

KosherTorah School
for Biblical, Judaic & Spiritual Studies
P.O. Box 628
Tellico Plains, TN. 37385
tel. 423-253-3555
email. koshertorah@wildblue.net
www.KosherTorah.com
Ariel Bar Tzadok, Director, Rabbi

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“Na'aseh v'Nishmah”

by Ariel B Tzadok

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*Heart and Head together are
the Inner Child, and the Inner Parent.*

*When the Torah was received
at Mt Sinai, the Children of Israel,
together as one, proclaimed,
“Na'aseh v'Nishmah,”
(We will do, and we will hear).*



This unusual order of terms is curious. Normally one has to first hear, and listen to what to do, before one can proceed to do it. How can the Children of Israel do the commandments even before hearing them?

The term “Na'aseh” (we will do) signifies the collective willingness of the people to accept the obligation of performing the commandments. They accepted upon themselves this obligation from a position of emotional zeal. Together, as one, the Children of Israel expressed a collective emotional outburst, and proclaimed their willingness to do whatever it is that God would tell them to do.

Right from the beginning, Israel already fulfilled a commandment that they would only later receive, first in oral, and then in written form, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart.” This indeed is the first step in Divine service. However, the first step is by no means the only step!

The term “v'Nish'mah” (and we will listen) also signifies a certain type of collective willingness of the people. But to what does “v'Nishmah” apply? To what have the Children of Israel obligated themselves with this one word? “We will listen” has

nothing to do with the already embraced obligation of obedience. The Children of Israel have already committed themselves to obey. What more is there to do?

Obedience is never enough! Obedience, as blind faith, has never been the Will of God.

While God does want us to willingly embrace His commandments, and to do them, He also wants from us something more. God wants us to develop our intellects, and to discover why His commandments are wise, right, and good. God does not want us to follow Him blindly. He wants us to follow Him with our eyes, and minds wide open, with a full intellectual conviction of the truth, and validity of our actions.

With “We will listen” the Children of Israel obligated themselves to understand God's commandments. The collective people obligated themselves to explore, investigate, and discover the meanings, and purposes underlying God's commandments, and not just to obey them blindly, without thought.

God does not want zombie followers. He wants intelligent, and moral men and women to correctly reflect the Divine “image of God” inherent within us.

Obedience? Yes! But with obedience must come an in-depth understanding of what it is to which one is obedient.

How can one obey a commandment such as observing the Sabbath unless one understands what exactly it means to rest on this day? Sabbath violation was punished by death. Its proper observance was therefore a matter of life or death. One can commit to obey, but without a thorough and proper understanding of the Sabbath's parameters one can easily come to violate any one of its many laws, leaving one subject to dire consequences. Certainly God does not desire this.

Sabbath observance, like all the other commandments, has changed its form and application over many centuries. How the commandments were observed in the days of Moses certainly differ from how they are observed today. This evolution of religious observance is the actual fulfillment of the “We will listen” statement pronounced at Sinai.

With changing times comes changing circumstances. God's commandments need to adapt to the times. Yet, such an adaptation cannot be haphazard, and applied in accordance with personal interpretation. “We will listen” implies the obligation of understanding the underlying essence of the commandments. “We will listen” seeks to understand the “why” of what we are commanded to do, not the “what.”

“What” we are commanded to do, the Children of Israel already obligated themselves to obey with “Na'aseh.” Understanding “why” the commandments were given to us, and why they are important to observe, this is the “v'Nish'mah.”

Doing is one thing. Understanding what one is doing is another. Only together, the deed, with the understanding of the deed, is what God wants from us. Doing without understanding is still obligatory, but it is not the proper way.

Emotional zeal may indeed cause one to become committed to something. Yet, once emotional zeal wears off, as it always does with time, then one must embark on an intellectual quest of understanding in order for one to remain motivated to fulfill one's previous commitment of obedience. In the end, one must come to the conclusion of how the commandments are all rational, logical, and intellectually sound.

The commandments are not purposeless, willy-nilly directives of God, ordained simply to please the Divine Will. All the commandments serve a practical, human-oriented purpose. They are not obligatory upon us for God's sake, but rather for our own sake.

The commandments were not ordained because God has need of us performing them. God has no needs. He does not need us to obey commandments. We human beings are the ones with needs. The commandments were given to us to fulfill human needs, not Divine needs. The commandments give structure, meaning and purpose to life, but only to those who explore them, and then embrace the wisdom therein that is discovered.

At Sinai, the Children of Israel proclaimed, “Na'aseh v'Nish'mah.” This was a two-fold obligation of both heart, and mind. Serving God with all one's heart comes first, but then one must also serve God with all one's mind! This requires of one not only emotional zeal, but also intellectual accomplishment.

One must learn not only HOW to observe the commandments, one must also learn WHY we need to observe them. We are obligated to explore, and discover the wisdom, and rationale of the commandments, and why it is that God gave them to us in the first place.

Only when we understand God, and His Laws, can we come to the level of observance that God wants from us. Learning the laws governing Sabbath observance (for example) is one thing. Learning WHY it is that we observe the Sabbath, and what this observance is supposed to mean to us, and to the world, is another, more important thing.

Uniting the heart and the mind and living a lifestyle that is both emotionally rich, and intellectually satisfying is what the Torah path is all about.

God gave us the commandments to better human society, and to better us as individuals. We need to understand the commandments within their proper context to extract from them their original intents, and meanings. When we understand the commandments, we gain a glimpse into the Mind, and Will of God.

To know God (not just to have faith in Him), is the first of the commandments. Knowledge requires learning, this is a commitment of the mind. Granted, one must first be emotionally committed, but this alone is never enough.

The heart cannot lead. The mind must always lead. We begin with “Na'aseh,” and we conclude with “v'Nishmah.” We begin with heart, and progress to mind. This is the obligation that the Children of Israel zealously, and boldly took upon themselves when they stood at Mt. Sinai.

When one's mind correctly understands the commandments, one shines the inner light of the sefirah Da'at. When one's heart properly loves, and embraces the universal Torah, one shines the inner light of Tiferet. When one performs the commandments in proper form, with clear thought, and a devoted heart, one shines the inner light of Yesod.

Da'at, Tiferet and Yesod form the central column of the sefirotic Tree of Life. The Dalet of Da'at, the Tav of Tiferet, and the Yod of Yesod spell out the Hebrew word Dati. This is the Hebrew word for “religious.” This subtle understanding reveals to us that only the one who reflects the inner lights of Da'at, Tiferet and Yesod can properly be called religious (Dati).

The Hebrew word for light is Ohr, (Alef, Vav, Resh). The numerical value of Ohr is 207. When one shines the inner light of Torah and expresses it as an external light, we have two lights, the inner and the outer. 2×207 (Ohr) = 414. Dati is spelled Dalet, Tav, Yod. The numerical value is 414 (double light). This alone defines the true “Dati” (religious).