

Listen

By Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

Life has become complicated of late. The world says that there is a communication explosion, but in reality, it is anything but. In the days before this explosion, people would communicate through the written and spoken word. They would visit friends and sit and talk together for hours.

People who lived far from each other would write letters – nice, long letters – filled with what was going on in their lives, with touches of philosophy and questions about how the other person was doing. People would call their friends and keep in touch every once in a while.

No more. People don't talk or write letters anymore. They text or WhatsApp a few words here and there. If someone has a simcha – let's say their son got engaged – they don't call their friends to share the news with them. Instead, they WhatsApp them, and then the friends WhatsApp back a smiley face, and that's the end of the conversation.

Due to the communication explosion, with information coming at us from so many digital sources, people don't have time or patience to listen to anyone. And without listening, we don't know much. We have become accustomed to skimming. We skim articles, we skim texts, and when we listen, we are also skimming. We hear one word out of three, because while the other person is talking, we are busy skimming on our phone to catch up on the latest.

A prerequisite for being a Jew is having the ability to listen. To be a ben Torah, you have to be able to listen, to read and to learn, for if you don't have a teacher and all you can do is skim your way through the parsha, Gemara, Shulchan Aruch and seforim, you can't be a shomer Torah umitzvos.

In this week's parsha, we learn of the Jewish slave who wishes to remain indentured to his master and doesn't want to return home to his wife and family. The Torah says that the slave must have his ear punctured (Shemos 21:6). Chazal explain that this is a punishment for not listening to the word of Hashem.

Hashem commanded that the Jewish people not steal, and this fellow went out and stole. He was not able to repay what he took, so he was sold as a slave, with the proceeds going to the victim of his crime. By refusing to return to a life of freedom, he is again defying the word of Hashem, who said that the Jewish people should be His servants and not slaves to other humans.

Later on in the parsha, we encounter the two words that depict the acceptance of the Torah by the Bnei Yisroel: "Naaseh venishma." It is noteworthy that although they are connected to Matan

Torah, which was described in last week's parsha, Yisro, they appear this week in Parshas Mishpotim.

The posuk (24:3) states, "And all the people answered in one voice and said, 'We will do – naaseh – everything that Hashem has spoken.'" The posuk (24:7) says that Moshe read the Sefer Habris to the Jewish people gathered at the foot of Har Sinai. In response, the Jews called out, "Naaseh venishma."

Chazal in Maseches Shabbos (88) relate that when Hashem heard the Bnei Yisroel say, "Naaseh venishma," He asked, "Who revealed to the Bnei Yisroel the special secret that is used by angels?"

What is so special about those words that they are described as a phrase more suited to celestial spheres than to our own? Seemingly, the explanation is that they embody the total subservience of malochim, who follow Hashem's every command. Man's recitation of the phrase was an implicit agreement to follow Hashem's commandments.

However, the people who proclaimed "Naaseh venishma" had been redeemed from Mitzrayim and seen great revelations. Awed by Hashem's power and splendor, of course they would follow Him. They didn't have to rely on anyone's testimony regarding Hashem's mastery of the world. They had seen it with their own eyes, they had heard it with their own ears, and they had felt it in their hearts and souls. Of course they would accept Hashem's word on everything. What, then, is so remarkable about their unconditional acceptance of Hashem's rule?

It would appear that the greatness of the term of acceptance inherent in the words "Naaseh venishma" is deeper than acknowledging the obligation to follow the rules of the Creator they had heard about ever since their youth and now had seen in action.

Perhaps, through the story of Yisro, related in last week's parsha, we can gain greater insight into these concepts. Yisro, a leader in Midyon, undertook a life-altering journey that brought him to his destiny. The posuk states that what set him on his path was his ability to listen. The parsha of Matan Torah opens with the words "Vayishma Yisro – And Yisro heard."

Upon hearing what Hashem did for the Chosen People, Yisro picked himself up and left his native land and everything else behind. The man who had achieved power, fame and stature in Mitzrayim and Midyon was so impacted by the accounts of the Bnei Yisroel's miraculous journey that he picked up his family and went to join a group of freed slaves alone in a desert.

