

Parashat *Mishpatim*: *Na'aseh V'Nishma*

By Rabbi Judith B. Edelstein

Mishpatim introduces us to and expands upon the daily responsibilities of what the divine spirit envisions will create a holy society. Following the *Asseret Dibrot*, the Ten Commandments, in last week's *parasha*, *Yitro*, a detailed legal system dependent upon the individual's adherence, is laid out this week. The expectation is that the uprightness of everyone would coalesce into a just and compassionate sovereign nation.

“If human beings act in consonance with the commandments, they uplift not only themselves but also the world.”¹

Last week in *Yitro* “Moses came and summoned the elders of the people and put before them words that God had commanded. The entire people responded together and said, ‘Everything that God has spoken we shall do...’” (Exodus 19:7) This week when Moses reads the “Book of the Covenant” to the people at Mount Sinai, they respond similarly: “Everything the Lord has said we will do, and we will obey” (Exodus 24:7). In Hebrew, this is the famous phrase *na'aseh v'nishma*, which is often translated as “we will do and we will hear/listen.”

The phrase *na'aseh v'nishma* is unique because it puts doing (*na'aseh*) before hearing/understanding (*nishma*), signifying a commitment to act on faith before fully comprehending the details. This concept of acting before knowing goes against the grain of many contemporary Jews, who rarely commit to undertaking an action prior to understanding its ramifications.

Several *middot* come to mind when contemplating the circumstance of acting before knowing: *emunah* / faith, *bitachon* / trust, *zerizut* / enthusiasm, *charitzut* / decisiveness, etc. And yet this renowned Hebrew phrase *na'aseh v'nishma* rings out as a clarion call of our tradition. Visions of thousands of Israelites in white togas, their eyes shining with tears of awe, fear, and joy, bowing in supplication and exultation dance before my eyes. Which *middah* prompted them, I wonder, to agree before they knew, much less understood, what they were signing up for?

On a mundane level, today, how many of us make an impulsive online purchase without knowing the origins, quality, or impact of the item on our environment; or sign up for a panoply of products and/or services about which we have limited knowledge, only to regret it, or even worse, not be able to cancel the subscription? Can you identify the *middah* that underlies your impulsive consumer behavior? It is unlikely the basis for our ancestors' obeisance.

¹ Rabbi Ira Stone, commentary to *Messilat Yesharim*, p. 22.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z”l, refers to Rashbam’s (Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir, 12th century Biblical and Talmudic commentator, grandson of Rashi) interpretation: “We will do [what we have already been commanded until now] and we will obey [all future commands].”

“The Israelites’ statement thus looked both back and forward. The people understood that they were on a spiritual as well as a physical journey and they might not know all the details of the law at once. *Nishma* here means not “to hear” but “to hearken, to obey, to respond faithfully in deed.”²

It was the faith of the Israelites that allowed them to embrace the unknown.

To what do we hearken today? There is a multitude of voices clamoring for our attention all at once, so much so that we may become paralyzed, overwhelmed, or make choices that are not in our or society’s best interests. We have been bombarded by this for several years now. The refrain I often hear is “I can’t take it anymore.” So much of what we are exposed to goes against our value system and beliefs.

If you are reading this, perhaps, like me, the voice of Mussar drowns out some of the others as it reverberates with truth, a contemporary clarion call of truth (*emet*), faith (*emunah*), and hope (*tikveh*). While Mussar practice provides structure, just as our *halachic* system does, it goes a step further in speaking to our individual *neshamot* (souls). We are encouraged to perform *mitzvot* to the best of our ability, but our responsibility does not end there. Mussar opens us up to an expansive world of personal growth and spirituality.

In *Messilat Yesharim*, Rabbi Luzzato observes that fulfilling the *mitzvot* rituals is only one part of the equation. He emphasizes the importance of our behavior and demeanor towards the other as the sterling standard. Indeed, the many *mitzvot* in this week’s *parasha* invite us to practice holiness in our relationship with others and our community. While we cannot change the world, we can change ourselves. Yet we must not forget the world.

In providing practices to access our inner truth while serving the Divine through carrying the burden of the other, the Mussar masters set a high bar. They created a platform for observing the *mitzvot* in addition to recalibrating our souls. Our ancestors were given a set of decrees to follow in order to create a just society which have been handed down to us. We additionally have been handed a grand Mussar toolbox to create heaven on earth. We have had the privilege of *nishma* (we will hear). The task now for us is to quell the panoply of voices surrounding us and *na’aseh* (we will do). We have heard – now let us do.

“The fate of the world depends upon humanity’s conduct.”³

² Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z”l, *Covenant and Conversation*, “We will do and We Will Hear,” Mishpatim, 5780. Online article.

³ *Messilat Yesharim*, Translated by Mordechai Kaplan, p. 21.