

Parashat Mishpatim, 5775, 2015:

*Like Angels Before Hashem*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

R. Simla lectured: When the Israelites gave precedence to “we will do” over “we will understand,” [*naaseh v'nishmah*, *Sefer Shemot* 27:4] six hundred thousand ministering angels came and set two crowns upon each man of Israel, one as a reward for “we will do,” and the other as a reward for “we will understand”...

R. Eleazar said: When the Israelites gave precedence to “we will do” over “we will understand,” 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 L-rd, you angels of His. You mighty in strength, that fulfill his word, that hearken unto the voice of His word’ [*Sefer Tehillim* 103:20]: first they fulfill and then they understand?” (*Talmud Bavli, Shabbat* 88a, *The Soncino Talmud* translation with my emendations for readability)

*Naaseh v'nishmah* are arguably two of the single most important words that appear in our *parasha*, and perhaps, in the entire *Tanach* (Hebrew cannon of Scripture). They straightforwardly declare our people's loyalty to Hashem and His Torah, even in those instances when our intellects fail to perceive the depth and meaning of His everlasting commandments. While we are required to plumb the depths of His holy Torah, we are no less obligated to recognize and embrace the limits of our intellect. Our rationalization of the Mitzvot (i.e. the search for *ta'amei hamitzvot*), therefore, never becomes the reason for our observance of the Mitzvot. Instead, we must observe all commandments as if they were *chukim* (commandments whose reasons currently elude us), since our understanding of the Mitzvot is never the reason for their performance.

Given the above, we are now ready to examine the different, yet complementary, approaches toward understanding *naaseh v'nishmah* that are offered by R. Simla and R. Eleazar. R. Simla's emphasis is upon the *malachai hasharet* (Ministering Angels), who rewarded our ancestors with two crowns of glory; one for "we will do" and one for "we will understand." It is crucial to note that these rewards are not only based upon the content of our utterance and the unmitigated loyalty it conveyed. Rather, the key factor for R. Simla was our willingness to temporarily suspend intellectual judgment and wholeheartedly serve Hashem with the essence of our beings.

In contrast to R. Simla's interpretation, R. Eleazar opined that G-d, in all of His Divine glory, directly recognized the unprecedented actions of the nascent Jewish people in their emulation of the Ministering Angels. This was perceived as an act of authentic spiritual intimacy and communication. Thus, the Almighty exclaimed via "...a Heavenly Voice... 'Who revealed to My children this secret, which is employed by the Ministering Angels [?]'” On the surface, it might appear that Hashem was upset with our forebears. In truth, however, the opposite was the case; G-d's question/declaration was one of joy and happiness at our having discovered this secret of the angels.

In order to enhance our understanding of the over-arching power and significance of this Talmudic passage, let us turn to the contemporary work of Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg. In my view, her skillful utilization of a musical metaphor enables us to better grasp the full power of the faith-gesture inherent in the words "*naaseh v'nishmah*," and their explanation as seen in our Talmudic passage:

In saying, "We shall do and we shall hear! [the literal translation of *nishmah*]" the Talmud implies, the people assume some of the virtuosity of the angels, who are capable

precisely of such a brilliant power of action. Like the virtuoso musician, whose skill makes movement seem to happen before thought (“hearing”) can intervene, the people discover a genius for generous and decisive commitment. All the hesitations that beset the amateur have long been resolved: the fingers fly faster than the eye or ear can observe. In the case of the musician, however, this angelic condition is the fruit of much practice and years of experience. In the case of the [Jewish] people’s response, it is spontaneous, unpracticed.... (*The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus*, page 303, brackets my own)

In sum, for Zornberg, *klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people) emulated “the virtuosity of the angels” and their “brilliant power of action.” This was manifested by our people’s spontaneous “generous and decisive commitment” to G-d and His Torah for all time. Clearly, *naaseh v’nishmah* became the foundation for a fundamentally different and deeper relationship between G-d and our nation.

