

Parashat Mishpatim 5780, 2020:

## *The Meaning of Na'aseh v'Nishmah*

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, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

*Na'aseh v'nishmah* —We will do, and we will hear and understand — are two of the most celebrated words that appear in Parashat Mishpatim. (24:7) In some ways, this phrase builds upon an earlier expression found in Parashat Yitro: “All that Hashem has spoken *na'aseh* —we will do,” that is preceded by the introductory statement, “And all the people replied *yachdov* — in unison...” (19:8) This leads us to ask a classic exegetical question: “Why does the Torah utilize the term, ‘*yachdov*’ in reference to ‘*na'aseh*,’ but refrain from doing so when it states our forebears proclaimed, ‘*na'aseh v'nishmah* in our *parasha*?’”

One very beautiful answer to our question is offered by the Chortkover Rebbe *zatzal*, as summarized by Rabbi Yaakov Neuberger, a *rosh yeshiva* at Yeshivat Rabbi Yitzchak Elchanan Theological Seminary:

The [Chortkover Rebbe] suggests that when it comes to performing *mitzvos*, simply *na'aseh*, we seem unified and in fact do all the same activities. Yet we differ in the way that we understand the *mitzvos* and in the manner in which they impact upon us and inspire us. Thus, the “*na'aseh*” of Torah is “*yachdov*” but the “*nishmah*” of Torah will be as different as our hearts, minds and souls are from each other. (*Personalized vs. Standardized Observance of Mitzvot*, Parashat Mishpatim, 2010, Torahweb.org, underlining my own)

In sum, the Chortkover Rebbe differentiates between *ma'aseh hamitzvah* (performance of the *mitzvah*) and *havanat hamitzvah* (comprehension of the *mitzvah*). Since *na'aseh*, the

*ma'aseh hamitzvah*, is universal in nature, the Torah uses *yachdov* to indicate that all Jews perform the *mitzvot* in nearly the same manner. *Nishmah*, or *havanat hamitzvah*, is an entirely different matter, as it reflects our differentiated cognitive abilities and the degree of emotional and spiritual engagement that we have with the *mitzvah*. Therefore, *yachdov* is not used in reference to *nishmah*, since the act of understanding is unique to each individual.

The change from *na'aseh b'yachdov* in Parashat Yitro to *na'aseh v'nishmah* without *yachdov* in our *parasha* may now be viewed as a positive transformation, rather than a loss of *achdut* — unity. It represents our nascent spiritual development as a nation comprised of very different people — all searching for Hashem and performing His *mitzvot* in their own individual manner. As Rav Neuberger suggests:

We then realized how differently we perceived the very same facts, how they touched us distinctively and inspired us idiosyncratically. Through the appreciation of meaningful Torah study [that is, *nishmah*], we allowed ourselves to cede the “*yachdov*” and embrace, through the practice of the very same *mitzvot*, a depth that was private and personal.

With Hashem's help and our fervent desire, may we ever sound the clarion call of *na'aseh v'nishmah* as we stand as new links in the great chain of Jewish being forged so long ago, and forevermore, on Mount Sinai. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>  
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha's* name.

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 <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* 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. Please click on the highlighted link.