Turning Memory into Moral Responsibility

Salem Pearce

Over the past few years, I’ve found myself thinking, writing, and talking a lot about the Book of Exodus as I learn to be a rabbi in situations I never could have imagined. Today, my work focuses on helping American Jews understand that our story of liberation is formative in developing our moral consciousness and should guide us to care more for the vulnerable among us. This is what comes to mind when I hear the Israelites’ enthusiastic affirmation of covenant, נא’סח וְנִשְׁמָע, traditionally translated as, “All that God has said, we will do, and we will obey.” (Exodus 24:7) The verse (sometimes translated simply as “We will do, and we will hear”), is understood as the paradigmatic expression of Israel’s faithful adherence to God, a devotion to follow the law even before understanding it.

As a rabbi working for a human rights organization, I am often called upon to articulate the particularly Jewish opposition to our country’s current immigration policies. I’ve lost track of how many times I’ve explained it with a talmudic line from Rabbi Eliezer: “In the Torah, we are told 36 times — and some say 46! — not to oppress the stranger.” (Bava Metzia 59b)

One instance where this charge appears is just prior to the declaration נא’סח וְנִשְׁמָע: “You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 23:9) Rabbi Shai Held points out the truly radical nature of this seemingly simple command. Memory is, for the most part, ethically neutral. But here, “the Torah appeals to our memory to intensify our ethical obligations: Having tasted the suffering and degradation to which vulnerability can lead, we are bidden not to oppress the stranger.”

At a recent protest of the administration’s immigration policies, I saw a sign that particularly moved me. It said, “שאָמְר וְזָכוּר,” “we watch and we remember.” The phrase, which comes from the Shabbat prayer “L’cha Dodi,” is generally understood to refer to the two different reasons we observe Shabbat. I felt particularly moved seeing these two words as an explanation for taking action in response to injustice: We see what is really happening, and we know the history that has taught us exactly where this all ends.

Of course, watching and remembering was certainly not all that the sign holder, or anyone else at the protest that day, was doing. That’s just what got us all there. The Book of Exodus teaches us that it is not enough to simply remember. As Rabbi Held concludes, “One of the Torah’s central projects is to turn memory into empathy and moral responsibility.”

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So, too with na’aseh v’nishma. It is also not enough to simply act and obey. The cultivation of that empathy and moral responsibility is not just commanded. The Torah is not making a rational argument for such behavior; the motivation for protecting and promoting the interests and rights of the stranger is our memory of being strangers in Egypt. Acceptance of the covenant — “All that God has said, we will do, and we will obey” — is also acceptance of the Torah’s insistence upon the deep connection between memory and morality. To the extent that we fail in our obligations to the vulnerable, we are failing to remember our experience in Egypt — which is of course why we retell the story of the Exodus every year on Pesach.

In some ways, na’aseh v’nishma can be understood as a merism, a conventional phrase that references parts that refer to a whole. The Israelites’ promise to “do and obey” signifies an obligation much broader than the connotations of just those two words. We did not pledge just to do and just to obey. Na’aseh v’nishma is our commitment to serve God by cultivating empathy and compassion for the vulnerable among us. And there is no time more urgent than now to renew that commitment.

Rabbi Salem Pearce is the director of organizing at T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, which mobilizes rabbis, cantors, and their communities to protect human rights in North America, Israel, and the occupied Palestinian territories.

I Was a Rabbinic Psychonaut: Psychedelics and the Future of Judaism
Zac Kamenetz

In the spring and summer of 2017, I was invited to sit on a couch, get comfortable, and take a little blue pill containing a very high dose of psilocybin, the psychoactive compound found in “magic” mushrooms. I was participating in a study conducted by the psychiatry and behavioral sciences department at Johns Hopkins University, exploring the nature of consciousness and mystical experiences. The study brought together clergy for a profound psychedelic journey in a setting supported by expertly trained guides. Even two years later, I am still integrating what I learned and experienced, and how those experiences have guided my personal, professional, and spiritual life.

