

Accepting the Torah - Then and Now

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Based on a *sicha* by Harav Aharon Lichtenstein

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In the *parashot* of *Yitro* and *Mishpatim*, the Jewish People undergo a process of conversion and acceptance of the Torah. The fundamental transition from being a non-Jew to being a Jew is the stage that we read about in *parashat Yitro*. But even for a person who enters the covenant, there are still different stages we can speak of. Let us proceed from the assumption – and Ramban (24:1) quotes a debate between the *Tannaim* in this regard – that, according to the literal text, the second stage of this process occurs at the end of *parashat Mishpatim*, in “the covenant of the basins.” The Sages point out a difference in the formulation of the nation’s response in *parashat Mishpatim* and in *parashat Yitro*. In the preparations for receiving the Torah, we are told that Moshe came to the people and they all said, “All that God has said – we shall do” (19:8). In *parashat Mishpatim*, as they are about to enter into the covenant of the basins, we are told: “He took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people, and all the people said: All that God has spoken – we shall do and we shall obey” (24:7).

The expression “*Na’aseh ve-nishma*, We shall do and we shall obey,” as opposed to simply “*Na’aseh*, We shall do,” has become a cornerstone of our faith. Chazal teach that this was a secret kept by the ministering angels, which was adopted by Bnei Yisrael, and God declared: “Who revealed this secret to My children?” This, of course, expresses the acceptance of the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven, which precedes acceptance of the yoke of the commandments. The yoke of the commandments is also a comprehensive commitment, but acceptance of the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven is the fundamental commitment of a Jew’s life: “Nullify your will before His will.” It is this level that was attained here, but not in *parashat Yitro*, prior to the revelation at Sinai.

We may ask what happened in between, and what brought about such a revolutionary change in such a short time that Bnei Yisrael were able to declare, “*Na’aseh ve-nishma*,” to grasp the axiom of the ministering angels, rather than merely promising, “*Na’aseh*”? If we follow the text from the middle of *Yitro* to the end of *Mishpatim* and try to discover what happened between the previous declaration and this one, we can point to three elements.

The first, of course, is the actual revelation at Sinai. This event, with the forging of the covenant that it entailed, was not just an experience one undergoes that leads to a change in status. This was a revelation of the Divine Presence, to which, Chazal say, Bnei Yisrael reacted with both fear and attraction. This great and awesome event had the power to bring about not only a legal change, but an existential revolution. All those who experienced it attained new understanding of the love and fear of God – and this, of course, in addition to the halakhic change of status. A proselyte who has undergone conversion is like one born anew; Bnei Yisrael were reborn at Sinai.

Secondly, following the giving of the Torah came *parashat Mishpatim*. I do not know how much Moshe could have taught all at once, but our impression is that there was serious involvement in Torah and Torah study. The nation began to absorb the teachings on the level of study, as well as on the existential level. Once they had embarked on this process, a new dimension was added to their Divine service, their personality, their connection to the Torah they had received but still did not know clearly. Now they began to learn the details and internalize them. They began to understand that this was the word of God - not just a matter of learning about an ox that gores another, but a profound connection with Divine service, a consciousness of “placing God before me always.”

The third element pertains to the contents of *parashat Mishpatim*. The connection to God through learning Torah may arise in any context; any sphere of Torah study that a person engages in has the power to bring him to an encounter with God. But *parashat Mishpatim* deals principally with the inter-personal laws that are meant to mold society. “These are the laws (judgments) that you shall place before them” – before whom? On the purely halakhic level, Chazal teach – “‘Before them’ [i.e., authorized rabbinic judges] and not before non-Jewish [judges] and not before non-ordained [judges].” The judgments must be presented to people who are able to acquire Torah and to implement Torah. But Ramban (21:1) emphasizes that this is not the only aspect of the command. He views *parashat Mishpatim* as containing the details of the Ten Commandments, and therefore maintains that “before them” means before every Jew. Each individual, and society as a whole, accepted and implemented the details of the law.

Thus, what was added in *Mishpatim*, and what facilitated the transition from “*na’aseh*” to “*na’aseh ve-nishma*,” was threefold: first, the purely religious aspect of the revelation at Sinai, including its experiential and personal dimension; second – and no less important – the involvement in study and the deepening knowledge of Torah; and third, Torah experience and knowledge implemented on both the personal and societal levels.

These three factors, on the personal and national levels, provided the impetus for the transition from the first stage, accepting the Torah, to the second stage, sacrifice. These events – the giving of the Torah and its acceptance – were, of course, one-time events in history, but they still present a model for all future generations, both on the communal and personal levels.

Just as the Jews entered the covenant in *parashat Yitro*, yet did not suffice with that level and rose to a higher level – both in terms of quantity of *mitzvot* and quality of learning and observance – in *parashat Mishpatim*, so must we rise to ever higher levels. Once you have accepted the Torah, or entered yeshiva – that is the beginning of the path; it is an important gateway to continued personal growth and the foundation for the rest of your life. But what we learn from the story of the giving of the Torah is that there is more. Once a person is immersed in Torah, there are still further objectives: deepening the covenant, reinforcing it, adding to it in terms of quantity and quality.

Our ascent, on a personal and communal level, is facilitated by same factors that the Jews experienced between *Yitro* and *Mishpatim*. First, the purely religious dimension – the experience of holiness, the acceptance of the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven and the acceptance of the yoke of the commandments – is a powerful stimulus to religious growth. Second, Torah study, when conducted as part of one's Divine service and not simply as part of one's intellectual activity and satisfaction of one's curiosity, will also lead to progress. Third, the molding of a society that displays cohesion and mutual responsibility has both social and religious significance.

When measuring our progress in Divine service and fear of heaven, in Torah study, and in social and moral sensitivity, we must not judge only whether we have risen to higher levels than in the past, but also whether this progress has been in keeping with the potential and the possibilities that are open to us. Have we made the most of the possibilities offered to us – in terms of our study, in terms of our interpersonal relations, in terms of our service of God? Here we are required to examine ourselves, objectively, to ensure that we will progress from “*na'aseh*” to “*na'aseh ve-nishma*.” Our observance of *mitzvot* and study of Torah must proceed not only from a sense of duty, but also from the feeling that “Happy are we, how good is our portion.” We must ensure not only that we put in maximal effort, but that we sense the existential vitality of Torah, the excitement and life-giving quality of Torah. Only then will we truly be able to declare, “*Na'aseh ve-nishma*.”

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