



Jewish Educational Wisdom,
Experience & Leadership

The Things We Carry: Bomb Shelter 8.0

A Family Program by Rabbi Sarah Messinger

Themes: Thinking about What We Value
The Role of Judaism and Torah in Our Families
Shavuot

Ages: Can work with all ages participating in family program

Supplies:

1. Slips of paper with the names of about 100 separate household items. The options should include Jewish ritual objects. A wide range of items works well, for example everything from a wallet, a blanket, a computer, a TV, a *tallit*, candlesticks, a prayerbook, towels, food, medical supplies, etc. You may want to have several copies of each item in the pile so that different families can take the same items.
2. Large wrapped gift box
3. Copies of two *midrashim* to teach (attached)
4. A background article is provided for the educator to read before teaching the *midrashim* and the idea of "*naaseh v'nishma*" (we will do and we will hear/understand) associated with them.

Procedure:

1. Scatter the slips of paper on the floor.
2. Tell the group they must flee from their home because something terrible has happened (can be a hurricane, Nazis, flood - what ever is timely). Everyone is going to go hide out in the woods.

3. Give individual participants 3 minutes to each choose 5 items. If this is a family program, family members must agree on a total of 5 items for the family. (Mention that all pets are already safe.)
4. Once everyone has their items and is seated, tell them that they must give up 1 item.
5. Then walk around and randomly take a second item from each of them.
6. Lead a discussion with the following questions:
 - a. Who chose what items?
 - b. Did anyone choose anything Jewish?
 - c. Did anyone smuggle any extra items?
 - d. Did everyone follow the rules?
 - e. Who chose electrical things and why? Did they think about the fact that there is no electricity in the woods when they took them?
 - f. How did the family decide on which objects?
 - g. Did everyone really agree or was it more some people's decision than others?
 - h. Did the parents have to talk the children into or out of any choices?
7. Present a large gift box to the group. Tell them it has something very sacred in it, but do not tell them what it is.
8. Divide the families up, so parents form one group and children form another group.
9. Go to the parents' group and tell them to discuss why the children should protect whatever is in the box.
10. Go to the children's group and tell them to discuss why the parents should guard whatever is in the box.
11. Bring the two groups back together and invite participants from each group to share key points of their discussions and essentially make their case as to why the other group should be responsible for the sacred item in the box.

12. Reveal that the sacred item in the box is actually the Torah.
13. Introduce two *midrashim* about how the People of Israel said “*naaseh v'nishma*,” meaning “we will do and we will hear/understand” when we received the Torah.
 - a. In terms of today’s activity:
 - i. How does *naaseh v'nishma* apply to the lesson?
 - ii. What did you do and what did it help you learn?
 - b. In terms of our relationship to Torah:
 - i. How and why do we honor the Torah even before we have learned all that it has to teach us?
15. In conclusion, invite everyone to discuss the following questions:
 - c. What is sacred?
 - d. What has been passed down in your family?
 - e. What should be guarded by the children? By the adults? By the whole family together?
14. There is a final Jewish teaching that you might want to weave in to connect back to the way everyone began the program by choosing material objects to take with them when they fled to the woods. It is the rabbinic teaching that, “Ben Zoma said: Who is rich? One who is happy with one’s lot.” (*Pirkei Avot* 4:1).

Background Article from www.MyJewishLearning.com

(we have emboldened certain sections of the article to help you key into the most relevant parts)

Do First, Understand Later

The Jews accepted the Torah with the statement *na'aseh v'nishma*, "we will do and we will hear."

By Rabbi Jill Jacobs

Judaism is often said to be a religion of deed rather than of intention. Though overly simplistic, this description reflects the centrality of *mitzvot* (commandments) in Jewish life, as well as the rabbinic conclusion that, in most cases, a person who performs a mitzvah without focusing on its significance has nevertheless fulfilled his or her religious obligation.

This understanding of Judaism as a religion of action is encapsulated by the biblical verse in which the Jews standing at Mount Sinai signal their acceptance of the Torah with the words "na'aseh v'nishma"--"We will do and we will hear/understand." In other words, the Jewish people promise first to observe the laws of the Torah, and only afterward to study these laws. In traditional Jewish culture, this statement has come to epitomize the Jewish commitment to the Torah.

Study vs. Action

Three separate biblical verses record the Israelites' acceptance of the obligations that the Torah will impose on them, but only the last of these contains the now-famous phrase "na'aseh v'nishma." When Moses first ascends to Mount Sinai, God commands him to tell the people that if they accept the covenant, God will make them a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6). Upon hearing these words, the people respond, "All that God has said, we will do" (19:8).

Later in the text, **after Moses relates specific divine rules to the people, they again say, "All of the things that God has said, we will do" (24:3). A few verses later, after Moses writes and reads aloud the words of the Torah, the people utter the phrase "na'aseh v'nishma," "We will do and we will hear" (24:7).**

The rabbinic tradition understands the words *na'aseh v'nishma* as a correction of the earlier promises simply to "do" what God has commanded. According to one midrash: **"And they [the Children of Israel] said, "all that God has said we will do and we will hear," since they had initially prioritized doing. Moses said to them, 'Is doing possible without understanding? Understanding brings one to doing.' They then said, 'We will do and we will understand,' [meaning] 'We will do what we understand.' This teaches that the people said 'na'aseh v'nishma' before receiving the Torah" (*Mekhilta d'Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai* 24:7).**

This midrash reflects a classical rabbinic debate about the relative merits of study and action. **In a well-known talmudic discussion, the rabbis conclude that "study is great, for it leads to action" (*Kiddushin* 40b). While emphasizing deed over study, the rabbis appear wary of promoting a religion by rote, in which people perform rituals without any understanding of the significance of these actions. In claiming that "understanding brings one to doing" or "study... leads to action," the rabbis**

can prioritize action without negating the meaning of one's actions. The insistence that "*na'aseh*" precedes "*nishma*" also allows for the creation of a coherent community unified by its practice, even while allowing for discussion about the details and significance of this practice.

