

Inspiration from the Torah Portion – Mishpatim / Rabbi Elisha Wolfin

Shalom Chaverim,

This week, with perfect timing, we're signing our first collective covenant. This is not something to be treated lightly! You can live your life being conscious of a covenant, but you can also choose not to. Since there is consciousness involved, the choice is there. The two options appear to differ greatly.

God's part in the covenant is to reveal God's self and be present in our lives, and ours is to live our lives and to know that our lives have meaning!

Let's explain.

"Then he (Moshe) 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 listen!**' (**Na'aseh V'Nishma**. Translators comment: Nishma means both hear/listen and obey, but also draw meaning from).

So much ink has been spilled over these words. An entire theology of the "Acceptance of the Yoke of Heaven" has sprung up around this immortal yet unusual expression which appears in this week's Parasha for the very first time.

A nation of freed slaves - part enthralled, part hypnotized - somewhat anxious, possibly terrified, or perhaps simply in a state of spiritual elevation, commits itself, a priori, to carry out the commandments of the Lord and to submit to His authority.

And I think to myself: what is it about this expression that our Sages loved so much while we, the off-springs of the Enlightenment (Haskala) and the grandchildren of those who cast off the yoke of blind faith, feel so uneasy about?

So let's take a good look at "Na'aseh v'Nishma". Perhaps it might help to clarify what the opposite means. The opposite, of course, is "Nishma V'Na'aseh". First we shall listen, and then fulfill the commandment. But this smacks too much of blind obedience. Such a stiff-necked people are never going to promise a-priori to always hear and obey.

Perhaps there is a word missing here in the contrary formulation (a common phenomenon in the Torah): We'll listen, then **think**, and then do!" In other words, we promise to listen to You, to hear what You want us to do and then after hearing it, we'll think it over carefully, and if convinced it is good we will act.

There you go!!! That's definitely the saner approach; it's logical and it makes sense.

... And of course it also reflects a much more secular, independent decision. What a “lovely” covenant for the 21st century person.

But before we dismiss the cultural relevance of the original words - “Na’aseh V’Nishma” - let’s take a deeper look. Something in this expression tugs unremittingly at the human experience.

In our culture, in our educational approach, and in our self-perception in general, we have accorded the human intellect a sense of unprecedented power. The thinking man is our model of wisdom. Yet those regarded as wise by our ancestors were not necessarily the intellectually endowed. They were the elders of the tribe, both men and women. These older people had gathered lots of “doing” in their lifetime - lots of “Na’aseh”. As the Hebrew idiom asserts: “There’s none as wise as a person of experience,” and not “of I.Q.”

But nowadays, the old man is “put out to pension”; the old woman lies neglected in the corridor (a modern Israeli idiom), and we -- we are taught to think, to research, to understand and to consider things carefully before acting. The teacher at school would scold us, saying: “Think first, before you act.”

But is this how life works? Do we indeed think before we act? Can you really think and plan Life? I’ll rephrase the question with some pathos: can we distill this infinite thing called “life” to the narrow concept of human intellect?

What percentage of our actions--- the mundane and the creative---truly pass through the crucible of conscious thought? I’m not talking about the autonomous nerve system which accounts for the greater part of our nervous activity, which beyond argument reflects no conscious thinking. I’m talking about those elements of our lives to which we accord thought, choice and active consciousness.

There are, without a doubt, many spheres where active thought and planning come before we make a decision, and many actions are preceded by conscious decisions. But a closer look (a much closer look!) reveals that almost always thinking comes into play post-factum, after the act, sometimes only a split second later. So much so that even when we think we have considered something in advance, it turns out that in practice we have essentially rationalized our action, or opted for instant apologetics (which is, by the way, a very noteworthy ability!). This complex mechanism is aimed at subconsciously justifying our actions in our own eyes and trying to dignify our behavior with a logical basis - one that is in accord with the cultural context in which we live, or with any other context for that matter.

This week I gave a lecture for school principals and “Tali” leaders. The subject of the lecture was “The Questions Humans Ask”. I argued at the very beginning that the question “Why?” may not always be a good question, that this is not a question that leads to particularly helpful answers. I

explained that the “why” question merely sends the intelligence (almost always after an action is taken) on a mission to scan the hard drive between our ears and find, almost at any price, a logical and satisfactory explanation for our actions. We can rely on our clever minds to come up with an answer, an answer that is predictable, logical and satisfactory. Only a brave and honest few are ready to confess and say: “I really don’t know (though I live my life as if I do).” Trust your mind; it will always come up with an answer that will meet its needs, even if there is no connection between reply it brings forth and reality!

Do we, and can we **really** know why we do what we do? Because if not, then indeed the “why” question is misleading. It affords us the illusion that we understand the world and ourselves, and often leaves us stuck in an inflexible repetition of what our minds already know, when in practice the answer we got is, at best, only a partial one.

I would venture to say that even the most well-thought-out action is not really as calculated as we think.

I would go further and say that our intelligence gets much more credit than it really deserves. Of course there are many fields of endeavor of major importance where intelligence reigns supreme, from planning and construction to analysis and evaluation. But in most areas of our lives the intellect’s contribution is mainly in supplying us with a sense of logical continuity. This enables us to cope with the great mystery of life. In other words, its function is to disperse the enfolding mist at any price, even though, as we read in the Parasha last week, it is within the mist that the Divine Presence hides! The mind prefers to deal with concrete and unoriginal knowledge rather than encounter infinite yet obscure wisdom.

Therefore, it is possible that the immortal phrase “Na’aseh V’Nishma” tells us a very profound truth about our lives: while life should and can be somewhat planned and there is plenty of room for intelligent decision-making and analysis - ultimately life is intended be lived, not planned and thought.

John Lennon sang to his son: “Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans.”

Until now, Bnei Yisrael always said to Moshe: “We will do (Na’asseh)”. In other words, we shall do; we agree to simply live our lives.

This week we are adding just one word: “Nishma”. But before we fully understand and resign ourselves completely to that immortal phrase “Na’asseh V’Nishma”, we should consider one more opposite:

“Na’aseh, **V’Lo** Nishmah”. We will faithfully do, but **not** listen (or draw meaning).

This is what (perhaps, I don't really know...) our partners to this planet—the plants and animals—do. They simply live their lives and do not claim to hear anything or attribute any sublime significance (“Nishma”) to their life’s work and enterprise. Furthermore, their lives, unlike ours, are not regarded as “work”, and certainly not “enterprise”. They simply live, as we once did, in Egypt, where we slaved and built and multiplied greatly, and complained (also a unique human ability), but saw no special significance in it all.

In this week's wondrous encounter with the Divine in the desert, we discover that there may actually be Holy Presence in this place and in our lives. Hence, the People of Israel entered into a momentous covenant:

We recognize that there may not be a-priori significance to our deeds and our lives ("Na'aseh"); but we agree to draw significance ("Nishma") thereafter from the actions we have taken, and by doing so Your presence is revealed.

The question then, is less about “What should I do?” and more about: “What have I learned from what I have done, from my accumulated experience?” Or, in brief: “What is the meaning of the life that I have lived?” Always, always, after the event. First “Na'asseh”, then “Nishma”.

We agree to live our lives the best we can. What we ask of You, is to know that there is sublime meaning to our brief and complex sojourn on earth. That it was all worthwhile. That we will feel that something of significance happened. That it was not for nothing.

May you always have a life of meaning.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha