



# WEEKLY PARSHA

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## If the Medium Is the Message, What's the Message?

When the Children of Israel stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai, they famously declared “נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע – *na’aseh ve’nishma* – We will do and we will listen.” ([Exodus 24:7](#)). This phrase appears at the end of *parshat Mishpatim*, after all the laws that followed the Ten Commandments. And yet the Rabbis place it in the middle of Yitro, right before the giving of these commandments. For the Rabbis, the word *nishma*, we will hear, is meant to signify “we will hear the details of the mitzvot.” The greatness of *na’aseh vi’nishma* is that Bnei Yisrael committed to doing the mitzvot even before they knew what they would be. They were prepared to sign a blank check to commit to fulfilling the mitzvot.

Given the actual placement of this phrase after they had heard all the mitzvot following the events of Mt. Sinai, it is not possible to explain *nishma* to mean that “we will hear the specifics” later. A possible alternate explanation is that we asserted that we would first commit to doing the mitzvot, and only afterwards to try to make sense of them. To ask why God had commanded them so as to allow us to connect and relate to them in a deeper way.

Sfas Emes takes this approach one step further. *Nishma*, he states, is a desire to understand the mitzvot. But not for our sake, so we can relate to them better. It is for God’s sake and the Torah’s sake. Mitzvot are a concretization – his word is “clothing” – for the values that stand behind them. Let us suppose that kashrut is about a distinctive way of life and self-control of our appetitive desires. Those are the deeper values that the Torah cares about. The specific and concrete way they translate is through the keeping of kashrut.

As religious Jews, we are obligated to attend to the *nishma* alongside the *na’aseh*. Our life should not just be

one of observing the detailed halakhot. We should not think that just because we look everything up in the Mishneh Brurah that we have fulfilled our obligations. No. A religious life does not end with observance, with *na’aseh*. It must continue on to understanding what are the Torah values and living our lives accordingly. It needs to also be one of *nishma*. And yet, *na’aseh* must come first. If we start with *nishma*, with the values, then we will see the mitzvot as just a means to an end, and they will become secondary and negotiable. We need to have an *a priori* commitment to *na’aseh*. If we proceed from there to *nishma*, our lives will be full religious lives – one anchored in mitzvot and striving to understand and live according to their values.

The concept of commandedness preceding engagement in the values can be seen by looking at the opening and closing of this week’s parsha. In Yitro, we had pure commandedness: God’s thundering voice and the people quaking in fear. In contrast, Mishpatim opens with “וְאַלֶּהָהּ הַמְשַׁפְּטִים אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׂמַע לְפָנֵיהֶם” – And these are the laws that you shall present to them.”

Present it to them for their approval. Let them review them and choose to freely accept them or not.

And so, after all the laws are given, Moshe writes them down in a book of *brit*, of covenant, and presents this book to Bnei Yisrael for their acceptance. It is at this moment that they say *naaseh vi’nishma*, after which Moshe ritualizes the covenant by sprinkling blood on the altar – representing God – and the people.

Covenant means partnership. What makes the

partnership possible is the foundation of *na'aseh*. We understand that this is not an equal partnership. God is the commander, and we are the commanded. And we will do regardless. *Na'aseh*. But with that commitment, partnership is possible. We can now engage the *nishma*, bring our best human understanding to what the Torah values are, and our best understanding of how to apply them to halakha and mitzvot, and our best understanding how to realize them in our lives. This is what *Torah she'ba'al peh* means – partnering with God in the interpretation and application of halakha. It is the partnering of *nismah* made possible through *na'aseh*. As noted, a commitment to *na'aseh* prevents an overemphasis on *nishma* that would lead a person away from a life of mitzvot. But there might be something here beyond simple *a priori* commitment. There might be a deeper way in which the *nishma* is embedded within the *na'aseh*.

The Canadian philosopher, Marshall McLuhan, was famous for coining the phrase that the “medium is the message,” that the same message can change radically based on the medium through which it is conveyed. A story told through a book is very different from the same story told through a movie. The medium shapes our understanding of the narrative and the inner life and dynamics of the characters.

The same, it can be said, is true regarding the mitzvot (the medium) and the values that lie behind them (the message). The particular way that we affirm that God created the world and rested on the seventh day, and that God took us out of Egypt, is through the halakhic observance of Shabbat. This is very different than, say, the way a Christian might ritualize the same message. Because the media are different, the very message is profoundly different as well.

A message does not live in the abstract. The meaning of Shabbat is embedded in and expressed through the observing the 39 forbidden categories of labor and the associated Rabbinic restrictions; through the making *Kiddush*, *Ha-Motzi*, and *Havdalah*; and through the

singing of Shabbat zemirot, and – before the age of COVID – going to shul and getting together with friends. If we attend to the message, the *nishma*, then the medium becomes the message. *Na'aseh* alone is an empty ritual, a medium with no message. *Nishma* alone is abstract and unembodied meaning. It is their integration which can create a life of embodied – and specific and particular – meaning.

Let us always start with a commitment to *na'aseh* — to Torah and mitzvot that we do because God has commanded it to us. And let us move from there to engage the *nishma*, to become partners with God in understanding the values of the Torah, in seeing them embedded in our life of observance, and in bringing these values to all facets of our lives. For when we take these values and apply them to our lives, we act in partnership with God, and deepen the connection between God and humanity.



For more of Rabbi Linzer on the parsha, tune in to Parsha in Progress, where he discusses and debates the parsha with noted author Abigail Pogrebin.

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