As an Orthodox rabbi, I turn to Jewish exegesis and philosophy to ground my experiences and propel my inquiries. I began to think about the notion of “na’aseh v’nishma,” “we will do and we will hear,” and how several mystical and Hasidic traditions employ this phrase to explore the process of approaching, achieving, and integrating mystical unification, an experience in which a person has a direct encounter with the Divine.

One powerful example is found in the seminal work of the Hasidic master Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav (1772-1810), Likutei Moharan, where he states, “...every person must proceed from level to level and from world to world, until they merit each time to attain a higher aspect of ‘we will do and we will hear,’ so that every time for them the aspect of ‘we will hear,’ the aspect of the hidden..., will become the aspect of ‘we will do,’ the aspect of the revealed..., until they come to the primal beginning point of Creation, which is the beginning of Emanation.” (22:10)

Here, Rebbe Nachman is describing a process of spiritual discovery. At first, we encounter a rusing of existence that is hidden from us (“we will hear”). It is an encounter with the Divine mystery. But eventually, we arrive at a state of understanding, and the mystery itself becomes a revealed realization that we can put into practice in our waking life (“we will do”). While Rebbe Nachman prescribes the tools of Torah study and prayer as the primary methods of achieving these states, psychedelic researchers speak of a parallel process of “integration” — the conscious and intentional activity over time of reflecting upon and making meaning of the insights occasioned during one’s time on the couch.

Ever since my experience at Johns Hopkins, I’ve been wondering how these experiences and psychedelic research as a whole might help us rediscover sources of healing and spiritual attunement aligned with Jewish tradition. Though difficult to describe — especially experiences of the ineffable that are almost beyond rational comprehension — I will try to articulate some of the peak spiritual and mystical encounters I had while under the influence.

The whole of my first journey was near-blissful. Blindfolded, I lay on a wide couch. The six-hour session began with swirls and patterns of the whole palette of colors — specks, lines, spirals, waves, pulsing clusters, images, works of art, shifting one into the next at a high rate of speed. The only “Jewish” moment of this first trip happened in front of a massive oak tree, where I watched a flow of illuminated energy course from a long branch on its right side to its left, phasing from red to blue. I understood the imagery as polar points of the kabbalistic “Tree of Life,” with its 10 symbolic branches, teaching me directly how the energies of chesed, boundless compassion, and gevurah, the constricting force of limitation and boundaries, require careful, constant balance and integration. After many more tears, insights, and images, the psilocybin wore off, and I returned to normal consciousness.

Having responded to my first dose so well, the research team determined that I could handle a higher dose for my second experience, two months later.

Rabbi Zac Kamenetz during his first psilocybin experience at Johns Hopkins University (Photo/Courtesy Kamenetz)
Rather than lights, colors, and feelings of connection and gratitude, I felt as though I were in a pitch-black hatch with no reference points, no imagery, and no way out. I felt no fear, but rather deep boredom. How long was this going to last? All I remembered was that I had to pay that parking ticket today and asked one of my guides to remind me after the session. This memory sparked a question: When given the option to pay now or pay later, why do I mostly choose to pay later? Either way I will have to pay! When it was all over, I was terribly disappointed, upset that I may have done something wrong that resulted in a less fantastic experience.

