



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



"With thanks to **The Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation** for their generous sponsorship of Covenant & Conversation. Maurice was a visionary philanthropist. Vivienne was a woman of the deepest humility. Together, they were a unique partnership of dedication and grace, for whom living was giving."

בס"ד

משפטים
Mishpatim

**We will do
and we will
hear**



PARSHAT MISHPATIM IN A NUTSHELL

In last week's *parsha* Hashem gave the Children of Israel the Torah at Mount Sinai. This included the Ten Commandments. In this week's *parsha* we read more about the details of many of the laws and mitzvot.

This week mainly focuses on the laws of how the Israelites should live after they enter the Land of Israel and create a society there. These kind of mitzvot are called *civil laws*. Here are some examples about the kind of mitzvot we learn in Mishpatim: we have laws about slaves and when they must be freed; laws about what happens if someone damages your property or hurts you; laws of social responsibility, justice and compassion – how we must treat each other every day; and also some laws about Shabbat and the festivals.

At the end of the *parsha*, the Covenant of the Torah (which is like a contract between God and the Jewish People) is "signed" in a symbolic ceremony with sacrifices. The people agree to their part of the covenant with the words "We will do and we will hear". Moshe then climbs to the top of Mount Sinai, to sit with God for forty days and forty nights.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

What is the difference between "we will do" and "we will hear"? Why did the people need to make both these promises?



THE CORE IDEA

The two words we read towards the end of our *parsha* – *na'aseh ve-nishma*, "We will do and we will hear" – are among the most famous words in the Torah. They are what our ancestors said when they accepted the covenant at Sinai. They are the opposite in spirit to the many other stories of the people's complaints, sins, and rebellions during the wilderness years.

Let us examine what the words *na'aseh ve-nishma* actually mean. *Na'aseh* is straightforward. It means, "We will do." It is about action, behaviour, deed. But *nishma* is not so clear. It could mean "We will hear." But it could also mean, "We will obey." Or it could mean "We will understand." These multiple options suggest that there is more than one way to decode the phrase *na'aseh ve-nishma*. The Rabbis offered these interpretations:

[1] The view of the Talmud (Shabbat 88a) and Rashi is that it means "We will do and *then* we will hear." This suggests that the people accepted the covenant even before they heard what was in it. They said "we will do" before they knew what it was that God wanted them to do, which showed their total faith in God.

[2] Rashbam suggests it means "We will do [what we have already been commanded until now] and we will obey [all future commands]." The Israelites' statement 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."

[3] "We will obediently do" (Sforno). On this view the words *na'aseh* and *nishma* are a "hendiadys", that is, a single

idea expressed by two words. The Israelites were saying that they would do what God asked of them, not because they were looking to benefit but simply because they wanted to do His will. He had saved them from slavery, led and fed them through the wilderness, and they wanted to show their complete loyalty to Him as their redeemer and lawgiver.

[4] “We will do and we will understand” (Isaac Arama in Akeidat Yitzchak). The word *nishma* can have the sense of “understanding”. According to this explanation, when the Israelites put ‘doing’ before ‘understanding’, they were giving expression to a profound philosophical truth. There are certain things we can only understand by doing. We only understand leadership by leading. We only understand music by listening. Reading books about these things is not enough. So it is with faith. We can only truly understand Judaism through living by its commands. You cannot comprehend a faith from the outside. Doing leads to understanding.

Staying with this interpretation, we may be able to hear another important idea here. If you look carefully at the book of Shemot, chapters 19 and 24, you will see that the Israelites accepted the covenant three times. But the three verses in which these acceptances took place are significantly different:

1. The people all *responded together*, “We will do [*na’aseh*] everything the Lord has said.” (Shemot 19:8)

2. When Moshe went and told the people all the Lord’s words and laws, they *responded with one voice*, “Everything the Lord has said we will do [*na’aseh*].” (Shemot 24:3)

3. Then [Moshe] took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, “We will do and hear [*na’aseh ve-nishma*] everything the Lord has said.” (Shemot 24:7)

Only the third of these contains the entire phrase *na’aseh ve-nishma*. And only the third has no *statement about the people’s unanimity*. Notice how the first two emphasise that the people were as one: the people “responded together” and “responded with one voice.”

