

We will do... and therefore understand: A Reflection for Shavuot

“Na’aseh V’Nishmah”- we shall do and we shall understand. With these words, the Jewish people accepted the covenantal responsibility of being God’s people at Mount Sinai. (See Exodus ch. 24) Many commentators have noticed the syntax of the phrase, noting that it makes more logical sense to say “Nishmah V’Naaseh”, we will listen and then we will do. Before one enters into an agreement, one wants to know the stipulations and requirements and consider the options. Only then does an individual go into a contractual relationship. In this situation, the Jewish people decide to obligate themselves and their progeny to fulfill the Torah.

The Talmud (shabbat 88a) notes this strange anomaly and records a story between a Sadducee (in this context a heretic) and the famous amora Rava.

There was a Sadducee who saw Rava studying a Talmudic matter, and Rava had put the fingers of his hands under his legs and he was crushing them and his fingers were flowing with blood. The Sadducee said to Rava, “Oh impulsive one, who put their mouth before their ears. You still persevere in your impulsiveness. First you should have heard the commandments so you would know whether you are able to accept them. And if you did not hear them first, you should never have accepted them!”

The argument of Sadducee seems to contain an incontrovertible logic: from his perspective, he sees an individual burdened down by an externally imposed law. Sitting in a seat with hands bleeding, the Sadducee sees a pathetic individual who is the victim of his own folly and now paying the price. If I was to give an analogy, Rava is like a slave, toiling day in and day out, who voluntarily enslaved himself without even knowing what it entailed!

But the story does not end there, for the acceptance of the Torah was anything but impetuous, but reflected a fundamental difference in world view. Quoting Proverbs 11:3, Rava replied;

For those of us who go in the ways of complete faith, it is written about us “The perfect faith of the upright shall lead them.” For those people who go in the way of perverseness, it is written about them, “and the perverseness of the faithless shall destroy them.”

Very eloquent, but what does Rava mean? How has he responded to the challenge of the Sadducee? In these words, Rava is turning the tables on the Sadducee. While the Sadducee claims to be quoting logic, what it really reflects is an utter lack of moral fiber and commitment. The Sadducee has a serious vision problem, because he cannot see farther than his nose, and has no idea what it is to live meaningfully, and what a faithful gesture entails.

Rava speaks from the language of faith. People who are upright, who want to

grow, may suffer, but their life is defined by purpose and meaning. The Sadducee misreads the bleeding hands; they do not tell a story of absurdity but rather of gravitas. Serious existential issues are being worked out, matters that require the entire human person and his commitments. For an aesthete like the Sadducee, these matters cannot be understood.

Interestingly, at the covenantal ceremony quoted above, blood also played a prominent role. Sacrifices were offered, and blood was thrown on both the altar as well as the people. Now blood in Jewish thought represents that which animates all life. At the covenantal moment, the people and God's destiny are symbolically intertwined. In our narrative, Rava continues that covenantal moment; he is bloodied because that is what the covenantal requires to make it real- ultimate commitments.¹

We all have ultimate commitments. Curiously, most of the things we do are not because we objectively analyzed the options and came to a decision. Rather we commit to these things because on the deepest levels those things speak to our soul. We know that through involving ourselves in these things, we will more fully understand ourselves, and our role in the world. We may bleed, but that is the price for really living. Without these commitments, we do not bleed, because we are really not alive.²

Consider marriage. People obviously make rational considerations when deciding to marry, but the ultimate decision flows from love, a feeling that two lives' should be inextricably linked; it is a decision to weave two narratives together into a bigger narrative. These decisions present themselves before a person with no real way to arbitrate, because one will never completely know another. It is based upon Na'aseh V'Nishmah- we will do and we will understand.

This is the moment of Sinai, and the meaning of these words. Sinai was the wedding between the Jewish people and God. It was the decision to 'weave narratives together' into a greater narrative on a personal and national level. Based upon this, we can reread the phrase "Na'aseh V'Nishmah"; it is not 'we will do and we will hear', but rather the conjunctive *vav* in the phrase is causative- 'we will do and therefore understand'. We ultimately understand the true value of what we are given in life, what we have, when we commit to them. If not, the greatest gift in the world could be right in front of us, and we would not even know.

May we learn the lesson of Manasseh V'nishmah in all aspects of our lives- as Jews and as human beings.

¹ It is no coincidence that blood is used in both the brit milah (circumcision) and the Paschal offering (in ancient times). Both are covenantal entry rituals on an individual and collective level.

² This notion is expressed poignantly- and tragically- in the wonderful new film, "Up in the Air", where a corporate hatchet man (George Clooney) tries to insulate his life from all connections and commitments, and comes to a painful realization that he has not really lived.