Two years later, I can say that these two sessions, taken together, were a direct, personal encounter with immanence and transcendence. My first session was a journey through the world of phenomena — light and color, relationships, emotion, and apprehension — the world of immanence. It is where laundry gets done and dinner gets made, where Sukkot happens, where people are born and pass away. My second session was a journey into transcendence, beyond polarities and causality, to a place, as the writer Stanislav Grof describes, “pregnant with all of existence.” (The Adventure of Self-Discovery) My inability to make sense of what I was experiencing was not because of personal defect or shortcoming, but because it was my first contact with what Rebbe Nachman called “the primal point of Creation,” a point of origin that precedes the familiar forms and structures of the world as we know it. Without having had the time, space, and support of my guides to help me seek out deeper significance of each experience on their own and in concert, I may never have come to this deeply moving insight. But with time to reflect, write a “trip report,” and talk about my experiences with trusted friends, the nishma — hearing the mystery of what these things mean — has become apparent. Opening to the na’aseh, the lived and applied expressions, is the work of my everyday balancing of intimacy and withdrawal — the relationship I have with my wife and daughter, my work as a community rabbi, my engagement with and escape from my own body. A new nishma arises: What do these substances mean for the future of Jewish spirituality and religion?

If the cultural forecasters are correct, the use of psychedelic drugs in clinical settings will eventually become a norm for psychotherapeutic treatments as well as for personal and communal self-exploration of mystical states of awareness. Navigating that exploration will depend not only on scientific data but also on how open we are to inhabiting altered states of consciousness and garnering authoritative insights into our lives that can effect healing and transformation. Before this major cultural shift occurs, we should acquaint ourselves with and draw upon the maps of non-ordinary states that Jewish sages and mystics have developed throughout the generations.

As more research about the applications of these substances for psychotherapeutic therapies and sacred encounters emerges from respected research facilities around the world, I hope we might seek out and experiment with the Jewish ideas and practices that touch and heal the deepest parts of our psyches and spirits. Our noble mystical tradition, by and large, remains in the storehouses, waiting to be shared and flow freely.

Heartbeat of a Living Tradition

Sam Berrin Shonkoff

When the Israelis at Sinai declared, Na’aseh v’nishma, “We shall do and we shall hear,” they expressed a profound principle: It is through doing that we hear divinity. Spiritual insight is inseparable from bodily action.

I can’t remember where I first encountered this luminous gloss on Exodus 24:7. It seems to spring up everywhere. In any case, it touches the core of my own convictions. Even as I have sought, sensed, loved, and thanked God’s presence in the world’s wildness, I’ve always recoiled from the question, “Do you believe in God?” Na’aseh v’nishma — the Holy One is knowable only in the medium of moments, when we are overcome with attention. And yet, such strong resonances are rarely as timeless as they seem. Indeed, this particular perspective on na’aseh v’nishma is not ancient or even medieval. It’s modern. And when we trace the hermeneutical history of the two-word phrase, we shed light on our contemporary situation.

For more than two millennia, the verse was interpreted primarily as a declaration of obedience. In biblical Hebrew, the verb nishma had a semantic range of hearing, hearkening, and heeding. In Exodus 24:7, therefore, it presumably emphasized Israel’s eagerness to comply with God’s commandments: “We shall do and we shall heed.” Such a word-for-word translation sounds clunky, of course. But the late-ancient rabbis delighted in clunkiness. Every wrinkle
In a similar vein, Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (1787–1859) critiques philosophers who fancy that they can comprehend God through rational speculation. In truth, the Kotzerk contends, those heady intellectuals only apprehend within the bounds of mere reason. In performing the divine commandments, however, we expand our minds beyond ourselves. “This is na’aseh v’nishma: If we have a vessel of doing, then we shall hear and we shall comprehend everything of the highest heights.”

The German-Jewish philosopher Martin Buber was smitten with this latter teaching. As a sort of anti-theologian, Buber repudiated all theoretical or “I-It” discourse about God, suggesting rather that God is graspable only in moments of non-objectifying or “I-Thou” encounters in the world. The Kotzerk’s commentary fanned Buber’s flames. After discovering it in 1927, he included his own version in almost all of his subsequent anthologies of Hasidic tales, and even incorporated the exegesis into a 1929 essay on religious versus philosophical ways of knowing. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, an acquaintance of Buber, a descendent of Hasidim, and a self-proclaimed disciple of the Kotzerk, claimed similarly in 1955 that na’aseh v’nishma turns “upside down the order of attitudes as conceived by our abstract thinking” and dissolves binaries of “thought and fact, the abstract and the concrete, theory and experience.” The French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, the Jerusalem-based Torah commentator Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, the New York mystic and activist Jay Michaelson, and innumerable other modern Jewish thinkers go on to contribute related teachings on na’aseh v’nishma. The gloss catches like wildfire.

