

FROM THE EDITOR

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When people think of religious figures, the most recurring image is of the solitary “holy” man, the monk, living alone, off in some distant place, a mountaintop, a monastery, steeped in vows of silence, poverty, and chastity.

But such ideas are anathema within the framework of Torah. You can’t be a Torah Jew alone. A life of Torah can only be lived within the framework of a community. There are mitzvos that absolutely require us to have relationships with and connections to other people. We need each other – perhaps, as we’ll see, even more than we realise.

As we, the Jewish people, stood at the foot of Har Sinai to receive the Torah from Hashem, Moshe read to us from it – from Bereishis up until the giving of the Torah, including the mitzvos that we had been commanded in¹ – and we famously said, “All that Hashem has said, *na’aseh v’nishmah* – we will do and we will understand.” But, if we look closely, the Torah tells us² that when Moshe first placed before us all that Hashem had commanded, we responded – together – at that point saying, “All that Hashem has said, *na’aseh* – we will do.” with no mention of *nishmah*, of understanding. The Midrash explains³ that, after we had initially said that we would do all that Hashem had said, Moshe said to us, “Is it possible to do without understanding? Understanding brings a person to doing.” We then revised our initial response, taking into account Moshe’s comments, and said, “*Na’aseh v’nishmah* – we will do and we will understand.”

It’s well known that there are 613 mitzvos in the Torah, often referred to by the Hebrew word that spells out the *gematria* (the numerical value for each Hebrew letter) that reflects this number: *taryag*. It’s seemingly impossible for any single Jew to fulfil all of the many mitzvos that Hashem included in His Torah. There are, for example, mitzvos that apply only to *Kohanim*, to men, to women, to judges, to kings, and on and on.

But, our Sages derive from these two different answers that we gave at Har Sinai that there are two ways by which it is actually possible for us to fulfil all of the mitzvos in the Torah – one as a nation and the other as individuals.

The first way focuses on our initial answer, where we said *na’aseh* (we will do) without the *nishmah* (we will understand), noting that, unlike the later answer where *nishmah* was included, the Torah states that the people said this first answer “together”. Our Sages teach⁵ that the entire Jewish people stand as sureties for each other; where one of us falls short, the other makes up for it. And that’s why we answered together – as one – when it came to this aspect of doing the mitzvos and said that we would do everything that Hashem had said because, together, we could actually do all of it. When there is unity among us, it’s like we are a single entity and it’s as if, through that unity, each one of us has fulfilled all of the mitzvos in the Torah by making up for what each other lacks.

The second way focuses on our revised answer, where we said *na’aseh* coupled with *nishmah*, but no longer answered “together”. Whereas the first way of fulfilling all of the mitzvos in the Torah was focused on the *na’aseh* aspect, on the doing, the second way focuses on the *nishmah* aspect, on the understanding of it. Our Sages understand the expression *nishmah*, “we will understand”, as referring specifically to study, as only through diligent study of the Torah can we come to understand it, as well as what’s required of us. The *gemara*⁶ teaches that when someone studies, for example, the parsha related to bringing a *korban* (offering) that it’s as if the person actually sacrificed a *korban* – similar to the idea that Hashem shared with Avraham that, in the absence of the *Beis Hamikdash* (Temple), by merely reciting the order of the *korbanos* (ie. reading the service detailing what would take place when a *korban* was brought), Hashem would consider it as though we had actually brought those *korbanos* that we read aloud and He would even forgive us for our iniquities.⁷ Through the study of Torah, each person is able to fulfil the entire Torah because Hashem reckons our studying of his mitzvos as if we’ve actually performed those mitzvos.

Not everyone has the *zitsfleysh* (the ability to sit for long periods) to learn *gemara*, but we can all join together, doing the mitzvos and making up for what each of us lacks, and thereby fulfil the entire Torah.

From everyone at *JL*, *chag sameach*!

ROBERT SUSSMAN, EDITOR

¹See Rashi to Shemos 24:7

²Shemos 19:7-8

³Mechilta d’Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, Shemos 24:6

⁴See Iturei Torah on Shavuot

⁵Shevuot 39a

⁶Menachos 110a

⁷Taanis 27b

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ON THE COVER: A watercolour illustration of the sheva minim (the seven species) – wheat, barley, olives, dates, grapes, figs, and pomegranates – from which the bikkurim (the first fruits) were selected each year and brought to Jerusalem to be given to the Kohanim when the Beis Hamikdash (Temple) stood. The first time these fruits could be brought was on Shavuot, hence the close association with that chag and one of the reasons why the chag is referred to as Chag HaBikkurim.

