

(D-276r)

"JUDAISM'S OPEN SECRET"

In preparing for the revelation at Sinai, Moses read the "Book of the Covenant" (from the beginning of the Torah up to that point) to the Children of Israel. *וְאֵלֶיךָ יֵשְׁעוּ*, "And they said: 'all that the Lord hath spoken we shall do and we shall obey.'" Our Tradition saw in these two words, naaseh ve'nishma, not just an indication of consent but a whole philosophy of religion. For the Tradition did not translate naaseh ve'nishma as "do and obey," but as "do and understand." It is the particular order of that expression, the priority of action to understanding, that was acclaimed by our Sages. They tell us that even God was overwhelmed:

*יְצַוָּהוּ בְּהַקְדֵּם קוֹל מֵאֱלֹהִים וַיִּגְעַשׁ כֵּן לֵב עַלְיוֹתָיו
אֵלֶּיךָ אֱלֹהֵי הָאֱמִנָּה הַזֶּה מְהֵרָה בָּר*

A divine voice issued from heaven and cried out, "Who revealed to My children this secret which only the ministering angels know of?"

But we must be honest. If the Jewish tradition admires the response of naaseh ve'nishma and God was astounded that the secret is out, clearly we moderns are shocked for the opposite reason. The modern temper sees in this attitude a symptom of blind religion, of lack of understanding, of irrationality. Surely an intelligent person seeks to understand before he practices, he seeks to know before he commits himself.

How then can we go along with Judaism's enthusiastic approval of naaseh ve'nishma?

We must understand that we here face two radically different approaches. The modern temper can be characterized as autonomous. Man himself must determine each act, each decision, each challenge. A demand must appeal to his intellect and to his emotion before he commits himself to it. He, man, is the measure of all things. What he does must issue from his internal consent, and not be imposed upon him externally. Judaism, however, is theonomous. Naaseh ve'nishma implies not man as the center of all things, but God. It is the nomos of Theos, the law of God, to which we submit in humility. Judaism regards autonomy in religion as an act of intellectual arrogance and presumptuousness. The Jew must acknowledge that *אֵין חֵכְמָה וְאֵין יוֹשָׁר לִבּוֹ*, there is no wisdom and understanding for man in the presence of God.

Many of us here this morning no doubt experience this clash and conflict in our minds and souls. As moderns, we accept autonomy in most areas of our lives. We like to think that we never do things

without first understanding. Yet, in our Judaism we behave theonomously. We observe the Sabbath; why? We lay tefillin; we do not necessarily understand the reason for the commandment. We all pray; yet we are not all Hebraists.

Permit me first to clarify one point. The philosophy of naaseh ve'nishma, the theonomous attitude of Judaism, should not be interpreted as being anti-intellectual. On the contrary, there is not a religion in the history of mankind that has placed such a premium, such a sublime value, upon intellection. The study of Torah is considered אסור בידים, as outweighing all the other precepts. We pray, immediately before reciting the Shema, אשר ידענו -- to understand, to know, to appreciate, to learn, and to teach. Rather, naaseh ve'nishma means that our commitment is unconditioned by our rational assent, that we submit to the will of God even if we do not understand it or like it at all times. Certainly, we attempt to understand -- but our conduct is independent of our understanding.

However, even with this insight, this naaseh ve'nishma foundation that we accept in our religious lives often makes us feel uncomfortable. How do we explain it, not only to others but to ourselves?

There are three answers that commend themselves. The first of these is that naaseh ve'nishma is the natural way to live Judaism. Judaism is not primarily, if at all, a rational theology. It is halakhah, which means "the way," and אורח חיים, a "way of life." And life is lived before it is comprehended.

Perhaps the best example is language. The natural way of learning a language is to place yourself in an environment where it is spoken, and to begin to immitate, to practice, and to speak. Only later do you learn the rules of the language, the grammar and the syntax. The artificial way is to learn the rules first, and then try to piece them together into the form of a living language. The same would hold true for walking. A child learns to walk not by analyzing the principles of mechanics and the laws of physics, but by actually attempting to walk; only when he is much older does he learn, if ever, how it is that a human being walks. But when scientists construct a robot, they first must know all the mechanical principles, and only then does the machine begin to "walk."