What sparks this hermeneutical mutation? First, modern ideals of freedom and autonomy, coupled with separations of church and state, render images of the Israelites’ unconditional obedience uninspiring at best. If religious observance is a personal choice, then those actions must offer something to seekers. The new interpretation of na’aseh v’nishma does just this, exchanging an image of subservience for a promise of enlightenment. Second, although traditionalists and rationalists had already clashed for centuries over various scriptural claims, modern intellectual developments challenge the very notion of professing metaphysical doctrines at all. As if in direct response, the new interpretation of na’aseh v’nishma outlines a way to contemplate God beyond doctrines and beliefs, offering a wholly embodied, post-dogmatic theology.

To acknowledge the relative newness of this view on Exodus 24:7 is in no way to imply that it is therefore inauthentic or invasive. On the contrary, here is the heartbeat of a living tradition. Interpretation is a mirror that reflects at once the infinities of Torah and the faces of Israel. The voices of Sinai resound.

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Yea. Sure. OK. Whatever!
Ross Andelman

Parent: “You’re a teenager, and I get it: You want unlimited access to the car, no curfew. But we’re your parents, and here are the rules you’re going to have to live by if you want greater independence…."

Teen: “Alright, already! I’ll do whatever you say!”

The People Israel, B’nai Yisrael, was born emerging from Egypt. Passing from the seaside station of pi ha’cheirut, “the mouth of freedom,” through a canal of parted waters, held by God in a loose embrace as the people traversed the expanse of their formative years, with God providing sustenance and protection. But Israel’s childhood was brief.

Just three months after the Israelites leave Egypt, God makes a promise to them and issues expectations for their conduct, and the people assert their obedience: “We’ll do what you say!” (Exodus 19:6-8) Soon thereafter, Moses reads them a written
form of this relational covenant, and they expand upon their assertion, reaffirming: “Na’aseh v’nishma,” “We will do and we will hear!” (Exodus 24:7)

What were they agreeing to do? What was their motivation? Love? Obedience? Fear? How well did their submission work out? At first glance, not so well.

So, when the People of Israel assert ‘We will do then we will learn,’ they are letting God know not just that they will learn by doing but — like the adolescent people they are — they will explore, innovate, and create their own ways to follow God’s commandments.

As the narrative unfolds, Moses leaves the Israelites alone as he climbs the mountain to talk with God. Feeling abandoned, and having not yet internalized God’s presence, the people fashion a tangible God-object, “the Golden Calf.” (Exodus 32) The children of Israel continue to act out, rebelling repeatedly against the seeming privilege of those who guide and set the boundaries of their existence: The descendants of the tribe of Reuben, and then Korach, rail against Moses, enacting disastrously destructive fractures between themselves and their parental God (Numbers 16).

As we follow the Israelites from deliverance to revelation, we watch them move from birth to adolescence. The Israelites grow from a completely dependent and confused people, ketching about food and water, to a more mature though not-yet-adult nation seeking spiritual sustenance and a greater role in leadership.

