

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Mishpatim)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From **Rav Binny Freedman**

Sunday mornings for me, even twenty years later, still have a tinge of sadness. While Westerners most often view Sunday morning as the chance to sleep late, relax with the family, and catch up on the news, for most Israeli soldiers it is the most depressing moment of the week.

Every Sunday morning, all over the country, soldiers begin their long, weary trek back to their bases and the duties that await them. The weekend is over, and with it the freedom to be master of one's own time, if only for a while. The thought of heading back to the hellish reality of gray & olive green, yelling and running, patrols and battle-rations ruins many a Saturday night in Israel.

I still remember, in Officer's course, when they decided to begin flying us down to base. It is astronomically costly to put a cadet through tank officer's training, and the powers that be decided it was more efficient and economical to get us down to base faster rather than waste eight hours on buses deep into the Negev desert. As painful as Sunday mornings were, these flights took us to new depths of depression. Instead of having five or six hours on a long bus-ride to acclimate ourselves back to the reality of army life, we would arrive at the stark, gray, air force terminal, get on a plane at 10AM, and by 11, we were already working on the tanks.

There was one curious detail to these Sunday mornings. I don't know how they managed it, especially considering the security clearance necessary to enter the military terminal, but every Sunday morning, without fail, there were always two Lubavitch (Chabad) Chassidim offering the guys a chance to put on tefillin. Most often, the guys made fun of them, with the occasional joker taking a turn at 'the tefillin game' in between stories of his Saturday night conquests... (Though the week we went up to Lebanon, there was a large group who thought of it as extra third party insurance...!)

*I always wondered what the value of such an action really was. Wouldn't it have been more valuable, if someone was willing to invest a few moments, to explore the philosophy, or **why** of the mitzvah, rather than simply 'perform' an action almost divested of any meaning?*

On the other hand, someone wrapping tefillin on their arm does indeed fulfill the mitzvah of tefillin. So what is the relationship between what we do, and our need to understand the purpose of our actions?

This question of finding the balance between the doing and understanding seems to be very clearly resolved in an oft-quoted verse from this week's portion, *Mishpatim*. The Jewish response to Hashem's desire to give us the Torah is two words:

*"Na'aseh Ve'Nishma"
'We will do, and (then) we will listen'*

The Jewish people, presented with the opportunity to receive the Torah from G-d, rather than question its contents, or explore its values, simply respond that they are willing to accept it, sight unseen. 'Just tell us what to do', exclaim the Jews, later you'll let us know what it's all about!

Jewish tradition extols the virtue of this moment, describing it as an extraordinary leap of faith, which formed the basis for our relationship with Hashem and His Torah. Indeed, the Talmud (Tractate Shabbat 88a) has G-d Himself proclaim, regarding this statement:

“Mi Gilah Le’Banai Raz Zeh...?”

‘Who’, asks G-d, ‘revealed this secret, (used by the angels) to my children?’

This statement is so powerful; it is deemed positively angelic, resonating with the essence of angels who perform Hashem’s service, irrespective of the purpose behind their mission...

But is this really the ideal? Does Judaism encourage us to completely abrogate the all-important faculty of intellect? Am I not supposed to question?

The **Sefer HaChinuch** (Book of Knowledge), written by an unknown but widely accepted medieval commentator, was one of the first works of its kind, exploring the philosophical underpinnings of the mitzvot in the Torah. In his introduction, he explains that there are those who will suggest that “Tzaddik Be’Emunato Yichyeh”, the truly righteous live by faith alone, implying that if one truly believes, there is no need for understanding. To them the Chinuch responds with the verse:

“K’sil Ba’Choshech Ye’halech”;

“A fool walks in darkness”.

In essence, G-d gives us an intellect, and we are meant to use it!

In fact, one wonders *how* the Jewish people were meant to fulfill the Torah (the “Na’aseh”, or ‘doing’), without first exploring it! How could they know what Hashem wanted them to do, if they did not first study what the mitzvot were all about?

Indeed, this is precisely the question of Rabbeinu Yonah on the Mishnah in **Ethics of the Fathers** (3:9), which says that the main thing is not the study, but rather the action. Whereas the Mishna seems to be pointing out that the purpose of study must always be the ethical behavior it hopefully leads to, here, in our portion of Mishpatim, the implication of “*Na’aseh ve’Nishma*” (‘*We will do, and (then) we will listen*’) is that the action *precedes* the study, and is not dependant on it at all, which seems to be completely illogical!

And even more challenging: what does this say about our relationship with the giving of Torah in the first place?

Imagine you are in the process of a business negotiation, and are about to sign on a new partner. So you prepare a long and complicated contract and get together to share it with him for his perusal. And imagine he walks in and says: ‘No problem!’ I don’t need to look at this, signs the 200 page contract and runs off to his tennis game. You would begin to wonder whether you had the right partner! How intelligent is a person if he is presented with a complex contract and doesn’t even bother to look at it? What sort of attitude does that represent? Certainly one would wonder about the perspective and dedication of a person with such an attitude.

So how could the Jewish people, presented with the greatest book ever written, not want to peruse its contents? How could we just accept it at face value, without utilizing the intellect that Hashem gave us: a gift that ultimately elevates us above the animal?

Rav Avigdor Nevehnsal, in his *Iyunim* on Sefer Shemot, points out that everything depends on who the author is. Obviously, if I were about to sign a business contract, it would be foolish not to examine closely the contents of that contract. But what if the person giving me the contract is my father? Well, then the idea of closely examining the contract is ridiculous. If my father, who loves me so deeply, who brought me in to this world, and who wants only the best for me, were asking me to sign something, then why would I even waste the time looking at the document? In such a case, having not read or even seen the contract, the question is not how could I sign? The question is: how could I *not* sign?