If Judaism is to be native to us and not a foreignism, if it is to be natural and not mechanical or imposed or external, and if Jews are to be religiously vital and responsive and not automatons, then we must respond to God and to Torah with the words naaseh ve'nishma.

It is for this reason that our Day Schools do not simply assemble children and give them a crash-course on "the beauty of Judaism." To explain theological principles is not the ideal way to make Jews. We must teach them first to live as Jews, to practice, to conduct themselves in a certain fashion. Only then do we proceed from naaseh to nishma, from doing to understanding. I admit, that living in the contemporary world with its emphasis on autonomy, this raises problems for children who, prematurely, are challenged to explain actions that cannot be understood except when they are much older. Certainly, we ought to strengthen the curriculum of our Day Schools and yeshivot in such areas as explaining the commandments, the philosophy of Judaism, its world-outlook. Nevertheless, it has been our experience with many of the young people who come to Yeshiva University on the college level from homes almost entirely devoid of Jewish content, that they have been attracted initially because we appealed to their autonomous outlook, because of explanations of various commandments, because we endeavored to show them the beauty of Judaism. But after they have come in to the Jewish life itself, when they have immersed themselves in authentic Jewish living, they then opt for natural Judaism, for the theonomous approach, for naaseh ve'nishma. They become impatient with the often superficial and tentative reasons we advance, and they understand that living Judaism is its own explanation. They appreciate that religion, to be authentic, must be theonomous and not autonomous.

The second value we find in the naaseh ve'nishma approach is: love. When you love, you do the bidding of the beloved even before you understand.

Why do parents suffer and work for children? Those who have rational explanations such as the expectation of compensation, are fooling themselves. They are doomed to frustration. We do it only for one reason: love. If that is present, no other reasons are necessary. If it is absent, all the other reasons do not suffice.

It is told of Mrs. Albert Einstein that she was asked if she understood Prof. Einstein's Theory of Relativity. "No," she replied, "I do not understand Prof. Einstein's Theory of Relativity, but I understand -- Professor Einstein."

Love is the willingness to do what the beloved asks of me simply because he or she wants it. That is sufficient for me. And for Judaism one of the very highest ideals is the love between God and man.

And love evokes love. In one version of the divine reaction to the Israelites' response to naaseh ve'nishma, we read (M. Tanh., Tetzaveh):

וַיִּפֹּל אֱלֹהִים בְּאַהֲבָה עִמָּם
... וַיִּשְׁמָע אֱלֹהִים בְּהֶאֱמָתָם

"When the Israelites were on Mount Sinai and said, 'all that the Lord hath said we shall do and understand,' immediately God fell in love with them..." When the Jews angelically said naaseh ve'nishma and revealed their love for God, He requited their love with His affection for them.

Only if one observes Shabbat out of love rather than selectively choosing those laws he "understands," will he derive the ultimate satisfaction of נִשְׁמָע בְּאַהֲבָה, of enjoying the Sabbath. Only if one prays out of love, and not as an exercise in Hebrew grammar or philology, will he derive the fulfillment and the emotional experience of prayer. Only if one follows all the commandments, and not only those that temporarily appeal to his superficial intellect, will he derive the full religious benefits that comes from a way of Jewish life.

The Talmud (Shab. 88a) relates that a pagan (or Saducee) saw the great rabbi Rava who was so engrossed in his studies that he did not realize that the low stool on which he was sitting had one of the legs pressing on the finger of one of his hands. So hard was he pressing, and so preoccupied was he in his study, that he did not realize that the finger was injured and bleeding. Whereupon the intruder said to him, לֵבָד לֵבָד -- impatient people, thoughtless and mindless and impulsive Jews! At the very beginning of your history you put your mouth before your ears (when you said naaseh ve'nishma), and you are still as impulsive as you once were. First you should have said nishma, to understand what you are letting yourself in for, and only after you knew what you are doing should you have said naaseh. And that same impulsiveness at Mt. Sinai is still present in your neglect of everything but the mitzvah in which you are now so engrossed. To which Rava answered in three simple words: אֵלֵינוּ אֶהְיֶה, which according to Rash means: we are a people greatly in love (with God). When you love, you respond by immediate and impulsive affirmation of the request made of you, even before you understand. Nothing else is important.