Accepting Torah Before Sinai

The chronology of the revelation at Sinai is virtually impossible to unravel simply through a reading of the relevant biblical passages. Moses seemingly travels up and down the mountain continuously and presents the Torah to the Jewish people on several occasions. This confusing series of events leads numerous biblical commentators to invoke the rabbinic principle that "there is no chronology in the Torah"--meaning we cannot assume that events occurred in the order in which the Torah describes them.

This principle also allows the rabbis to insist that the Jewish people recited the words "*na'aseh v'nishma*" even before the revelation at Sinai. This unconditional acceptance of Torah, according to the rabbis, indicates the depth of the Jewish people's commitment to God and their submission to divine law.

In placing the declaration "*na'aseh v'nishma*" before the revelation, the rabbis solve a problem created by their own biblical interpretation. According to the Bible, at the moment of revelation, "[the people] stood underneath the mountain." According to the traditional interpretation of this strange biblical locution, God uproots Mount Sinai from the ground and holds it over the people, saying, "If you accept the Torah, fine; if not, here shall be your grave" (Talmud, Tractate Avodah Zarah 2b). The implication seems to be that the Jews accepted Torah only through coercion. The Rabbis eliminate this possibility by insisting that the people said "*na'aseh v'nishma*" before the revelation. Further emphasizing the voluntary nature of the Jewish submission to God and Torah, the Rabbis teach that the Jews accepted the Torah again at the time of the Purim.

Worthy of Torah

For the rabbis, the words *na'aseh v'nishma* also indicate the worthiness of the Jewish people for divine revelation. Several *midrashim* (interpretive stories) depict the angels, who often exhibit a sort of sibling rivalry toward the Jewish people, trying to persuade God that human beings, who are inherently imperfect, do not deserve to receive the Torah. This angelic argument finds support in the Torah's own portrayal of the Jews as a whining and ungrateful people who construct a golden calf almost immediately after encountering God at Mount Sinai.

Nevertheless, the Talmud suggests that the people redeem themselves with the declaration "*na'aseh v'nishma*," which demonstrates an understanding of certain divine secrets: "At the moment when the Jewish people said first 'We will do' and then 'We will understand,' a heavenly voice went out and said to them, 'Who revealed to my children this secret, employed by the angels, as it is written, 'Praise God, O God's angels, mighty in strength, who do God's will and understand God's word'" (Tractate Shabbat 88a). Just as the angels know first to obey and then to understand God's word, so too the Jewish people have somehow intuited this divine secret and therefore have proven themselves as meriting the Torah, previously the exclusive property of the divine realm. Accordingly, in the Talmud, the angels respond to the people's words by crowning each member of the Jewish people with two divine crowns, one for "*na'aseh*" and one for "*nishma*."

While only Moses ascends to Mount Sinai, the collective Jewish people accepted the Torah. According to *midrash*, not a single member of the community missed the

revelation for reasons of ritual impurity, and not a single person was blind, deaf, or otherwise unable to experience the totality of the revelation. Furthermore, according to some commentators, the words *na'aseh v'nishma* indicate an acceptance not only of the immediate laws of the Torah, but also of all of the laws to come. According to Abraham Ibn Ezra, "*na'aseh* [indicates] all of the laws given until this point [and] *nishma* [indicates] the laws to come in the future" (short commentary, comment to Exodus 24:7).

Though only one generation of Jews actually stood at Sinai, this group comprised the ancestors of all future members of the Jewish community. **They accepted the Torah not only for themselves, but also for all generations to come. Each year at Shavuot, when Jews recreate the experience of the revelation, each generation has a new opportunity to declare on its own behalf, "*na'aseh v'nishma.*"**

*Rabbi Jill Jacobs is the Executive Director of Rabbis for Human Rights-North America.
She previously served as the Rabbi-in-Residence for the Jewish Funds for Justice.*

http://www.myjewishlearning.com/holidays/Jewish_Holidays/Shavuot/Themes_and_Theology/Celebrating_Submission/Accepting_the_Torah.shtml



Jewish Educational Wisdom,
Experience & Leadership

Midrash One

Shir HaShirim Rabba 1:24

When Israel stood to receive the Torah, the Holy One said to them: "I am prepared to give you My Torah. Present to Me good guarantors that you will observe and study the Torah and I shall give it to you."

They said: "Our ancestors are our guarantors."

The Holy One said: "Your ancestors are not sufficient guarantors. Bring Me good guarantors, and I shall give you the Torah."

They said: "Our prophets are our guarantors."

The Holy One said: "The prophets are not sufficient guarantors. Bring Me good guarantors and I shall give you the Torah."

They said: "Indeed, our children will be our guarantors."

The Holy One said: "Your children are good guarantors. For their sake I give the Torah to you."

The Jewish people accepted the Torah saying, *na'aseh v'nishma. We will do and we will understand.*

Midrash Two

Avodah Zara 2b

God offered the Torah to each other nation of the earth before the People of Israel. Each nation declined, saying they didn't want to give up the behaviors forbidden by Torah (stealing, cheating). Finally, God came to the People of Israel. God held Mount Sinai literally over the heads of the People of Israel and said, "If you accept the Torah, all will be well. If you do not, here shall be your burial."

The Jewish people accepted, saying *na'aseh v'nishma. We will do and we will understand.*