We can understand that the reason the parsha of Kabbolas HaTorah is named for Yisro and begins with the story of his "shmiah" is because it is integral to understanding what Kabbolas HaTorah necessitates. The same "vayishma" that lay at the root of Yisro's conviction depicted the greatness of the Bnei Yisroel when they said "venishma."

Just as Yisro's "vayishma" led him to forfeit the prestige and importance he had earned over a lifetime to move to a desert encampment because he felt that the truth dwelled there, the Bnei Yisroel, when they said "venishma," were committing themselves to listen carefully to Hashem's commandments and to follow them, just as Yisro had done. The whole world had heard about the wonders Hashem performed for the Jews in Mitzrayim, as well as during and following their exodus. But Yisro was the only person who acted upon what he had heard and therefore the parsha of Kabbolas HaTorah was named for him.

By stating in unison, "Naaseh venishma," they were using language normally used by malochim, who were created to serve the Creator and have no choice in the matter. Through their own choice, bechirah, the Bnei Yisroel agreed to follow the word of Hashem.

Like Yisro, they wouldn't only listen to Hashem and follow His laws, but, when necessary, they would give up everything they had spent a lifetime acquiring in order to follow the devar Hashem. The Torah would be their roadmap through life and they would follow it scrupulously.

Perhaps the words "Naaseh venishma" appear in Parshas Mishpotim to hint at another truth. The test of whether a person is sufficiently devoted to the word of Hashem and has fidelity to Torah is the way he acts with respect to the laws taught in Parshas Mishpotim.

The way a person conducts himself in business dealings with other people demonstrates his level of religiosity. A person who cheats, steals and lies in the course of his financial dealings shows that he is not really a believer and thinks that he must bend the law in order to earn the money Hashem sends him.

Someone who is dishonest and defrauds people is in essence denying the laws of the Torah, which define how we must conduct ourselves. He also demonstrates that he doesn't believe in the essence of s'char v'onesh, as he thinks that he will get away with his crookedness and ignores the punishments the Torah prescribes for those who harm others.

He also rejects the basics of emunah: that Hakadosh Boruch Hu is zon umefarneis lakol and that Hashem prescribes how much each person will earn in any given year. A person who has faith in Hashem is honest in his financial dealings, for he knows that what he will earn in any given year is predetermined. The amount of money Hashem decided for him is what he will have, no matter how he swindles or what income he appears to forgo by being honest. We do not prosper by cheating and do not lose by being honest.

The epic declaration of "Naaseh venishma" is the Jewish mission statement, our promise to work without making cheshbonos and petty calculations. Our job is to follow Hashem's laws. We listen to rabbonim who teach us the halachos and act accordingly.

Baalei mussar point out that a young man on the cusp of his journey to spiritual growth is referred to in Hebrew as a "bochur," which literally means a chosen one. They explain that the significance of the title with which a young man is crowned is the fact that in order to triumph

over the many spiritual trials this world presents, a person needs to decide early on who he is and which path he will follow through life.

Once a person is on the path that strengthens his core, it is easier for him to stand tall in the face of temptation. Once he has chosen who he is and where he would like to be headed, he can gauge right from wrong and declare that he will not engage in improper actions. His firm identity protects him from activities that would rob him of his future. One who is bocheir, choosing the right path, is a bochur, a chosen one.

Each of us has that responsibility and ability. Once we are bocheir in our path and affirm who we are, we can possess the strength and even temerity to do the right thing for ourselves and for others.

On a deeper level, we can perhaps understand why the parsha begins with the laws of owning an eved Ivri, a Jewish slave.

We are all familiar with the Chazal that one who purchases an eved Ivri obligates himself to care for him with great sensitivity. If there is only one pillow available, the eved is the one who places his head on the pillow to go to sleep. If there is only one blanket, the master gives it to the eved.