This suggests that when it comes to action (*na’aseh*) we must be united. However, there can be more than one path to understanding our faith (*nishma*).

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How can the Jewish people be united in action?
2. Can you think of examples of different paths to faith within Judaism?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

The first Satmar Rebbe, Rav Yoel Teitelbaum, was known to be a fierce opponent of the Zionism movement. Central to his philosophy of Judaism was the opinion that the Jewish people are forbidden from creating a Jewish state in the Land of Israel until Mashiach comes. He was also known as a tremendous philanthropist, giving money to any Jew in need that he met without asking any questions, his willingness to help coming from a deep sense of love and kindness.

Once, a desperate Jew who was an outspoken supporter of Zionism came to visit him. He had recently found out that his child was in need of an emergency life-saving operation that would cost a large amount of money, more than he could ever afford. He had been told the only person that would be able to give him that much money on such short notice was the Satmar Rebbe. He had deep misgivings, and did not have high hopes. After all, he was from an entirely different world to that of the Satmar Rebbe. Why would the Rebbe give him *tzedakah* when he was a Zionist Jew who stood for everything the Rebbe opposed?! But the man was so desperate to save the life of his child he was willing to try anything, and so he went to meet the Rebbe, and to ask for help.

As he entered the Satmar yeshiva, he felt a silence fall and saw all eyes turn to look at him. He approached the Rebbe, and quietly began to talk about his child’s medical needs and their desperate situation. Before he had even finished his story, the Rebbe instructed his attendant to give the man the money he needed. In amazement, and full of the deep relief, the man left the yeshiva with tears rolling down his face.

After the man had left, one of the chassidim asked the Rebbe: “How can you support that man when he is a Zionist?!” The Rebbe turned to him with fire in his eyes, and replied, “We fight with opinions and philosophies. We don’t fight with Jews!”

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. How does this story illustrate the idea of the many individual paths to faith (*nishma*)?
2. How does this story illustrate the idea of unity from action (*na’aseh*)?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

At the level of *na'aseh*, the Jewish deed, we are one. To be sure, there are differences. In every generation there are disagreements between leading *poskim*, halachic authorities. That is true in every legal system. Poor is the Supreme Court that leaves no space for dissenting opinions. Ashkenazim and Sephardim differ too. Yet these differences are insignificant in comparison with the agreed fundamentals of *halachah*.

This is what has historically united the Jewish people. Judaism is a legal system. It is a code of behaviour. It is a community of deed. That is where we require consensus. Hence, when it came to doing – *na'aseh* – the Israelites spoke “together” and “with one voice.” 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.

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 famously said that at Sinai, every person received the revelation in their own way:

"And all the people saw" (see Shemot 20:15) - they saw the sounds of sounds and the flames of flames. How many sounds were there and how many flames were there? Each heard according to their own level of understanding what they were experiencing." (Mechilta 20:15b)

What unites Jews, what *should* unite us, is action not reflection. We do the same deeds but we may understand them differently. There can be agreement on the *na'aseh* but not the *nishma*. That is what Rambam meant when he wrote in his 'Commentary to the Mishnah', that “When there is a

disagreement between the Sages and it does not concern an action, but only the establishment of an opinion (*sevarah*), it is not appropriate to make a halachic ruling in favour of one side.” This does not mean that Judaism lacks strong beliefs. It has very important tenets. The simplest formulation consists of three fundamental beliefs: in creation, revelation and redemption. Rambam's 13 principles elaborate this basic structure. These three beliefs also form the pattern of Jewish prayer.

Creation means seeing the universe as God's work. Revelation means seeing Torah as God's word. Redemption means seeing history as God's deed and God's call. But within these broad parameters, we must each find our own understanding, guided by the Sages of the past, instructed by our teachers in the present, and finding our own route to the Divine Presence.

Heresy-hunting is not our happiest activity. One terrible episode of Jewish history is the treatment of Rambam, who was accused of heresy during his lifetime, and after his death many of his books were confiscated and burned. These were shameful events.

Judaism is a matter of creed as well as deed. But we should allow people great leeway in how they understand the faith of our ancestors. “We will do and we will understand,” means: we will do in the same way; we will understand in our own way.

