

WEEKLY PARASHA

By Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva and Dean



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Parashat Beha'alotecha

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One of the central events in the rabbinic retelling of the Revelation at Sinai is the moment when *Bnei Yisrael* declares: *na'aseh vi'nishma*, "We will do and we will listen!" This declaration appears in the Torah at the end of Parashat Mishpatim, after the Ten Commandments and all of the detailed laws had been presented to the people. In the Talmud, however, it is understood to have occurred before the Ten Commandments were presented, and it signifies the people's willingness to obey *a priori*, regardless of what was asked, regardless of why it was being asked:

R. Eleazar said: When the Israelites gave precedence to 'we will do' over 'we will hearken,' a Heavenly Voice went forth and exclaimed to them, 'Who revealed to My children this secret, which is employed by the Ministering Angels?,' as it is written, 'Bless the Lord, you angels of His. You mighty in strength, that fulfill His word, that hearken unto the voice of His word,' first they fulfill and then they hearken. (Shabbat 88a)

Focusing on *na'aseh* underscores that our primary response to God's mitzvot is one of obedience and of obligation. From this perspective, any attempt to ask "why?," to understand what the commandments are about, runs the risk of undermining their absolute binding nature. An over-engagement in exploring *ta'amei ha'mitzvot*, the reasons behind the mitzvot, can lead to the conclusion that if a certain mitzvah's purpose is X, then the mitzvah is just a means to an end, and if X can be achieved in some other way, the mitzvah itself is expendable. Similarly, if one does not agree with reason X, or feels that reason X is no longer applicable, then the mitzvah would likewise fall by the wayside. Indeed, when the Gemara in Rosh HaShanah asks: "Why do we blow the shofar on Rosh HaShanah?," the response is not, "To serve as a wake-up call to *teshuvah*" or a similar explanation, but rather, a rejection of the premise of the

question: "Why do we blow? Because God has said to blow!" (Rosh HaShanah 16a).

And yet, *nishma* plays a critical role. Hazal did not focus on the times both before and after the Giving of the Torah when the people said simply, "We will do" (Shemot 19:8, 24:3). By drawing our attention to the dual "We will do and we will hear," they were highlighting the interplay, the dialectical tension that exists between these two concepts. How does this tension play itself out?

First, it has not been possible for many people (at any time, but particularly nowadays) to adopt an *a priori* position of *na'aseh*. For many people, the fact that God commanded the mitzvot is something that they may not believe, or, if they do believe it, it is too abstract an idea, not something that exists as a lived reality. They need to feel that the Torah speaks to them, resonates in them, that it makes sense.

Moreover, even if someone was able to start with an *a priori* "we will do," that may not be able to support and sustain her at all times, for such a commitment can falter. Hence the rabbinic statement that after Israel sinned with the Golden Calf, the heavenly angels descended and stripped them of the crowns that had been placed on their heads when they declared, "We will do and we will hear."

This idea is developed in Sefat Emet (R. Aryeh Leib of Gur, late 19th century), who begins by noting that the key word used regarding Yitro, whose story is told before the Giving of the Torah, is not *na'aseh*, but *nishma*. Yitro needed first to hear, to be awed and inspired, and then he drew close to God and Torah. Many of us may find ourselves in this position as well:

The Midrash states [relating to the sin of the Calf]: "You have lost *na'aseh*, be careful to hold on to *nishma*." And it brings a proof from how Yitro heard, and then came... The

explanation is that the Children of Israel said *na'aseh* prior to *nishma*, which is to say, that their drawing close to Torah does not come through hearing [but rather through an *a priori* commitment]... But if so, why did they also say *nishma*? This was in order to help those at a lower level who needed to hear in order to draw close... And even they, after they corrupted *na'aseh*, that is — through their sin they became distant from their essential connection to Torah — they now have to draw close through *nishma*.

All that is well and good, but it still affords *nishma* a secondary, backup type role. It acknowledges its necessity, but does not see any intrinsic value in it. But we know that this is not the whole story. An enormous amount of energy has been invested throughout the centuries in exploring the *ta'amei ha'mitzvot*, in delving into the *nishma*. The more we understand what the mitzvot are about, the more we will live our lives in accordance with not only the Torah's commands, but also the Torah's values and goals. If the question "why?" is, "Why should I do it?" then the answer is, "Because God said so." But if the question is, "Why does God want me to do it? What does it tell me about how to live my life?" then it is a question of utmost importance.