The Ponovezher Rov pointed out that the halacha is always “chayecha kodmin.” A person is obligated to care for himself before caring for someone else. If so, why is the halacha regarding an eved different? Why when there is only one pillow available does the halacha obligate the master to give it to the eved?

The Ponovezher Rov, who helped so many people revive themselves after the Holocaust and gave of his own ruchniyus and gashmiyus to help reestablish Torah, answered that the reason a master gives his single pillow to the eved is because a Yid cannot sleep well if he knows that alongside him is a tired person without a pillow.

How can a Torah person sleep knowing that in the same house there is a person who doesn't have a blanket? If there is one pillow, the master gives it to the eved so that he will be able to sleep with the knowledge that he has enabled someone to rest comfortably.

That is the way a “Naaseh venishma” person conducts himself, ke'ish echod beleiv echod, forfeiting his own property and comfort for the benefit of others.

Nishma means that we hear. We hear another person's cries and we respond. We hear another's person's pain and do what we can to help. And even if the person is screaming or calling out to us, we feel their heart and hear that they are lacking. And we respond.

The master hears that his fellow Jew has no pillow and blanket and he hears him crying to himself over his misery. And he responds. He gives him his own pillow and blanket because he stood at Har Sinai and said, “Naaseh venishma.”

In a time of war, we hear our brethren who have no homes to go to and no job to go to. We hear the cries of new almanos and yesomim, of bereaved parents. We see the pictures and hear the pain of those who have lost limbs. And as Torah Jews who stood at Har Sinai and proclaimed, "Naaseh venishma," when we hear, we have to respond. We have to feel and we have to do. We can't not hear, we can't not do, we can't be apathetic, and we certainly can't run around having a good time while forgetting about those who are suffering.

"Naaseh venishma." We hear and we do.

And we listen.

The Vizhnitzer Rebbe of Bnei Brak attended the chupah of two of his chassidim. When it was over, he told the kallah's father to call his gabbai when he got home after the wedding, regardless of how late it was.

At 4:00, the exultant father returned home and, following the rebbe's instructions, called the gabbai. The gabbai handed the phone to the rebbe, who proceeded to ask the man questions. "How was the wedding? Was the hall nice? Were they nice to you? Was the food good? How was the dancing? Who came?" The rebbe asked these and other similar questions. They had a long conversation, discussing these things for at least an hour. Their friendly conversation ended as the first rays of the sun began peeking over the horizon.

When the rebbe hung up, the gabbai asked him what had brought him to have this conversation and to take such intense interest in the wedding. The rebbe explained, "Loneliness is never easy, but at a time like that, it is especially profound. Here he is, a proud new mechutan, having just married off his youngest daughter. The wedding was surely joyous, but normally, when the wedding ends and the parents return home, they sit and discuss the night, reminiscing about who came and who didn't, and speaking about the things that worked out well and what was most meaningful.

"But this man is a widower. He came home to an empty house. His wife passed away and now his youngest daughter, who had kept him company, has left the house. Now he is all alone and has nobody to talk to. I can't fill the vacuum in his life, but I can listen to him and take interest in what is meaningful to him."

Being able to listen to others and lift their spirits by carrying on a simple conversation is what "Naaseh venishma" people do. Listening to people when you have other things to do is part of being a Torah Jew.

We learn the Torah and hear what Hashem is telling us. We learn Gemara and we listen to what the Amorain are telling us. We learn Mishnah Berurah and hear the Chofetz Chaim as he takes us by the hand and walks us through what we should be doing. We listen intently to shiurim, as

our rabbeim talk to us about what they learned from listening to their rabbeim. And by doing so, we become better Yidden and we keep the chain stretching back to Har Sinai going.

“Naaseh venishma” transformed the people who uttered those immortal words at Har Sinai from freed slaves into angels. They promised to always listen and always take action, not to ignore, not to be apathetic, but to listen to Hashem and listen to others and to respond accordingly.

Doing so raises us and our lives, bringing us joy, satisfaction and fulfillment, making us better people and making the world a better place and ready for Moshiach.