Act First

Listen Second

A Statement of Faith

by

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He took the Book of the Covenant and read it in earshot of the people, and they said, “Everything that HaShem has said, Na’aseh v’nishma!”  The people swore that they “would do” *even before* the commandments were issued.   We will do *and then* we will listen/understand.

The response of the Jewish people certainly boggles our modern sensibility. We demand near-absolute certainty *before* we commit. To anything! Who does such a thing? What fool would ever consider *na’aseh* before every “i” is dotted and every “t” is crossed; before the contract has been gone over and gone over?

Perhaps our “modern sensibility” is not so unique in this regard. The Talmud (Shabbat 88a-b) quotes the Sadducee as having mocked Rava, “You are an impetuous people, for you put your mouth before your ears [by saying that you would do before even knowing what the commandments would be].”

For his part, Rava seemed unconcerned by the insult. He hardly thought of himself or the Jewish people as “fools”. He responded, “… we Jews are a wholesome people who love God and trust that He would never command the impossible.”  That is, for Jews action precedes understanding but even preceding action there is *love and faith*.

Na’aseh v’nishma!

So laudatory is the Jewish response that the Talmud (Shabbat 88a) records three rewards bestowed upon the people because of it. First, 600,000 angels crowned every Jew with two crowns, one each for *na’aseh* and *nishma*.  Second, hearing the affirmation of the Jewish people, God referred to them as, “My firstborn child”. Finally, upon the sounding of the Jews’ utterance, a Heavenly voice cried out, “Who revealed this secret of the angels to My children?”  For the faith to precede action to listening is an angelic attribute. At that moment, the Jewish people demonstrated the ability to reach angelic spheres.

The Midrash relates that when God offered the Torah to the other nations of the world they demanded to know, “What’s in it? What does it demand?” When they were answered, they turned away. “Thanks, but no thanks.”

It was not for them. The nations of the world could not be bothered. But the Jews? The Jews enthusiastically accepted the charge. *Na’aseh v’nishma*! No question. No negotiating. No doubt. This Midrash makes clear why the Jewish response resulted in those three sacred rewards. The response highlights the uniqueness of the Jewish people. Of all the nations of the world, only we agreed to do God’s will whatever His will would be.

That is genuine *emunah*.

Rav Yaakov Weinberg *z’l* notes that while we often praise Am Yisrael’s response we curiously view the reaction of the other nations as being “understandable.” Theirs is the “normative” response, no? Don’t we generally agree that before entering an agreement, all the details must be hammered out? Many very intelligent and savvy attorneys make nice livings ensuring precisely that!

Read the fine print! *That* is the wisdom of our age.

And yet, Rav Weinberg argues that our assessment of the nations is wrong. In an everyday transaction there are fallible, selfish, self-serving entities on either side. But the Children of Israel were entering a relationship with *God.* God – Creator and Master of the world; God Who knows each individual and nation intimately. If God “proposes” something – *anything* – to anyone He already knows, *a priori*, that the person can accept it and do it.

What’s more, the person knows exactly *who* he was dealing with as well.

**When the Bais Halevi wonders how the Jews could proclaim *na’aseh v’nishma* without knowing the details of their commitment, he is asking, how would the Torah’s obligations be** chal **(take effect) without knowing what it was that they were obligating themselves?  Rav Chaim Kanievsky *Shlita* responds that on the one hand, halachically, one can never accept any obligation without**gemiras da’as **(forethought), but here, on the other hand, there was *gemiras da’as*! As Rava told the Sadducees, “**Anan d’saginan b’shleimusa” – we have the full trust of those acting from deep love and faith, knowing that He would never lead us astray; knowing that He would never obligate us with that which we cannot fulfill.

In short, our relationship with God cannot be compared to any other relationship.