This, then, is the tension between these two concepts. *Na'aseh*, a preparedness to observe regardless, is in constant conversation with *nishma*, a desire to understand, to apply, to delve deeper. And both of these are necessary. With only *na'aseh*, a person will live a life of rote observance, a life devoid of religious meaning. With only *nishmah*, a person's commitment to concrete, *halakhic* observance may waver.

Thus, Sefat Emet continues, *na'aseh* allowed the people to achieve a true *nishma*. Since

it was more dear in their eyes to do God's will than to understand the reasons, they merited to understand the reasons... For the reasons are more "inner" (the spiritual essence, the soul) than the actual physical performance (the body) of the mitzvah.

The reasons are the soul of the mitzvot, but the soul cannot exist without the body, its concrete, flesh and blood form. A life of just *na'aseh* is soulless. A life of just *nishma* is bloodless.

And so it is for the *halakhic* process. Without an *a priori* commitment to submit to God's will, a person may read his own values into the *halakha*, may force the *halakha* to say something that is true to his values but false to the Torah's values, or the Torah's laws. But if one starts with a disposition of submission, then, says Sefat Emet, they can truly partner with God, for

God gave the Children of Israel the ability for their words to have the power to be part of the reasons of the Torah, just like God's words... And this is the idea of the Oral Law: that the Children of Israel merit to innovate those things that were carved out before God.

We play a role in interpreting and applying *halakha*. If we start with *nishma*, we put our own understanding first. We will come to impose our will on the *halakha*, to do violence to the system and to work in opposition to God. If, however, we start with submission, with *na'aseh*, then we will let the Torah guide us, we will seek to understand the reasons of the Torah even if they are not consonant with our own reasons. We will be led to an "understanding above an understanding" in the words of the Sefat Emet. If this is our point of departure, then we can be part of the process; we can be part of discovering what those reasons are. Our voices can also be heard; they can play a role in identifying and articulating what those Torah values are, and we can engage those Torah values in interpreting and applying the *halakha* without the fear that we will overstep, that we will abuse this privilege.

Our voice will matter, because it is God's voice that matters most. If we start with *na'aseh*, we can reach the level of *nishma*. We can live a religious life *brit* in its fullest sense: a life of Torah observance and a life of Torah values. A life guided by God's law, and a life in an ongoing relationship with God.

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ALUMNUS D'VAR TORAH

Divine Revelation and Human Revelation

By Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz (YCT '10)

Revelation, the central theme of Shavuot, is the most powerful moment in our religious narrative, yet, sadly, it is nearly impossible to grasp in the 21st century. We must still strive to access the experience of our ancestors. There is an interesting Talmudic debate regarding how the Israelites responded to the intensity of the primary revelation at Sinai:

And Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: With every single statement that emanated from the mouth of the Holy One, Blessed is He, the souls of the Jewish people departed (from their bodies), as it is stated: “my soul departed as He spoke.” Now, since their souls departed after the first statement, how could they have received the second statement? (G-d) brought down the dew with which He will resurrect the dead in the future, and He resurrected them, as it said: “A generous rain did You lavish, O G-d, when Your heritage was weary You established it firmly.” (Shabbat 88b)

However, in the same passage, a discordant encounter is described:

And Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: With every single statement that emanated from the mouth of the Holy One, Blessed is He, the Jewish people retreated twelve miles, and the ministering angels helped them to totter back, as it is said: “The angels of legions totter, they totter. Do not read this *yidodun* (they lead) but as *yedadun* (help others to lead).

There is a distinct paradox evident in the account of the Israelites approaching the Divine Superpower. While the first narrative tells a story of love (a return to G-d), the second reveals a fearful encounter (backing away with awe). The first is about the human limits of truth and the latter is about the human limits of courage.

There are a few unique features to revelation that must be outlined. First, by necessity, we learn something we did not

know before receiving revelation. We are startled and affected because something very new and powerful has been learned. Second, in religious revelation, we do not merely walk away with new knowledge. There is also a relationship that has been deeply strengthened in the process. Third, revelation is only effective if it leads to emotional transformation. We cannot live the same way after attaining this new knowledge and after this relationship has been strengthened.

We must always strive to imitate the Divine and create intimate revelation in our own relationships. Indeed, revelation should not be limited to intellectual and religious learning. In these special and revelatory moments, we share and connect very deeply with those we love. I recall the first time my wife shared that she loved me. That revelation was transformative in the moment, but it also profoundly reshaped my past narrative and my future vision.