The rational part of the brain is the prefrontal cortex, the brain’s CEO, responsible for planning, prioritizing, analyzing, and taming our emotional reactivity. As Dr. Jess Shatkin writes in Born to Be Wild: Why Teens Take Risks and How We Can Help Keep Them Safe, the prefrontal cortex develops slowly, not fully forming until early adulthood. The limbic system, however, the part of the brain that gives rise to our emotions, develops much earlier, so that we experience joy, sadness, anger, desire, and frustration early in childhood. In adolescence, we are not yet guided or tethered by reason. It can be a time of impulsivity and risky behavior propelled by the emotions and physiological needs that motivate us to sustain ourselves by eating, satisfying sexual appetite, drawing close or fleeing, defending or rebelling. The adolescent brain, not yet fully formed, is more flexible. And an adolescent’s risky behavior can serve a greater purpose; it allows for exploration, innovation, and creativity: So, when the People of Israel assert, ‘We will do, then we will learn,’ they are letting God know not just that they will learn by doing but — like the adolescent people they are — they will explore, innovate, and create their own ways to follow God’s commandments.

The developmental psychologist Erik Erikson taught that each stage of psychosocial development must be negotiated and resolved before moving into the next stage. The work of adolescence is to evaluate and challenge the experiences that have contributed to our sense of self so that we become true to ourselves and who we want to become as adults. An adolescent might feel a need to reject parental values and family practices as she searches for her authentic self.

Navigating this stage successfully results in the capacity for loyalty and faithfulness, a volitional fidelity more meaningful than obedience.

B’nai Yisrael’s rebellions — for example, the rebellion of Korach, Dathan, and Abiram against Moses and Aaron (Numbers 16:5-7) — are clear examples of an adolescent need to assert agency while negotiating a hierarchical world. The fact that some of the Israelites are swallowed up in the process amplifies the inherent risk of the adolescent journey.

For teens, na’aseh v’nishma, resonates: We’ll experiment with the mandates you set out as we come to terms with our own spiritual and moral path. Some of our actions may not please you, some may anger you, some may be self-destructive, but if you want our authentic allegiance, our mature devotion, our real understanding of what this covenant entails, you’ve got to wait.

Dr. Ross Andelman is a pediatric and adult psychiatrist living in Vancouver, British Columbia, with his wife, Rabbi Hannah Dresner. He practices in Bellingham, Wash., and Berkeley, Calif. Andelman grew up in Tulsa, Okla., and studied architecture at Yale University, photography at San Francisco Art Institute, and medicine at Columbia University.
Rachel Adler: Authoritative scholars are the original intended audience of Pirkei Avot, Chapters of our Fathers. The tractate’s goal is to help form character rather than to transmit data, as other mishnaic and talmudic tractates do. The first chapter teems with warnings about speaking too much or hastily. The danger of words seems an odd concern for the progenitors of a vast body of conversations among many voices. Yet here, Shimon Ben Gamliel recommends silence and listening above speech and argues that acts outweigh words.

Teaching, judging, and leading all require language, but words are only part of how we influence others. We receive the words of tradition, but the only way to determine whether they transform us is action. Action is the inevitable result of words. It reveals whether the speakers are embodying their words or using them as disguises for far different outcomes. Actions also expose how well we listened to other conversation partners, how seriously we took their concerns and well-being. If we claim to love everyone and then oppress those unlike us, the malignity of our act unmasks the lie in our words. In a world of liars, integrity is difficult but precious. Like Shimon ben Gamliel, who was martyred by the Romans, we must make our acts guarantors for our words.

Jay Michaelson: Interpreting the verse from Pirkei Avot (1:17), Professor Rachel Adler writes, “Shimon Ben Gamliel recommends silence and listening above speech and argues that acts outweigh words.” But in the text, Rabbi Shimon Ben Gamliel only recommends silence — not listening. Which raises the question: What kind of silence?

Maybe Professor Adler is right that the ideal person here is a good listener. Or, perhaps, someone who says, “Say little, do much,” in contrast to the pedant-sophist-hypocrite. Maybe even a first-century meditator (probably not).

But I wonder if this imagined ideal is more like Dostoevsky’s “man of action” — a thoughtless brute; as Rabbi Shimon says, “Study is not the most important thing, but action.” Silence can mean a lot of things, many of them awful; there are silences of assent, conformity, obedience, intimidation, violence.