*This* trust in God is basic to our understanding. Of course, there are times when we feel we are overwhelmed and that we can’t live up to the Torah’s expectations. We feel that God’s commands are beyond us. We all experience such ups and downs.  But even in our distress, we must remain aware that accepting Torah truly and sincerely means being connected to Him not only when we are confident and secure but also during challenging times. Has any of us not felt deep destress and uncertainty during these Covid times?

Na’aseh v’nishma!

The greatest love feels different on a wedding day than ten years into a marriage. Doubt, uncertainty, fear – all the challenges of being human – creep in. Even so, trust also deepens over the years. So, it is with faith. We cannot always stand on the mountaintop. Faith cannot continually be maintained at the highest level. Na’aseh v’nishma is the pinnacle statement of our faith. God knows that we cannot always stand at the pinnacle. He knew this before we accepted Torah. He knows it now.

He knew that trust – His in us and ours in Him – would endure.

Just as during challenging times in a relationship, it is the underlying trust that carries us through. During the times we find ourselves overwhelmed by Torah, we need trust that God is still the God of Sinai. He knows us. He has always known us. He would not ask what we cannot do.

Na’aseh v’nishma! Our voice cried out our commitment. Our faith. Our certainty that, despite the limits of our understanding, it is enough to simply *do*.

In Judaism, the name of the game is action. *Na’aseh*. Do. As opposed to the nations of the world, we proclaimed na’asehbefore *nishma*. Of course, we would never pursue action to the exclusion of study and understanding. The study of Torah and the pursuit of Divine knowledge is essential to a Torah life. But we cannot be passive until we “know it all”. If we waited to know it all we’d never act. When can we ever truly say, “I understand.” There is always more. More to know. More to understand.

Nothing makes this point more clearly than our tradition at Simchas Torah. We no sooner complete the final *pesukim* of *Devarim* than we immediately begin the process anew, reading from *Bereishit*. And when we complete a tractate of Talmud we declare, *Hadran Halach* – we shall return to you!

Yes, we have studied. Yes, we have learned. But we have not studied enough. We have not mastered it all. We have more to turn over and over again. It is not knowledge that sustains us, but actions.

Avos D’Rebi Nassan (22:1) affirms na’aseh v’nishma as the basis for the teaching that, kol sh’ma’asav merubin m’chochmaso chochmaso mitkayemet (Anyone whose deeds are greater [more numerous] than his wisdom, his wisdom will endure.)  It is not just that *na’aseh* precedes *nishma* but that *nishma* cannot truly happen without *na’aseh*. Unlike other moral systems, Torah teaches us to make sure that our beliefs, philosophies, thoughts and teachings – our *nishma* – are reflected in our actions.  True wisdom is rooted in striving to incorporate one’s values deeply into the self and that self can only be authentic if the wisdom is applied in the world of action.  Moreover, there is much in Torah that is understood differently and uniquely.

As Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks Z’L notes, there are three times in which the Jewish people accepted the call of God – *na’aseh*. The first two, the voice of the Jewish people was unanimous. In the third, *na’aseh v’nishma*, the people did not cry out with one voice. He takes from this the essential unanimity of Jewish action, of Torah behavior. “Despite the differences between Hillel and Shammai, Abaye and Rava, Rambam and Rosh, R. Yosef Karo and R. Moshe Isserles, we are bound together by the choreography of the Jewish deed.” However, even as we behave as one, we have many disagreements when it comes to *nishma.*

“At the level of *nishma*, understanding, however, we are not called on to be one. Judaism has had its rationalists and its mystics, its philosophers and poets, scholars whose minds were firmly fixed on earth and saints whose souls soared to heaven. The Rabbis said that at Sinai, everyone received the revelation in his or her own way.”

Throughout Jewish history there have been great *tzadikim* whose constant and consistent *ma’asim* – actions and deeds – were pure and generous, sensitive and kind so that, even though their knowledge was not encyclopedic, it endured. *Na’aseh*. *Nishma*. In this way, both acts and knowledge endure.