In our lives, we share concerns with, and have concern for, those we love. We assertively embrace justice with, and for, strangers. So too, must we embrace learning with strangers and revelation with those whom we love. It is a sacred space where we can let down our guard, allow ourselves to be vulnerable, and embrace a shared experience that will necessarily change us. Some commentators suggest that G-d only revealed the *aleph* of *anochi* (the first word of the 10 commandments). This perspective serves as a powerful reminder that spiritual presence is just as important as the actual content expressed. Sometimes just an *aleph*, spoken with all of one’s being, can be deeply revelatory.

One goal that we should keep in mind when participating in religious life is to take apocalyptic and cataclysmic moments from our text and tradition and assimilate them into daily life. Sinaitic revelation should become a part of daily prayer and living. The wedding *chuppah* should be carried into daily love and responsibilities. Even further, a near-death encounter can become a consistent reminder of the power and sanctity of time.

Revelation is not merely a historical phenomenon, but a way of life. We can open our eyes and hearts to the profundity of the soul, the amazement of the universe, and the beauty of loving relationships. In sacred moments, G-d continues to speak with us.

Rabbi Dr. Shmuly Yanklowitz is Executive Director of the Valley Beit Midrash, founder & President of Uri L’Tzedek, and founder & CEO of The Shamayim V’Aretz Institute.

FROM THE PRESIDENT

The Passionate, God-Revering, Inclusive, Open and Modern Orthodox Movement

By Rabbi Asher Lopatin

Seventeen years ago, in a powerful, transformational article, Rav Avi Weiss wrote what might be labeled an Open Orthodox manifesto, putting openness front and center in the Modern Orthodox agenda. It was a refreshing embrace of welcoming, diverse, and even contradictory voices aimed at communities and places of learning, challenging Judaism to grow through the exploration of the world around us. Soon after, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School was founded. With this year's graduating class, YCT has produced nearly 90 rabbis who have dedicated their lives to serving the Jewish community.

Though the yeshiva was founded on the principles of a modern and open Orthodoxy, our students and *musmakhim* (ordained graduates) have managed to add a richness and breadth to the ideas "modern" and "open." Some YCT-trained rabbis have worked on the passionate side: Whether in the pulpit or in schools, they are known as spiritual leaders, rabbis who bring the soul of Yiddishkeit to people young and old. Some of our *musmakhim* have committed themselves to building *frum* Orthodox communities in neighborhoods or environments where Torah and Mitzvot, *Yir'at Shamayim* (God-reverence), and even *Yir'at HaCheit* (fear of doing the wrong thing in the ethical and spiritual realm) were absent. Others have made inclusivity their domain by creating space in schools, hospitals, or organizations where an authentic but welcoming Judaism can flourish, or through exploring ideas and philosophical approaches that lay in territory where more traditional Jews might fear to tread. Some *musmakhim* have brought the rulings of the foremost *poskim* of our generation into secular hospital settings to uplift and guide both Jewish and non-Jewish patients in their hardest and most painful moments.

Through our students and our faculty, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah has begun to lead the movement to reinvigorate and revitalize a modern Orthodoxy that once promised to inspire Orthodox and non-Orthodox Jews throughout America and the world. With passion, reverence for God, openness and inclusiveness, and the most serious and rigorous study of Torah and keeping of Mitvot, we can rebuild Modern Orthodoxy into a movement that truly makes a difference for millions of Jews.

I am proud of the work YCT has done to make Modern Orthodoxy relevant to Judaism, but the work is just beginning. The Jewish world needs to hear even more the voices of our *talmidim* and *musmakhim*, and, crucially, it needs to hear the voices of Rav Dov Linzer, our Rosh HaYeshiva, and our *rebbeim*, such as Rav Ysoscher Katz, who are committed taking the lead in disseminating the kind of Modern Orthodox *halakha* and philosophy that can transform the Jewish world. Long live openness, and may its message, ever relevant, make Modern Orthodoxy a movement we can be proud of.

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

Name:

Rabbi Devin Villarreal

Graduating Class:

2009

Position:

Chair, Department of Jewish Studies;
New Community Jewish High School



About the Rabbi:

Mishlei 22:6, "Train a child according to his way," has guided Rabbi Devin Villarreal's work in Jewish education. To read more about Rabbi Villarreal's important work, and the difference he had made, and is continuing to make, in Jewish education in California, see our newsletter.

If you do not receive the YCT newsletter in your email and would like to, please contact us at slevec@yctorah.org.