Adler goes on to say, “Action is the inevitable result of words.” Inevitable? Isn’t the point here that some words lead to no action, like Pax Romana-era Facebook posts? Perhaps that’s what Rabbi Shimon means by “He who increases words brings sin.” Adler again reads him in the best light when she writes, “We must make our acts guarantors for our words.”

But I see something darker in the text: a mistrust of reasoning; a Trumpian contempt for detail, argumentation, analysis, science; anti-intellectualism; a concern that too much sophistication leads to error. Maybe it’s just the effect of our times, but I say: Count me among the sinners.

Daniel Holtzman: I spent a week last summer at Queer Talmud Camp, a program run by SVARA, a “traditionally radical yeshiva.” My chavruta (study partner) and I spent long hours studying texts in their original Hebrew and Aramaic, bent over our dictionaries, slowly uncovering the bones of an ancient argument about the release of debts during shmita, the seventh year of the agricultural cycle. Together, we mused and memorized, marveling at the fact that we — trans and queer Jews — had access to this text and this sweet process of learning.

For thousands of years, the privilege of Talmud study has been reserved for a select few. For me, the holiness of this learning was not about sages such as Hillel, or the laws of shmita, but rather the radical act of reading Talmud as a trans person. The words we read were profound, but made more so by the unique experiences and intuition each of us brought to the text. Learning Torah is an active and alive process.

While Professor Rachel Adler writes that “we receive the words of tradition,” she might agree that passively receiving these words is not an option for so many of us. For trans and queer Jews, the text does not at first seem to reflect our lives or holiness. In order to survive, our learning must be kinetic, and the Torah we teach responsive to our present realities. We must write ourselves into this old and ongoing story. And nobody knows better than ourselves into this old and ongoing story. And nobody knows better than ourselves into this old and ongoing story. And nobody knows better than ourselves into this old and ongoing story. And nobody knows better than ourselves into this old and ongoing story. And nobody knows better than ourselves into this old and ongoing story. And nobody knows better than ourselves into this old and ongoing story.

Rabbi Jay Michaelson, PhD, is the author of, most recently, Enlightenment by Trial and Error and the forthcoming The Holy Heresy of Jacob Frank.

Rachel Adler is the David Ellenson Professor of Modern Jewish Thought at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Los Angeles. Her writings include Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics, the first book by a female theologian to win a National Jewish Book Award for Jewish Thought, and over 50 articles, most recently “For These I Weep: A Theology of Lament” (The CCAR Reform Jewish Quarterly).
**Introduction**

*Sh’ma Now* curates conversations on a single theme rooted in Jewish tradition and the contemporary moment. At the core of this issue of *Sh’ma Now* is the Jewish sensibility of “*Na’aseh v’Nishma / We will do and we will hear.*” This short phrase suggests a nuanced and textured examination. It’s a rather common phrase, one that — on the surface — suggests a certain unexamined obedience to God and Torah: We, the Israelites, at Mount Sinai, declare that we will follow and perform before we fully hear and understand. On this verse, interpreters have offered myriad glosses. Rabbi Jill Jacobs writes, “The insistence that ‘na’aseh’ precedes ‘nishma’… 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.” She goes on to quote the commentator Abraham Ibn Ezra, who says *na’aseh v’nishma* indicates “an acceptance not only of the immediate laws of the Torah, but also of all of the laws to come.” Some interpreters scoff at such obedience, noting that we must first understand before we can accept and obey. Another interpretation suggests that since we can’t perform all of the 613 commandments given in the Torah (some commandments are only for Priests, for example), our collective acceptance of the Torah at Mount Sinai and the declaration *na’aseh v’nishma* committed Jews to be responsible for one another and a collective observance. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who describes Judaism not as a leap of faith but as a “leap of action” writes that a person is asked to “do more than he understands in order to understand more than he does.” In other words, when we commit ourselves and observe Judaism’s call to action, we eventually attain greater insight and learning. Rabbi Shai Held deepens the learning, connecting the action to our collective memory: “One of the Torah’s central projects is to turn memory into empathy and moral responsibility.”