I believe we are now in a position to more fully appreciate why my rebbi, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1900-1993), labeled the Revelation at Mt. Sinai “our people’s finest hour.” (Public lecture, 1975) Given the Rav’s prodigious intellect and emphasis upon logic and reason, one might very well have thought that he would have championed the Rambam’s perception of the uniqueness of man as being based upon “his thinking capacity” and “his ability to acquire knowledge.” Yet, in the course of his analysis of *naaseh v’nishmah*, the Rav completely repudiates this Maimonidean principle:

If man’s thinking capacity constitutes his singularity, how could G-d ask man to commit to precepts, the rationality of many of which eludes him and of which some actually conflict with his reason? If man’s dignity and humanity are rooted in his intellect, would G-d command a *hukkah*, a *mitzvah* which is beyond human understanding? Why would the angels in heaven salute the *na’aseh venishma* response of the Israelites which, in effect, negated the rational element that is the basis of man’s Divine image? To ask man to act without reason is to bid him to be less human, while G-d created man precisely to be different, to be human. (*Reflections of the Rav: Lessons in Jewish Thought adapted from Lectures of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, Rabbi Abraham R. Besdin, ed., page 90)

Man’s distinctiveness from the rest of creation, according to Rav Soloveitchik, is not to be found in his intellect. Instead, the Rav followed the *mekubalim* (Masters of the

Kabbalah) who suggested that man's "... *ratzon elyon* (higher will) constitutes the singular endowment which distinguishes him from the rest of creation." How are we to understand the nature of this "*ratzon elyon*?" The Rav suggested the following interpretation:

This will makes decisions without consulting the intellect. It is in the center of the spiritual personality and constitutes man's real identity. Man's pragmatic intellect, which weighs pros and cons, is of subordinate stature in man's personality and is called *ratzon tahton*, the lower, practical will. (Ibid., page 91)

This distinction between the *ratzon elyon* and *ratzon tahton* enables us to more profoundly appreciate and understand what transpired at Mt. Sinai when man and G-d encountered one another. For Rabbi Soloveitchik, the depth-level contractual commitment into which we entered marked the ascendancy of the *ratzon elyon* in our relationship with the Almighty forevermore:

When G-d offered the Torah at Mt. Sinai, the Israelites did not ask for a sample, to witness a demonstration, or to accept the Torah for a thirty-day trial period. This would have been the calculated, practical thing to do... The Jewish response was *na'aseh venishma*, which means "we have decided to commit ourselves and, after that, to understand intellectually." The decision was a leap of faith by the *ratzon elyon*, an intuitive sense of what was valid and imperative. The inner soul of man is capable of such bold visions, to transcend mundane considerations in an heroic embrace of what is or must be. (Ibid., pages 95-96)

We are now able to understand why *Chazal* viewed *naaseh v'nishmah* as the paradigm-changing moment in our relationship with Hashem: "Two crowns, they taught, were bestowed upon every Jew, one for *na'aseh* (the *ratzon elyon*) and the second for *nishma* (the *ratzon tahton*), the intellect. Which is the superior perception? Obviously, the *elyon*, which transcends man's intellect." (Ibid., page 96)

I must stress that the Rav in no way disparaged the intellect. He was, perhaps, the greatest Talmudic genius of the 20th century. Moreover, he was the noble scion and pre-eminent

representative of the Brisker methodology of Torah analysis. As such, careful analytic understanding was his matchless hallmark. Equally important to my rebbi, however, was the relentless pursuit of the truth. Thus, he was in the inimitable position of recognizing that “this intellect must acknowledge its limitations” and that:

It is subservient to perceptions of faith. The intellect classifies and applies basic truths which the *ratzon elyon* affirms. This Kabbalistic teaching expresses a cardinal tenet of Judaism. The intellect has boundaries within which it exercises its cognitive powers. The goals of life emanate from within, but the intellect removes inconsistencies, plans implementation, and formulates logical justification. Without the *ratzon elyon*, the Jew could not sustain his commitments to the demanding discipline of *mitzvot* observance and the unshakable faith in our people’s future. (Ibid., page 97)

Each time we read Parashat Mishpatim, we symbolically stand, once gain, at Mt. Sinai. Like our forefathers of old, may we have the *emunah* (faith) to declare *naaseh v’nishmah* from the innermost recesses of our souls. Then, our *ratzon elyon* will reign supreme, and guide us on the ultimate journey of faith toward a deeper relationship with G-d. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email [rdbe718@gmail.com](mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com).

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik’s** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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