

“The Parsha Discussion” by Rabbi Alex Israel

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Blind Faith or Informed Commitment?



- Who is the greater believer, the person who follows God blindly, or an individual who makes well-reasoned, informed decisions?
- Is commitment to God supposed to be a “leap of faith,” a jump into the absurd; or does Judaism embrace instead cognition and reason?

Our parsha ends with one of the most famous declarations ever stated by the Jewish nation: “נעשה ונשמע - Naaseh ve-Nishma – We will do and we will hear” (Exodus 24:6). But the order is awkward. Usually we “listen,” and after consideration and possibly further investigation, we “do” – we move to action. Why does Israel reverse the normal order of things? This textual observation is the stimulus for a celebrated reading of this statement:

R. Simla lectured: When the Israelites gave precedence to ‘we will do’ over ‘we will hear,’ six hundred thousand ministering angels came and set two crowns upon each man of Israel, one as a reward for ‘we will do,’ and the other as a reward for ‘we will hear’ ... a Heavenly Voice went forth: “Who revealed to My children this secret, which is employed by the Ministering Angels?” (Talmud Shabbat 88a)

This text assumes that the statement “Naaseh ve-Nishma” is made prior to God’s revelation at Mount Sinai, before Israel have heard God speak. Israel expressed absolute commitment to the law – “we will do” - well before they had heard its content. The Talmud views this submission, this blind acceptance as a mark of Israel’s deep commitment, a most admirable trait that is usually expressive of ministering angels.

- What are the virtues of the attitude exhibited here by the Jewish people?
- When is it good to express compliance before even hearing the task? (- children to parents? A loving spouse?)
- What are the dangers of this stance?

But there is an alternative, quite divergent understanding of “Naaseh ve-Nishma”. It emerges from a read of the biblical account of the Book of Shemot/Exodus, in which it appears that the people have absolutely heard the Law prior to their statement:

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³Moses went and told the people all the commands of the Lord and all the Mishpatim; and all the people answered with one voice, saying, “All the things that the Lord has commanded we will do!” ⁴Moses then wrote down all the commands of the Lord. Early in the morning, he set up an altar at the foot of the mountain... and they offered burnt offerings and offerings of well-being to the Lord... ⁷Then Moses took the record of the covenant and read it aloud to the people. And they said, “**All that the Lord has spoken we will do and we will hear!**” ⁸Moses took the blood ... and said, “This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord now makes with you concerning all these commands.”

This is a covenantal ceremony in which the nation express their commitment to God’s Torah. But Moses takes every step to ensure that Israel are fully informed. First (v.3) he tells them the Law, and after they express their initial acceptance, he documents the laws in a scroll and orchestrates a national covenant ceremony. It is at this occasion that nation declares “Naaseh Ve-Nishma!” Rashbam interprets it in the following manner

“we will carry out what God has said already, and we are also prepared to listen (obey) to what He will command from here on in.” (Rashbam)

“**We will do** all that has been written, and **we will hearken** to (observe) them always” (Ibn Ezra)

For Rashbam and Ibn Ezra, the people made an informed choice. First, they had “met” God, experiencing His presence at Mt. Sinai. Next they had listened to his laws and comprehended God’s demands. Now they state their agreement to God’s obligations, and their trust regarding laws that He may impose from this point on.

So let’s discuss this:

- What are the strengths of each approach – blind acceptance or informed commitment?
- In your observance of your Judaism, which interpretation of “Naaseh ve-Nishma” is closest to your mindset?

Personally, I love the Rashbam’s approach. I do not like getting into situations I do not anticipate. I always watch the trailer of a movie before I see it and I read reviews of a play before I attend. I love the fact that God respects Israel, and wants Israel to make an informed commitment to the law with in a state of total awareness. It gives our covenantal commitment to Torah greater depth; it pictures God as fully transparent as he builds this foundational agreement with Israel.

And yet, my Judaism is also characterised by a commitment to Halakha and the Jewish people that is absolute. We are not autonomous, and our submission to God reflects the blind “Naaseh ve-Nishma”. After all, no individual identifies with every one of Judaism’s laws. We all have details that we cherish and embrace, and others that we struggle with. Our sense of obligation does, at times, precede our rational understanding.

These two readings are both part of our Judaism. The unique hybrid of blind and transparent, of human autonomy twinned with national submission to God, these discordant hues become the beautiful tapestry of Israel’s covenant with Torah and with God Himself.

Shabbat Shalom!