You see, everything begins with the relationship. If Hashem, who brought me into this world, is giving me something, how could it not be good? Judaism does not suggest that my relationship is based on the fact that Hashem created me. It is, rather, based on the idea that Hashem creates me *all over again*, every day. And whatever Hashem gives me on this day, is the gift I am given by the Endless One, who gave me the day to begin with. Why would I not want whatever Hashem wants to give me?

So the Jewish people at Sinai were not abandoning logic, they were actually employing the only logical response possible. Every relationship, ultimately, begins with trust; the willingness to allow myself to be totally in someone else's hands.

In 1967, with the lightning victories that saw the Israeli Defense Forces return to Jerusalem, conquer the Golan Heights, and re-claim all of Judea and Samaria, the slogan that spread through the country was "Kol Hakavod Le'Tzahal", 'hats off to the IDF'.

But in 1973, as Israel digested the enormity of the brink from which they had been saved, when a mere battalion of thirty some odd tanks were somehow able to withstand the onslaught of two full divisions of (650) Syrian tanks in the Golan, a very different saying took hold of the State of Israel:

"Yisrael Betach Be'Hashem" The nation of Israel has trust- *bitachon*- in G-d.

To anyone willing to see, in those frightening hours of Yom Kippur, we were very much in the hands of G-d.

And this is one of the hardest aspects of any healthy relationship; to allow ourselves to be vulnerable and even dependant; to admit that 'I need you'. For so many people this is so hard... But there are very few things in this world as holy as the gift of showing someone else that you really need them.

And if love is all about giving, then trust is all about learning to receive. If I am doing all the giving, and you're not learning to love me back, then it may be loving-kindness (Chesed), but it's not a relationship. Relationships are about give and take, which is all about trust.

The more I learn to trust, the more I learn to love. And it is my intellect; the capacity to reason, that becomes the basis for this trust, which allows love to grow...

That is the first step: "*Na'aseh*"; if you are asking me, then that is what I will do; it is really what I long to do...whatever you are giving I am ready to receive.

I recall once, coming home from as long trip to the States. There is no feeling like coming home, and if that home is in the mountains of Judea, just south of Jerusalem, and if your wife and four incredible children are waiting for you in that home; it just doesn't get better than that.

And I would always pause for a moment, after knocking (there is a tradition to always knock before entering a home, even your own...) before entering the house, just to revel in that moment. Hearing the sounds of my children, running to the door because they know Abba (Dad) is on the other side; experiencing a moment of pure, unabashed recognition of all the blessings in life, I was about to open the door when I suddenly hear my wife's voice: "DON'T COME IN!!"

Now, this is a strange thing to hear, especially after nearly two weeks away from home, and considering that my wife knows that it's me at the door... But you know what? If my wife says don't come in, then I'm not coming in...

So I wait at the door, somewhat puzzled for a couple of minutes, and finally one of the kids opens the door, and my wife isn't even at the door. But there is a reason, I'm sure...

So understand, if you really have a relationship with someone then you know there is a reason. And I know how much my wife loves me, so why would she ask me to do something that wasn't good for me?

Only later, when I find out why she behaved so strangely, when I discover one of the kids was sick and threw up by the front door, and my wife didn't want me to walk in and slide thru a pile of ... do I realize all over again how blessed I am. Because if my wife was away for two weeks while I had to do everything in the house, and our kid had just thrown up, well, she would be arriving just in time to darn well clean it up herself!!

And when I later find out what that trust was really based on, then my relationship grows even deeper...

That is the second stage; Nishma... when I find out what its all about. Nishma is the desire, born of the depth of my relationship with Hashem, to discover what it is really all about...I so want to know what Hashem has given me, because I want to love Him even more...

The true challenge of intellect is to know when to apply it, and when to let it go. If everything must always be analyzed, there is very little room for a relationship to grow. At a certain point in every relationship, you have to be willing to take a leap of faith. You have to be willing to accept that you don't, and in fact will never have all the answers.

If every soldier needed to understand every order he received, you'd never be able to take a hill. Long ago, an officer of mine taught me that the true meaning of being an officer was not about getting through the grueling training. The real question is: can you become the type of officer whose men will follow you anywhere?

That only comes from a deep trust... In fact, one of the greatest experiences is when you reach that point of recognizing that there are many things that will forever remain beyond our ability to understand...

Ultimately, faith begins, where reasoning ends, and that is the balance of *Na'aseh and Nishma*...

Love is a good example of the balance between faith and reason. You have to begin with logic, but for love to succeed, you have to take a leap beyond logic. And that's when love grows.

Rav Shlomo once pointed out, that some of the greatest moments of love begin with the phrase: "close your eyes!" Love's greatest moments begin with the willingness to take that leap into the unknown. On the other hand, you wouldn't respond to that request by closing your eyes, if you were on the NY subway, and the person speaking was a complete stranger...it is reason that calls faith to come and take its place at

the table. Ultimately, we need to find the balance of Na'aseh and Nishma; to discover the relationship that allows us to take those leaps, and to come back to the meaning of those leaps, to allow the relationship to grow.

You never know what Hashem is giving you, nor where it is coming from, much less where it is headed. And there are no guarantees in this world...

But if we are blessed to know, above all else, that whatever Hashem does is coming from a good place, for a good purpose, then whether we are ever blessed to understand that purpose or not, it will always, ultimately be something we are able to receive...

And the real secret of the Jewish people's ability to utter the words, and be willing to leap first, and understand later, came from the fact that more than at any other moment in history, at Sinai we were truly, in the words of the Talmud, "One people, with one heart."

Shabbat Shalom,

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