Naaseh*" - and only afterward realize why - "*V'nishma.*"

I think this is such an important idea, to try to do a Mitzvah even before we understand everything about it. I get that they can seem intimidating, but the Mitzvot are achievable - they're not in the heavens. For some rituals and Mitzvot, we will make discoveries from the inside that we cannot see from the outside. This reminds me of when I started fully keeping Shabbat after high school. Someone close to me asked me in college, "Why don't you go out and socialize on Friday nights? That's the big night on campus. Isn't Shabbat a barrier here?" I told them, "No, Shabbat is the most social day of the week for me. I see lots of people at Hillel every Friday night and at synagogue on Saturday morning. Shabbat makes my day *more* social, not less, because when I am not able to leave campus, I find others nearby." This person had my best intentions in mind, but because they were not Shomer Shabbat themselves, they couldn't internalize what the experience was actually like. Perhaps this is what Heschel means when he demands a "leap of action" rather than a "leap of faith." Sometimes we just have to *do* it before we can understand it, and *then* we

will understand from the experience. *“Naaseh V'nishma.”* The *order of these verbs* is front and center.

Perhaps there's a ritual or Mitzvah - even a small one - that you have considered adding to your life but hesitate for one reason or another. Consider jumping in, and giving it a try. You will learn as you go and as you grow.

My own interpretation adds another layer to this - “we will do, and then we will seek out understanding.” I think the Torah is telling us that we must complete these actions and commandments, and continually seek to understand why even afterward. If we don't understand why we do a certain Mitzvah, like sitting in a Sukkah, we still have work to do. We should not do things by rote. The Mitzvot are not a grocery list to check off once we do them. Instead, we should always seek out explanations for the myriad rituals and traditions that we have. *“Naaseh V'nishma”* is a call for us to always seek out knowledge and to ask “Why do we do X? Why don't we do Y?” For me, the *process* is important.

When we do both *“Naaseh V'nishma”* together, that's the sweet spot. Here's a Midrash that compares the Israelites at the time to angels.

“At the moment when the Jewish people said first ‘We will do’ and then ‘We will understand,’ a heavenly voice went out and said to them, ‘Who revealed to My children this secret, employed by the angels?’”

Rabbi Jill Jacobs explains: “Just as the angels know first to obey and then to understand G-d's word, so too the Jewish people have somehow intuited this divine secret and therefore have proven themselves as meriting the Torah, previously the exclusive property of the divine realm. Accordingly, in the Talmud, the angels respond to the people's words by crowning each member of the Jewish people with two divine crowns, one for *“na'aseh”* and one for *“nishma.”*

Talk about a royal crown!

Rabbi Ronen Neuwirth of Israel tried to zoom out and take in all of this together. He wrote an article two years ago claiming that *“Naaseh V'nishma”* as classically understood to convey total subjugation to G-d, is a major challenge to Jews today, even the Orthodox. He points out, “Unqualified obedience, however, is quite literally the opposite of today's post-modern spirit, which offers boundless pluralism and moral relativism, unlimited possibilities, and endless freedom.” He's correct indeed. The response, I believe, is to continually reinterpret the stories and laws of the Torah, as we have done today. As Ben Bag Bag says in Pirkei Avot (5:22), “Turn it and turn it again, for everything is in it.”