

Mishpatim 5782
 Do, Listen, Repeat.
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How many of you like change?

Most people don't.

In the first few months of taking this pulpit, I brought to the Ritual Committee a proposal that we modify the gendered language in our Torah service. I was a bit surprised, although very grateful, that they agreed. Knowing that a new rabbi sometimes has a bit of honeymoon capital, I told myself that future changes might not move as quickly.

As I mused over our *parashah* through the lens of various events, discussions, and emails that took a lot of energy this week, two of the most familiar words in the entire Torah jumped out for me in a whole new way: “*na’aseh v’nishma*,” usually translated as “we will do and we will hear.”

After Moshe reads aloud the Book of the Covenant for the nation to ratify, they utter the famous words:

כל אשר- דבר ה' נעשה וניתמע:
 All that the Eternal has spoken will we do, and we will hear.”
 (Ex. 24:7).

I want to suggest that the Torah sets up the words “*na’aseh v’nishma*” to snag our attention as they do, because they come to establish a paradigm for one of the fundamental challenges and responsibilities we face as human beings and as Jews.

If you’re like me, somewhere along the way you picked up the idea that “we will do and we will hear” means, “we commit to doing whatever God will tell us to do, and *then* we will hear what it is.” This may be a beautiful interpretation; it is Rashi’s and the Talmud records it, too—but it depends on reading Exodus 24 out of sequence. According to a straightforward reading of the events, in the order in which they occurred, first the Israelites agree to the covenant (Ex. 19:8), then God reveals to them the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20), then Moses outlines many of the details of the law (Ex. 21-23), and only then do the Israelites say *na’aseh ve-nishma*, by which time they have already heard much of what they are to do. Out of sequence readings are not

necessarily problematic, but in this case, reading the text out of sequence creates unresolvable issues, and Rashi's view never became popular like his interpretations usually are. So, as for the notion that "*na'aseh v'nishmah*" is about making a blind commitment, in the end, that feels like a stretch.

The classical commentators offer other interpretations as well; among them:

- "We will obediently do whatever you say" (Sforno). In this view, the words *na'aseh* and *nishma* are a single idea expressed by two words; or
- "We will do and we will understand" (Isaac Arama). In this view, the Israelites acknowledge their willingness to accept the mitzvot with faith that they will come to understand Torah by living it.

Here's another idea: What if we were to focus on the *p'shat*, without jumping to poesis? A *p'shat* reading drills down into what it means for words to say what they mean. So, here, we said we'd do what God said—we'd build a society around the set of civil and moral laws just given. Then, we'd hear what would come in the future. But to fully understand "*nishma*," "hear," we need to know its particular nuance. "*Nishmah*" implies not only the sensory act of hearing, but also listening and obeying.

Now I want to explore what it actually means to do and then to hear like that. It could simply be additive: We will do what You just told us, and in the future, when You tell us more, we'll add it to what we do. And in fact that happens in the Torah.

But something much more remarkable also happens in the course of the ongoing Revelation which lies at the core of Judaism. We don't only add. We also hear new things that call for us to change what we were doing before. There are times when we replace one behavior with another, or stop doing something, or make a change that has the effect of reframing what we were doing previously.

Two commentators hint at this.

Abarbanel imagines that after they have committed themselves on the previous day, saying only "we will do," now they have slept on it and have become more aware of the implications of their assent. At that moment, they could demand qualifications and restrictions, but instead, they declare themselves willing to hear more. It is as if they are saying, "we are in this relationship for the long haul. We expect that there will be new ideas, new laws, and new demands on us—and we are willing to hear them."

Rashbam says much the same thing: *Nishma*—we will hear—means that we will respond

faithfully in deed. We will continue to keep our ears open. Even as we commit to a set of practices today, we commit to the possibility that they may change.

With this intense pshat reading, the process of doing, hearing, and then doing differently will, of necessity, be iterative and demand a constant attunement and readiness to listen.

This applies not only to Torah but to every committed relationship we experience.

Sometimes in the course of our relationships, a partner or colleague brings a perspective or makes a request that we did not expect. We may feel tempted to draw ranks around what we do *now*, rather than consider a different paradigm and giving up practices that had been part of how we saw ourselves. At times like that it is so tempting to listen with our faces but not hear with our hearts. We don't want to take in a possibility that will disrupt the order of things as we knew it. We may even feel we cannot—that we lack the disposition or the skills to change how we have been doing in response to what we have just heard. We may be inclined to do and hear at the same time—meaning, to keep doing what we did before while acknowledging that new information or perspective has been shared.

But we really *cannot* do *and* hear concurrently. If we're going to hear, we must put aside our “doing” mindset and prepare to be changed. Scientists confirm the fallacy of multitasking. People who are trying to do something, while also listening to something, sacrifice efficiency and quality of one or the other. I can listen to a congregant on the phone while I'm making a salad and stirring spaghetti sauce. But I can't *hear* you unless I exit “doing” mode and prepare to be changed by what you tell me or ask of me. I owe you that, because we are in a sacred relationship.

We are at our best when we know which mode we are in—doing or listening—and if listening, when we are prepared for “Nishma” listening—when we are prepared to change.

It turns out that it's not change per se that people dislike. It's losing what is familiar and predictable that many people find uncomfortable—and the most uncomfortable part is fearing the loss and the comfort and identify reinforcement that come with familiarity and predictability.

Less than a decade ago my husband Scott would have told you that he did not like change. Then he faced lots of it. Now he welcomes it. He even seeks it. It turns out that what he didn't like was losing his routine. But when he got good at making new routines,

he discovered that he loves the opportunities change offers and even comes to love the new routines.

I've shared a family story with you before, which gives a clear and stark example of what I'm talking about. Scott and I taught our kids to "stop, look, and listen" before crossing the street. One Shabbat, as we were walking to shul, Rena and Benjy ran ahead of Scott and me, as we pushed Shira in her stroller. Rena and Benjy reached the point where we would usually cross the street. Standing at the curb, they stopped, looked and listened—and then proceeded to enter the roadway in front of an approaching car. They were stuck in "doing" mode, and it prevented them from changing what they were doing, in response to new information.

What a tremendous act of faith, what profound trust our ancestors demonstrated, when they said, "*na'aseh v'nishma*," we're in this relationship for the long haul, and we are willing to be changed by it, over and over again. "*Na'aseh v'nishma*" voices an exceedingly rare and difficult capacity, one that I believe our Torah calls us to cultivate at the very moment we accept it.

The Talmudic sages ask: Which is better, learning something new or doing the mitzvot as we already do them? Rabbi Tarfon says, "following the mitzvot is greater." Rabbi Eliezer counters: "Learning is greater." Then someone else responds to both of them and says that both are important, but at the end of the day, if our relationships are going to make it, and if our way of life is going to make it, learning is greater, because learning leads to deed (Kiddushin 40b:8). We did not receive the mitzvot all at once and we do not get all of the rules and procedures in our interpersonal relationships right out of the gate, either. Revelation is ongoing, whether from God to Israel or from one person to another. We are meant to hear new things and be open to changing what we do, over and over.

May we have faith in our capacity to really listen, and may we be blessed with relationships based on the trust we need to be willing to go the distance.