

WE WILL DO AND WE WILL HEAR

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There is a verse in the Torah (Exodus 24:7) that reads: “And he [Moses] took the book of Covenant, and he read in the ears of the people; and they said: All that Adonai has spoken we will do and we will hear.”

What does the tradition tell us about the time in our history when the people made such an extraordinary pledge with one voice? And what does it mean that the people said, we will *do* what God asks of us before they said, we will *hear* what God asks of us?

They had already been following the law, which they had been given orally. Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888), the father of Modern Orthodox Judaism, who was known for his philosophy of Torah and Derech Eretz (Torah and worldly occupation), teaches us that, “The law had been fully explained to them in all its details and meaning.” Moses then had taken pains, through his own efforts and those of the leaders, to ensure that the book was read within the hearing of each and every person. Reading the book to the people ensured that the words would not only be heard in the plain sense, but also that the teachings might be internalized—each person was given the opportunity to assume the covenant with conscious intention.

Rabbi Hirsch also teaches us that, “The written Law contained the Law only in its short basic formula. . . . quite incomplete without the verbal tradition.” So through their “listening,” apparently after they had already been following the law, they were acknowledging that, “. . . by getting to know and to keep that which has remained verbal, we will get ourselves in the condition of being able to carry out the will of God really and completely.”

As Rabbeinu Bachya (R’ Bachya ben Asher, 1255-1340) has it, “When the Jewish people responded to the imminent revelation of G-d and His Torah, they said ‘*na’aseh*,’ we will perform, referring to the activities of their bodies. Then they said ‘*nishma*,’ we will hear, learn, referring to the tasks reserved for the intellect and spirit.”

Regardless of the precise chronology of doing and learning, when the people proclaimed, “We will hear,” they acknowledged implicitly that their own wisdom individually was far less than the wisdom that Moses had conveyed to them collectively, which they received as a people. In effect, they acknowledged that there was wisdom and intelligence beyond their own—virtually all of us learn this lesson as children—which they could only begin to understand and benefit from by following its directives as a people.

Upon reflection, the dynamics of this learning model are not unfamiliar. In our organizations, we don’t demand to know the reasons behind the rules of the game before we play soccer or baseball; in our communities, we don’t demand to know the rationale for all the rules and signage of the road before we begin driving; in our states and nation, we don’t demand to know the legislative history of our governments’ laws and policies before we agree to follow them.

It is nevertheless difficult for us modern Jews who are highly educated in secular knowledge to accept the idea that we should do anything without first fully understanding the reasons for doing it. This is true despite knowing from decades of behavioral research that doing the right thing much more often leads to knowing the right thing than vice versa. In effect, we are much more likely to become what we *do* than what we *know*.

And in our own time, not more than a small minority of all living American Jews have read in Hebrew and understood the Five Books of Moses. (One estimate we’ve heard from a knowledgeable source is less than five percent.) So we might say that in contrast to the experience at Sinai, in which the people had already been following the law and then heard it read to them personally in shorthand form, maybe it’s not reasonable to expect any of us to agree to do what we haven’t even heard or read about. More problematic is that some of us may have judged or even rejected the teachings on the basis of “hearsay” evidence.

We gain additional insight into the pledge of the people at Sinai by noting that, it was not as individuals but as a community when they answered, “We will do and we will hear.”

What linked them, one to another?

They had been enslaved and then liberated together, and at that moment they were receiving the Divine law together, becoming one people by virtue of entering a covenant with God. From the Talmud (Sota 37b) we learn they were connected, as members of an emerging community, through personal responsibility and responsibility for others. In effect, each person became responsible for him- or herself and for one another when they said, “We will do and we will hear.”

The Hebrew word for community, *tzibur* (צִבּוּר), is from the root צ-ב-ר, which denotes a gathering together of isolated objects to prevent them from becoming lost on their own—suggesting the fundamental purpose of authentic congregational community. However, consider that the majority of so-called members of what we refer to as the Jew-

ish community in most American cities and towns have virtually no common personal history and, beyond relatively small groups of committed congregation members and activists in communal organizations, barely know each other.

As a rule, we rarely feel bound by community norms, preferring instead to rely on what we imagine to be the advantages of exercising our autonomy, although it's clear that acting individually we are largely powerless to relieve many of the day-to-day pressures and disappointed hopes that we experience.

If we are to strengthen our congregations as authentic communities, empowering them to become relevant to the challenges of our day-to-day life, we must necessarily “do and hear” Torah, internalizing its vision and path for us, in which we are contemplated as a diverse but nonetheless unified people. Authentic *Jewish* community requires Torah as the guide for our individual and communal life, especially to address our common pressures and hopes in the image of God.

To act together as members of a Jewish congregational community does not require that we understand all the justifications for following Torah's teachings, but that together we are nevertheless committed to living and learning them. The basis for such a commitment is our acceptance of Torah as our authoritative source of *wisdom* (in contrast to other sources of facts, information, and knowledge), a compelling encapsulation of our people's learning of what is true, right and lasting, which we know by virtue of our shared historical experience.

At Sinai, the people acknowledged the holiness of the words, recognizing that they were a gift from the Creator to enlighten us about the workings of the creation and how to guide our lives, so as to be aligned with God's will as revealed in the creation. Even today, three millennia later, it's obvious that, overwhelmingly, the moral and ethical teachings of the Torah, and many of the ritual ones as well, would uplift our lives if we were to adopt them in practice.

When they proclaimed “We will do,” they affirmed a commitment for all generations to repeatedly apply ourselves to live out the path of Torah, never relinquishing the covenant that defines us as a people, no matter the challenges we encounter or our failures in meeting them.

But we may well ask ourselves, how could they make such a commitment for us?

Certainly, we don't question their commitment when we inherit the benefits that accompany it. We tend to question it only when we encounter the burdens. The fact is, however, we literally would not be here without their commitment, because without it the Jewish people would have disappeared long ago. Moreover, most of us are thankful if we were born into families in which the positive values of Torah were upheld; we are happy to be the beneficiaries of the Torah legacy. Yet we often fail to recognize that if we do not assume the burden of our inheritance, our own descendants aren't likely to benefit from that legacy.

Rabbi Eliezer said: “When Israel hastened to say, ‘We will do,’ before saying, ‘We will hear,’ a divine voice went forth and exclaimed: Who has disclosed to My children this secret, which only the ministering angels make use of?” (Shabbat 88a) We know from the Talmud that one way to understand “angels” is as our *yetzer hatov* and our *yetzer hara*, our good and bad inclinations. Israel at that moment was acting on its good inclination, without intellectual conviction, which is a compound challenge for modern, educated Jews.

Every individual who aspires to be part of a godly community, longing for social connection in which there is a commitment to a life free of fear and full of hope, faces the challenge that was faced by every individual who stood at Sinai. We became a people at Mount Sinai not because we saw God—Jews are still arguing about that—but because the law was revealed to us, a path for our life as a people, which we accepted as reflecting intelligence and wisdom far beyond our own. We accepted a covenant in which we would do our part to perfect our world, without fully understanding the vision and path defined by the Torah to accomplish such an extraordinary purpose.

The Midrash teaches that when God heard the response of the people, the Holy One said: “The orchard shall be saved on account of this flower. For the sake of Torah and Israel [who studies it] the world shall be saved.” (Leviticus Rabbah 23:4) And we can understand that our survival and success as a people has been, in significant measure, the result of an ethos that put *doing* the right thing ahead of but not in place of *understanding* why it was right.

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