

TOP SECRET

Parshas Mishpatim

By Rabbi Menachem Rokeach

The Talmud relates (Shabbos 88a): When the Torah was offered to the Israelites, and they responded with an enthusiastic NAASEH V'NISHMA, we will do and we will hearken, (giving precedence to "we will do" over the "we will hearken"), a Heavenly voice went forth and exclaimed: "Who revealed to my children this secret, which is employed by the ministering angels?"

On the surface this seems as a mere loving commendation of the Israelites by the Al-mighty, for their gracious acceptance of all the Torah even before it was spelled out to them. To the perspicacious student, however, this statement is more of a clue to the fulfillment of both, the NAASEH and the NISHMA. It is the secret "employed" by the angels. And now that the formula has been revealed to the Israelites, they, too, employ and use it to some benefit and purpose. It should be of interest wherein lies that advantage and purpose. Also worthy of deliberation is the significance of keeping the formula secret, and calling it a secret.

The Talmud relates (Shabbos 88b) that when Moshe ascended to receive the Torah for Israel, the angels requested the Torah be given to them instead. Until Moshe debated with the angels, demonstrating laws of the Torah dealing with human experiences, not even applicable to angels. Maharsha explains, the angels well knew the content, in its physical eense, not being applicable to them. They knew, however, that the Torah also possesses a higher, spiritual dimension, a Kaballistic interpretation, which was applicable to them (perhaps even more than to humans). Moshe counterreplied the main purpose of Torah is the human experience, and as for the higher

Kabalistic references, they would include that too, to the level they can reach.

Moshe's triumph, it seems, was conditioned on his recognition of endlessness in Torah wisdom, just as the Author of Torah is אין סוף, beyond limits. The angels, too, have limited knowledge of the אין סוף (Hashem's limitless wisdom) but they are more conscious of their limit since their comprehension is in the area of limitlessness of Hashem.

This may be the intent of the Talmudic teaching, upon the passage "The lips of the priest guard knowledge, and Torah they shall seek from his mouth, for he is a messenger, MALACH, of Hashem" (Malachi 2:7). The Talmud comments "if the teacher is like an angel, MALACH, you may seek Torah from his mouth (Chagiga 15b). The sublime task of a Torah teacher is to imbue the student with the feeling that while comprehending a Mishna or a Rashi in Chumosh, he is in touch with the limitlessness of Torah, similar to the angel whose connection to Torah is in the realm of vastness beyond limits, which even to them remains a secret.

This explains the conclusion of the Bracha recited every morning before learning Torah "Hamelameid Torah" (Bless... Who teaches Torah to His people Israel). The consciousness of the vast insights that remain "secret", until more mental strain, for deeper comprehension, regards him as a disciple of Hashem Himself, Who is Melamed. (See this writer's essay in Hapardes Tishrei 5758 entitled המלמד תורה לעמו ישראל).

By responding NAASEH before NISHMA, committing themselves to observe the laws without prior questioning and ascertaining the reasons, nor even the facts, the Israelites have raised themselves to the level of angels, touching upon the secret insights of, and reliance upon, the אין סוף. For it was a complete submission to the will of the Al-mighty, without asserting their own human logic.

A separate commitment was the pledge of NISHMA, we will hearken. This was a commitment to also study Torah, and blend its observance with the human quality, to delve into its depth, penetrate into its mysteries and plumb its hidden wisdom.

These are two separate commitments. The pledge to observe and do is not dependent upon comprehension. It is rather a complete yielding and bowing before the wisdom of the Al-mighty. The second pledge of NISHMA, on the other hand, is to use the marrow of the brain, to use our G-d-given intellect for the service of G-d. Having pledged to observe the Mitzvah, the NISHMA adds the promise to use human intelligence, as much as it can unearth, to gain sagacity, to understand and appreciate G-d's laws from a human standpoint.

It is for this reason that as a reward the Israelites were adorned two crowns, one for NAASEH and one for NISHMA (Shabbos 88a). The NAASEH is the angelic rung of performance of Mitzvochs "because G-d commanded them." The NISHMA adds the human touch, human intelligence in performance of Mitzvochs, as a result of intense cogitation.

The rabbis point out the contradictory statements in the Chumash (see Rashi Shemos 20:19). One passage reads "From heaven I have spoken with you" (Shemos ibid). Another states "And G-d came down upon Mount Sinai" (19:20). One may suggest resolving the contradiction as follows. Each Mitzvah is Heavenly in the sense that the Al-mighty gave it to us in accordance with His wisdom, and we accepted it with complete reliance upon Him, human intellect playing no role in its acceptance. It is "not in Heaven", on the other hand, regarding the obligation to study it. It is human in its upkeep, in the sense that we are not to simply rely on Heavenly wisdom, but to toil in its vineyards to comprehend them with our human minds.