Where there is love, full comprehension can wait. Where there is love, we will do even while we doubt. Where there is love, we will try to please God even while questioning. Where there is love, we will follow the halakhah and then study and inquire. Where there is love, every word of prayer and every Jewish act will be consecrated בְּשֵׁם שְׁמַיָּהוּ, for the sake of Heaven. Where there is love, you

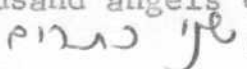
can even step on our toes, even draw blood, and we will never desist and never abandon Torah and Judaism. Naaseh ve'nishma!

Finally, the theonomous principle of naaseh ve'nishma entails the act of discipline and self-restraint, without which religion has no spiritual and existential meaning.

In the story of Rava we just cited, he sat with his hands under his feet, under the stool, no doubt so as to restrain himself from following the thousand and one "needs" that distracted him from his study. Do we not find ourselves in similar circumstances -- usually without the discipline that Rava exercised? We each of us have a hundred reasons not to "daven," not to study Torah, not to give charity, and not observe family purity. Is this not a typical circumstance: you try to study Torah and you find so many things clamoring for your attention and beckoning to you -- the refrigerator, the telephone, the children, other work, television -- everything but study. To be a genuine Jew means to put aside all rationalizations and distractions and say firmly, and once and for all, naaseh ve'nishma!

That great Hasidic advocate of our people, the Berditchever Rebbe, once pleaded for Israel in the following manner: Look, Almighty, at the kind of people You have. When the Czar prohibits stealing and dealing in contraband, he has courts and judges and police and jailers and all kinds of brutality to force the people to follow the right way. Yet, the jails are full, and stealing is rife throughout the land. But You say in just one little verse that it is forbidden for us to eat hametz on Passover -- and here it is half a day before Passover and you will not find a half a crumb of hametz in a single Jewish home in this town!

There is something majestic in this theonomous naaseh ve'nishma which gives a man this power of restraint, this heroism of discipline, this magisterial power of renunciation.

So it is that another version of God's reaction (Shab. 88a) tells us that when the Israelites said naaseh before nishma, 600 thousand angels came down and tied on the head of each Jew , two crowns, one for naaseh and one for nishma!

"Crowns" as a reward for the response of naaseh ve'nishma are indicative not only of a religious soul, but symbolize a kind of piety which is aristocratic, royal, majestic.

So, the theonomous basis of Judaism, naaseh ve'nishma has shown to reveal these three values: naturalness, love, and discipline. These are three qualities that, in our view, make naaseh ve'nishma more valid than and preferable to the autonomous approach to

religion which destroys the integrity and consistency of Judaism and leaves it artificial and dry and without majestic sweep.

Perhaps the three values may be said to be summarized and hinted at in one of the prayers we recite every morning. The Tradition, as we mentioned at the outset, attributed the "secret" of theonomy to the angels. And about the angels we say,
 כולם אלהים, כולם ברוכים, כולם גבורים.

"They are all beloved" -- the element of love.

"They are all pure" -- i.e., natural, straightforward.

"They are all mighty" -- disciplined, for, as the Sages taught, "Who is mighty? He who restrains his instincts."

All three elements are thus present.
 וְכָל הַמַּלְאָכִים בְּאֵימָה וּבִירְאָה וּבִפְחָד - "And all perform in fear and trepidation the will of their Maker." They are theonomous.

We start with naaseh, with a code of conduct, and we then progress to nishma, to understanding, to full comprehension. The ultimate ideal is for nishma to be fulfilled to such an extent that both halves of the equation are equal: Naaseh and nishma.

So the secret is out: "Who revealed this secret to My Children?" This is Judaism's open secret: we shall do and we shall understand. It is an angelic approach. It is the way humans try to be more than human.

Despite its difficulties, its challenge to man's intellectual pretention, and its strangeness in the modern autonomous culture, it has its reward.

For when the Jew proclaims naaseh ve'nishma, the response of God, according to the Psalmist, is equivalent. We might call it, "God's yaaseh veyishmah," He will do and He will understand. For thus do we read:
 וְהָיָה כִּי יִשְׁמַע יְיָ בְּקוֹלָם וְיַעֲשֶׂה לְהִשְׁמָתָם, "the will of them that revere Him He shall do, and their prayer shall He hear (understand, sympathize) -- and He shall help them."