

*Parshat Mishpatim* (Exodus 21:1-24:18)

*Mishpatim* includes a list of 52 specific *mitzvot* (commandments) and is referred to as *Sefer Habrit* (the Book of the Covenant). It's a bit anticlimactic, coming after the high drama of the Exodus and the revelation of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. Still, it contains one of the most significant phrases in the Torah.

Mishpatim closes with a ceremony in which the Israelites accept the Torah. After Moses reads aloud the record of the covenant, the Israelites respond with, "... All that the Lord has spoken, *na-aseh v'nishmah*" (Exodus 24:7). The question is how to translate those last two critical words.

"*Na-aseh*" is easy. It means "we will do." "*Nishmah*" is a bit trickier. Some translations use "and we will obey," others use "and we will hear," and still others gloss on the meaning with "and we will faithfully do." None of these capture accurately the best sense of the word.

Daniel J. Elazar (1934 – 1999; political scientist and expert on the Jewish political tradition) suggests "*nishmah*" is best translated as "hearken," an obsolete English word meaning to hear, think, and respond. "*Nishmah*" means to understand the lesson, internalize the principle, and incorporate it into daily behavior. "*Nishmah*" requires not blind obedience but reflection and choice.

The Israelites respond to the Torah with "*na-aseh v'nishmah*" because they need to first practice these new ideas and behaviors before integrating them fully into their collective worldview and individual mindsets. This, of course, is a model for Jewish learning as applicable at Heilicher today as it was at Sinai then.

Gut Shabbos/Shabbat Shalom