

In this week's Torah portion, Mishpatim, God sets forth the laws and commandments which the people have been tasked to follow. From last week's portion to this week's, we hear of two different moments of affirmation from the people. The first comes in Exodus 19:8. God is gearing up for the big proclamation and Moses has communicated to the people that they should be ready. Though the people have yet to hear the actual commandments, "all the people answered together, and said, 'All that God has spoken we will do.'" Several chapters later, after God has descended on Mt Sinai, sharing the commandments with the people, Moses and the people make a sacrificial offering to God. Then they say, "All that God has spoken, we will do and we will obey (or understand)" (Exodus 24:7).

There are two major differences in the people's affirmations. First of all, in the first instance, the people respond together, in one voice. In the second instance, there is no mention of their unity. Additionally, in the first example, the people promise to do what God has asked of them. In the second, the people express that they will do AND nismah, a word that is often translated as to obey, but can also be defined as to understand.

So, why are there differences in the people's responses? With the first instance occurring before the commandments, our sages have wondered if the people are backpedaling a little. It may have been easy to promise to do something before we knew what that promise was, but now that we know, we realize we may be in a little over our heads. I could certainly imagine the fervor of the people to commit to a God that has freed them from slavery only to realize that their enthusiasm may have gone a little too far. Yet, not surprisingly, there are some other explanations as well. I think the addition of nishmah, or to understand, might demonstrate a deeper connection for the people than what they had expressed previously. We can make a promise and not necessarily mean completely what we have said or have the best of intentions, but not be capable of following through in reality. Yet, when we not only do the commandments, we also understand them, I think there is a level of commitment that goes beyond the doing. In my opinion, the people are affirming that they are all in. They may have been willing to do what God asked even before God asked it, but now they are on a search for meaning and understanding in what they do, sensing that there may be some higher purpose to it all.

And that is where the additional difference between the two instances becomes even more significant. The people could make a simple promise with one voice, in unity before hearing the commandments. However, each of them, really each of us, would have to come to a point of understanding of the commandments independently from one another. We all stand in covenant with God, but our journey with God through life is different for every individual. Our tradition encourages us to walk the path of explorers, to dive into our tradition and into its wisdom to find for ourselves what meaning we can uncover. What an incredible message for us all. I am proud to be a fellow traveler with you on this journey to wonder, question, connect and, maybe even, to understand.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Debra Bennet