*Sh’ma Now* has never viewed learning or “meaning-making” as solely an individual activity. That’s why we have included this guide, which is specifically designed to help you to consider the idea of going forth in your discovery of ideas and questions independently or with others, formally and informally.

**How to Begin**

The guide offers a variety of suggestions, including activities and prompts for individual contemplation and informal or structured conversations. We suggest that you use this guide to share reflections and thoughts over a Shabbat meal, or, for those who are more adventurous, to lead a planned, structured conversation, inviting a small group of friends and family to your home or to a coffee shop. If you would like more information about ways in which this journal can be used, please contact Susan Berrin, Sh’ma Now editor-in-chief, at SBerrin@shma.com. You can also print out a PDF file of the entire issue at http://forward.com/shma-now/.
Guidelines for Discussion

If you wish to hold a structured conversation, the following guidelines may help you to create a space that allows for honest personal exploration through sharing:

• Create a sense of shared purpose that can foster the kind of internal reflection that happens through group conversation.
• Remind participants of simple ground rules for conversations. For example: Avoid commenting on and critiquing each other’s comments. Make room for everyone to speak. Step into or away from the conversation appropriately. No one participant should dominate the conversation. Let silence sit, allowing participants to gather their thoughts.
• For each of the questions below, we recommend that you print out the article in question, or provide the link to it, and we ask that you take a moment to read it in print or on screen, before the conversation begins.
• Allow people a few minutes to absorb the article, perhaps even to read it a second time, before moving into the discussion.

Interpretive Questions

can focus the reader on the ideas in the articles.

• Rabbi Salem Pearce, [page 1] director of organizing at T’ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, mobilizes rabbis, cantors, and their communities to protect human rights. Building on her experiences, she brings new insight into the idea of na’aseh v’nishma, the command to do and then to listen. She writes: “It is also not enough to simply act and obey. The cultivation of that empathy and moral responsibility is not just commanded. The Torah is not making a rational argument for such behavior; the motivation for protecting and promoting the interests and rights of the stranger is our memory of being strangers in Egypt. Acceptance of the covenant — “All that God has said, we will do, and we will obey” — is also acceptance of the Torah’s insistence upon the deep connection between memory and morality.” What does it mean to dutifully obey without understanding underlying reasons? What are the unexpected benefits of doing and then knowing? Is it more meritorious to observe Jewish law and mitzvot if there is no “reason” to do so? The Israelites were praised for “committing to obey” before fully “hearing.” Is that an act worthy of praise?

• In NiSh’má, [page 6] our simulated Talmud page, three commentators examine a line from the first chapter of Pirkei Avot distinguishing “learning” from “doing.” In privileging action over learning, our commentators consider the role of listening and the importance of seeing oneself in the textual conversation. Rachel Adler, the David Ellenson Professor of Modern Jewish Thought at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, notes that “Shimon Ben Gamliel recommends silence and listening above speech and argues that acts outweigh words.” She goes on to write that we “receive the words of tradition, but the only way to determine whether they transform us is action. Action is the inevitable result of words. It reveals whether the speakers are embodying their words or using them as disguises for far different outcomes. Actions also expose how well we listened to other conversation partners, how seriously we took their concerns and well-being.” Jay Michaelson, author of Enlightenment by Trial and Error and the forthcoming The Holy Heresy of Jacob Frank, responds to Rachel Adler’s interpretation of Pirkei Avot with, “Silence can mean a lot of things, many of them awful; there are silences of assent, conformity, obedience,
intimidation, violence.” Daniel Holtzman, the executive director of the Jewish Student Press Service, raises questions about who owns Jewish sacred texts and their interpretative renderings. In your estimation, what is more important, “words” or “actions”? Why? And when does the significance of one flip to greater importance? What dangers lurk when someone’s silence can be interpreted in multiple ways?

