

COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF SPIRITUALITY IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



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— RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS



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Doing and Hearing

Mishpatim - 6 February 2016 / 27 Shvat 5776

One of the most famous phrases in the Torah makes its appearance in this week's parsha. It has often been used to characterise Jewish faith as a whole. It consists of two words: *na'aseh venishma*, literally, "we will do and we will hear" (Ex. 24:7). What does this mean and why does it matter?

There are two famous interpretations, one ancient, the other modern. The first appears in the Babylonian Talmud¹, where it is taken to describe the enthusiasm and whole-heartedness with which the Israelites accepted the covenant with God at Mount Sinai. When they said to Moses, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do and we will hear", they were saying, in effect: Whatever God asks of us, we will do – saying this *before they had heard any of the commandments*. The words "We will hear", imply that they had not yet heard – not the Ten Commandments, or the detailed laws that followed as set out in our parsha. So keen were they to signal their assent to God that they agreed to His demands before knowing what they were.²

This reading, adopted also by Rashi in his commentary to the Torah, is difficult because it depends on reading the narrative out of chronological sequence (using the principle that "there is no before and after in the Torah"). The events of chapter 24, on this interpretation, happened before chapter 20, the account of the revelation at Mount Sinai and the Ten Commandments. Ibn Ezra, Rashbam and Ramban all disagree and read the chapters in

¹ Shabbat 88a-b.

² There are, of course, quite different interpretations of the Israelites' assent. According to one, God "suspended the mountain over them," giving them no choice but to agree or die (Shabbat 88a).

chronological sequence. For them, the words *na'aseh venishma* mean not, “we will do and we will hear”, but simply, “we will do and we will obey.”

The second interpretation – not the plain sense of the text but important nonetheless – has been given often in modern Jewish thought. On this view *na'aseh venishma* means, “We will do and we will *understand*.”³ From this they derive the conclusion that we can only understand Judaism by doing it, by performing the commands and living a Jewish life. In the beginning is the deed.⁴ Only then comes the grasp, the insight, the comprehension.

“We can only understand Judaism by doing it, by performing the commands and living a Jewish life.”

This is a signal and substantive point. The modern Western mind tends to put things in the opposite order. We seek to understand what we are committing ourselves to before making the commitment. That is fine when what is at stake is signing a contract, buying a new mobile phone, or purchasing a subscription, but not when making a deep existential commitment. The only way to understand leadership is to lead. The only way to understand marriage is to get married. The only way to understand whether a certain career path is right for you is to actually try it for an extended period. Those who hover on the edge of a commitment, reluctant to make a decision until all the facts are in, will eventually find that life has passed them by.⁵ The only way to understand a way of life is to take the risk of living it.⁶ So: *na'aseh venishma*, “We will do and eventually, through extended practice and long exposure, we will understand.”

In my Introduction to this year’s Covenant and Conversation, I suggested a quite different third interpretation, based on the fact that the Israelites are described by the Torah as ratifying the covenant three times: once before they heard the commandments and twice afterward. There is a fascinating difference between the way the Torah describes the first two of these responses and the third:

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

When Moses 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*].” (Ex. 24:3)

Then he 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.” (Ex. 24:7)

³ The word already carries this meaning in biblical Hebrew as in the story of the tower of babel, where God says, come let us confuse their language so that people will not be able to understand their neighbour.

⁴ This is the famous phrase from Goethe’s Faust.

⁵ This is similar to the point made by Bernard Williams in his famous essay, ‘Moral Luck,’ that there are certain decisions – his example is Gauguin’s decision to leave his career and family and go to Tahiti to paint – about which we cannot know whether they are the right decision until after we have taken them and seen how they work out. All such existential decisions involve risk.

⁶ This, incidentally, is the *Verstehen* approach to sociology and anthropology, namely that cultures cannot be fully understood from the outside. They need to be experienced from within. That is one of the key differences between the social sciences and the natural sciences.

The first two responses, which refer only to action (*na'aseh*), are given unanimously. They people respond “together”. They do so “with one voice”. The third, which refers not only to doing but also to hearing (*nishma*), involves no unanimity. “Hearing” here means many things: listening, paying attention, understanding, absorbing, internalising, responding and obeying. It refers, in other words, *to the spiritual, inward dimension of Judaism*.

From this, an important consequence follows. Judaism is a *community of doing* rather than of “hearing”. There is an authoritative code of Jewish law. When it comes to *halakhah*, the way of Jewish doing, we seek consensus.

By contrast, though there are undoubtedly principles of Jewish faith, *when it comes to spirituality there is no single normative Jewish approach*. Judaism has had its priests and prophets, its rationalists and mystics, its philosophers and poets. Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, speaks in a multiplicity of voices. Isaiah was not Ezekiel. The book of Proverbs comes from a different mindset than the books of Amos and Hosea. The Torah contains law and narrative, history and mystic vision, ritual and prayer. There are norms about how to act as Jews. But there are few about how to think and feel as Jews.

We experience God in different ways. Some find him in nature, in what Wordsworth called “a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused, / Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns, / And the round ocean and the living air.” Others find him in interpersonal emotion, in the experience of loving and being loved – what Rabbi Akiva meant when he said that in a true marriage, “the Divine presence is between” husband and wife.

Some find God in the prophetic call: “Let justice roll down like a river, and righteousness like a never-failing stream” (Amos 5:24). Others find Him in study, “rejoicing in the words of Your Torah ... for they are our life and the length of our days; on them we will meditate day and night.” Yet others find Him in prayer, discovering that God is close to all who call on him in truth.

There are those who find God in joy, dancing and singing as did King David when he brought the Holy Ark into Jerusalem. Others – or the same people at different points in their life – find Him in the depths, in tears and remorse and a broken heart. Einstein found God in the “fearful symmetry” and ordered complexity of the universe. Rav Kook found Him in the harmony of diversity. Rav Soloveitchik found Him in the loneliness of being as it reaches out to the soul of Being itself.

There is a normative way of doing the holy deed, but there are many ways of hearing the holy voice, encountering the sacred presence, feeling at one and the same time how small we are yet how great the universe we inhabit, how insignificant we must seem when set against the vastness of space and the myriads of stars, yet how momentously significant we are, knowing that God has set His image and likeness upon us and placed us here, in this place, at this time, with these gifts, in these

“God has placed us here, in this place, at this time, with these gifts, in these circumstances, with a task to perform if we are able to discern it.”

circumstances, with a task to perform if we are able to discern it. We can find God on the heights and in the depths, in loneliness and togetherness, in love and fear, in gratitude and need, in dazzling light and in the midst of deep darkness. We can find God by seeking Him, but sometimes He finds us when we least expect it.

“We can find God by seeking Him, but sometimes He finds us when we least expect it.”

That is the difference between *na'aseh* and *nishma*. We do the Godly deed “together”. We respond to His commands “with one voice”. But we hear God’s presence in many ways, for though God is One, we are all different, and we encounter Him each in our own way.

Jonathan Sacks

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