

This Week in Torah *Yitro*

For many years, there were 2 words that appeared on our *bema*. Next to the *Aron HaKodesh* were words from this week's *parasha*: *Na'aseh v'Nishmah*... we will do and we will hear. For a liberal synagogue based on its theological roots on a rational interpretation of Judaism, such a phrase seemed a bit puzzling. The “doing” leads to “hearing” seemed antithetical to the core founding principles of Reform Judaism. Perhaps that quondam principle evolved over time; indeed, many Torah commentators suggested that viewing this term in a lineal fashion does not capture the depth of holiness as viewing these two phrases in simultaneous fashion.

This latter understanding is reflected by the Reform Judaism association of Rabbis, called Central Conference of American Rabbis. To mark the 100th anniversary of the founding of our movement in 1976, that Rabbinic body passed a perspective of who we are as Reform Jews. In it, the following description of Torah was ratified: “Torah results from the relationship between God and the Jewish people. The records of our earliest confrontations are uniquely important to us. Lawgivers and prophets, historians and poets gave us a heritage whose study is a religious imperative and whose practice is our chief means to holiness. Rabbis and teachers, philosophers and mystics, gifted Jews in every age amplified the Torah tradition. For millennia, the creation of Torah has not ceased and Jewish creativity in our time is adding to the chain of tradition.” Indeed, revelation of Torah was not limited to what occurred at Mount Sinai; it was clear. *Na'aseh v'Nishmah* is a vibrant part of exploring and encountering who we are!

There is a rabbinic principle that reflects this concept. The phrase *Derech Chadod emet* literally means “the way of sharpening the truth,” which implies that there are things we can do to heighten our spiritual awareness when we start performing *mitzvot*. Indeed the mystical text, the *Zohar*, will go as far as to state that the *mitzvot* are really *atzot* [tips/suggestions] to achieve a more enhanced spiritual life! The Reform Jewish leaders of the 19th century would say that ethical principles are universal among us but the ritual/spiritual ones are in our hands to enhance our intellectual and rational connection to God. The Chasidic sage Levi Yitzhak added that a teacher /prophet/*tsadik*

was essential to guide one to deeper understanding and awareness--- or to find a *derech chadod emet*.

In our *sedra*, the words of affirmation *Na'aseh v'Nishmah* were uttered BEFORE the revelation from on top of Mount Sinai. According to the medieval Biblical commentator RaSHI and affirmed again by the 19th century Rabbi Levi Yitzhak that such a phrasing helped to partner and learn from our sages so that we can add intensity and deeper significance to our spiritual lives... truly *Derech Chadod emet*.

For us—and let us not forget this—Torah is constantly being revealed to us. *Na'aseh v'nishmah* means that the living our days contain opportunities to experience a fresh awareness of God's presence in the world. And with the help of a good guide/teacher/Rabbi/sage/prophet/friend, we can experience and travel a *derech chadod emet*!