• Dr. Ross Andelman, [page 5] a pediatric and adult psychiatrist, examines the relationship between the behavior of an adolescent teen and the adolescent B’nai Yisrael, the Israelites in their rebellious years. We watch as the Israelites grow “from a completely dependent and confused people, kvetching about food and water, to a more mature though not-yet-adult nation seeking spiritual sustenance and a greater role in leadership.” Ross explains how the human brain develops, and the differences in development between the brain’s rational and emotional centers. He writes, “the adolescent brain, not yet fully formed, is more flexible. And an adolescent’s risky behavior can serve a greater purpose; it allows for exploration, innovation, and creativity. So, when the People of Israel assert, ‘We will do, then we will learn,’ they are letting God know not just that they will learn by doing but — like the adolescent people they are — they will explore, innovate, and create their own ways to follow God’s commandments.” What is the relationship between “na’aseh v’nishma” and risk-taking? Is there anything special or unusual about the teenage brain that determines how teenagers approach risk? Is risk-taking linked to a developmental phase? Does this risk-taking mirror in any way the notion that the Israelites were an adolescent nation when they uttered “na’aseh v’nishma”?

Reflective Questions

A Guide to “Na’aseh v’Nishma /We will do and we will hear”

• Rabbi Zac Kamenetz, [page 2] director of Jewish Living and Learning at the JCC of San Francisco and codirector of Beloved Berkeley, shares the intimate story of his experiences with psilocybin, the psychoactive compound found in “magic” mushrooms. As part of a study conducted by the psychiatry and behavioral sciences department at Johns Hopkins University exploring the nature of consciousness and mystical experiences, Zac took two “trips” and relates his experiences through the lens of Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav’s teachings on na’aseh v’nishma. While several mystical and Hasidic traditions draw on this phrase to examine the process of integrating mystical experiences, Rebbe Nachman, in his work, Likutei Moharan, writes, “...every person must proceed from level to level and from world to world, until they merit each time to attain a higher aspect of ‘we will do and we will hear,’ so that every time for them the aspect of ‘we will hear,’ the aspect of the hidden will become the aspect of ‘we will do,’ the aspect of the revealed..., until they come to the primal beginning point of Creation, which is the beginning of Emanation.” (22:10) Zac shares with readers his work at integrating his psychedelic journeys and experiences into his life: “after the ecstasy, the laundry.” How do you understand the rungs, or levels of understanding, that Rebbe Nachman describes? Are there rungs of understanding that preclude your Jewish involvement? Is there a connection between listening, nishma, and understanding — and what is that connection?
Consider & Converse

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Sam Berrin Shonkoff, [page 3] an assistant professor of Jewish studies at the Graduate Theological Union and editor of Martin Buber: His Intellectual and Scholarly Legacy, explores how modern Jewish thinkers — especially the philosophers Martin Buber and Emanuel Levinas as well as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel — came to understand the idea of “na’aseh v’nishma.” While the classical rabbinic and mystical commentaries on “na’aseh v’nishma” understand it as a commitment of unconditional obedience (we shall do the commandments before hearing what is commanded of us), Hasidic interpreters suggest that “hearing is a result of the doing. Moreover, they suggest that this ‘hearing’ intimates a newfound theological awareness or understanding.” Sam goes on to explain that modern notions of “freedom and autonomy, coupled with separations of church and state, render images of the Israelites’ unconditional obedience uninspiring at best. If religious observance is a personal choice, then those actions must offer something to seekers. The new interpretation of na’aseh v’nishma does just this, exchanging an image of subservience for a promise of enlightenment.” How do see these interpretations of na’aseh v’nishma evolving for Jews with less commitment to Jewish law? When thinking about the relationship you have with God, do you need to understand what is expected before choosing to obey? What about in your relationships with friends and family: In “na’aseh v’nishma” moments, when you are asked to obey before fully understanding, how do you proceed?