I believe that action unites us, leaving us space to find our own way to faith.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

Do you think the Jewish people are united in action? Do we allow space for others in our communities to find their own ways to faith?



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

"Different groups evolved widely different responses to modernity. Orthodoxy, then, is diverse... It embraces a wide variety of different constructions. To what might we compare it? Perhaps the best analogy is language. A language is determined by rules of syntax and semantics. But within that language an infinite number of sentences can be uttered or books written. Within it, too, there can be regional accents and dialects. Orthodoxy is determined by beliefs and commandments. These are its rules of syntax and semantics. But within that framework lies an open-ended multiplicity of cognitive, emotional, spiritual and cultural styles."

One People? Tradition, Modernity, and Jewish Unity, pp. 92-93



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What do you think *na'aseh ve-nishma* means?
2. What is it about the word *nishma* that suggests different philosophical approaches to faith?
3. What are the basic faith statements we must believe in, and where is there room to take an individual approach?



IN A NUTSHELL

The basic understanding of these words (before delving into a deeper level of understanding, explored in the rest of the *Covenant & Conversation*) is that *na'aseh* means we will do everything God asks of us, and we agree to this before we even hear the details of the laws in the Torah – *nishma*). By making these promises as a group, rather than saying, “we’ll read the laws first and only then agree to them if we like them”, they were showing their *emunah*, their faith in God. Normally we are taught to read a contract carefully before signing it. To make a legal agreement, you must fully trust the person who drew up the contract, and trust yourself to be able to meet all the conditions. The people stood at Mount Sinai and made a declaration of faith.

THE CORE IDEA

1. Being united in action means Judaism has normative practices – whether halachic, or ethical behaviour based on the values of Judaism. In these modern times, when not all Jews agree on or are united in these normative behavioural aspects of Judaism, there is an additional message to be learned. There are issues that can and must unite us. Issues that face all Jews and on which all Jews can agree on the importance of action, such as antisemitism or poverty and suffering.
2. Different paths towards faith in Judaism are the differences in the way we are Jewish. For some Jews, the mystical spirituality of Chassidut speaks to them while for others they may be more comfortable with a more intellectual approach. For some Jews, Zionism is core to their Jewish identity, and for others it poses a religious challenge. We do not need to come to a consensus in these approaches to Judaism, and can still be a unified people without consensus.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. "Individual paths to faith" (*nishma*) illustrated in this story are the Zionist position of the Jew who came to ask for *tzedakah* from the Satmar Rebbe, and Satmar's philosophical position on Zionism, which is that it is against their Torah philosophy.
2. The "unity from action" (*na'aseh*) modelled in the story is the mitzvah of *tzedakah*. This action is something deeply valued by all Jews.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. The reality of the Jewish society today is that we do not have a normative consensus on action. Not all Jews are committed to halachah, and not all Jews who are committed to halachah can agree on the boundaries of halachah and how the *halachah* should be developed, applied and implemented. However, the things that bring us together are truly greater than those which separate us. We can and must focus on these things, and join forces in acting on the issues that are really important. This is what will keep us united as a people. There are many ways to be a Jew today, and we do not always manage to allow space for each other. If we focus on the unity of action this may help us find space for Jews who live their Judaism in a different way to us.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Take a look at the different approaches presented in the *Covenant & Conversation* this week and decide which speaks to you the most. Rabbi Sacks explores and expands upon the opinion of Rabbi Isaac Arama, but that is not to say that it is a more legitimate interpretation than the others presented here.
2. *Nishma* means "we will hear". When one listens to something, there is no guarantee you will hear this the same way others will. Two people can listen to a piece of music and get completely different things from it. This suggests that there is space for interpretation here in the way we understand the Torah, allowing for different approaches and philosophies.
3. Rambam authored his thirteen principles of faith (*Ani Ma'amin*). Rabbi Sacks, based on the thought and writing of Rabbi Shimon ben Zemach Duran, Joseph Albo, and Franz Rosenzweig, consolidated these ideas into three fundamental beliefs: in creation, revelation and redemption. (See Rabbi Sacks' *Introduction to the Koren Siddur* for more on this.) He writes that within the broad parameters of faith and practice of *halachah*, "we must each find our own understanding, guided by the Sages of the past, instructed by our teachers in the present, and finding our own route to the Divine Presence."