

# Youthful Heroism

Category: Mishpatim, Shemos

*Who really said “Naaseh V’Nishmah”?*

## A Mohel for adults

The last time I visited Israel, I met a long lost relative. He was not observant as a teenager, but, over the years, he had become increasingly religious. Now he dresses like a prominent rabbi.

I asked him what he does for a living, and he told me that he is a Mohel for adults. He has a special certification from the Department of Health, and he spends one day each week in the operating room doing circumcisions.

I assumed that he was doing these circumcisions for immigrants from the former Soviet Union. The Jews of the Soviet Union, by and large, were not able to circumcise their children, so when millions of them arrived in the United States and Israel, many underwent circumcisions. But my cousin looked at me and said, “no, that wave is long over. Any Russian immigrant who wanted a circumcision has already obtained one. I do circumcisions for ‘Sabras’ — native born Israeli Jews.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. Apparently, there’s a movement of Israeli parents who do not circumcise their children. What brings them to undergo circumcision as adults — a much more significant and complicated procedure — if their parents were against it?

He explained that most people decide to make the jump when they’re in the army. When they realize that everyone else has this unique marker of being Jewish, they don’t want to be excluded. So they turn to their superiors with a request for a bris, and they are recommended to him.

How many youngsters are actually not circumcised in Israel? Many hundreds, he says, in the Tel Aviv area and beyond, do not have this basic Jewish identification.

I recently listened to an interview with someone else who also does army

circumcisions. He does them for converts; non-Jewish soldiers convert to Judaism during their army service, and once a month, he does their circumcisions.

As you can imagine, it's not an easy procedure for a grown adult. There was one instance, he related, where he did a circumcision for a young man of about 30 years old. He was very tense. He asked the young man what his role in the army was, and he replied that he was an army pilot. "Believe me," said the young man, "I am far more afraid to do a bris than to fly over Damascus."

There was one incident that made a deep impression on him. During one bris, he asked the soldier what Jewish name he would like to adopt. Just as we name a child at his circumcision, a converted adult undergoing circumcision chooses a Jewish name as well.

The young soldier started to cry, and said, "Eitan."

Why did he choose that name?

In 2014, the IDF engaged in a 50 day operation in Gaza known as Operation Protective Edge and seventy soldiers lost their lives. In Hebrew, it was called *Tzuk Eitan*.

During the difficult days of fighting, the soldier was deployed in Gaza and a number of his friends were killed. During one particularly harsh battle, a few of his friends were killed and he tried to find cover before the volley of firepower resumed. He turned to G-d and said. "Dear G-d, I'm willing to die for my homeland. However, if I'm going to die, I don't want to die a gentile." At the time, he had already begun the conversion process. "Let me get out of this alive, finish my conversion process, be circumcised, and then I'm willing to die a Jew."

He survived the battle, and succeeded in converting to Judaism. Therefore, he decided to name himself after that operation— Eitan.

## **Our Pledge of Allegiance**

There's a famous pledge of allegiance associated with the giving of the Torah. When G-d presented the Jewish people with the laws they would need to observe, they said, "*Na'aseh V'Nishmah*, we will do and we will listen."

Interestingly, although the main story of the Ten Commandments was in last week's parsha, this part of the story was read this week, in Mishpatim.

The basic story line of the event was as follows:

On the first of Sivan, the Jewish people arrived at Mount Sinai. Following one day of rest from the journey, Moses climbed the mountain and G-d gave him a message for the Jewish people: "Now that I have taken you out of Egypt, I want to designate you as my kingdom of priests and holy nation."

When Moses came down to the people and relayed G-d's words, the entire nation responded, "whatever G-d said, we will do."

This was in last week's Torah portion.

The storyline then moves to our Torah portion. Two days after that first encounter, on the 4th of Sivan, Moses is once again called on to the mountain. This time, he is told how the Jewish people should prepare themselves for the giving of the Torah. Again, when he relays the information, the entire Jewish people say, "Whatever G-d says, we will do."

But then, there's one final incident. On the 5th of Sivan, Moses builds an altar, has the "youth of the Jewish people" offer a bunch of sacrifices, and then he took "the book of the covenant," i.e., a Torah scroll, and read from the beginning of Genesis through the story of the giving of the Torah. This time, they responded, "whatever G-d says, we will do *and we will listen.*"

What was unique about this interaction? Why did they suddenly add that they will "listen"? What exactly was lacking in the previous commitments? And why has this interaction become such a defining moment of Jewish history?

Commentaries explain that in the previous instances, the Jews had committed to what they had already heard. They had already "listened," and therefore committed to do it.

This time, the commitment was to "do *and* listen." They were signing an open check, committing to do whatever G-d would command them *in the future*. Understandably, that is a much more significant commitment, and it is therefore so memorable.

# Who Really Said It?

I think there's another difference as well. In one of the earlier instances, we read that G-d tells Moses to speak to the "House of Jacob and the children of Israel." As the sages explain, this means that he was to first speak to the women and then to the men. However, it seems that Moses followed a different order. When he came down from the mountain, he first gathered the elders of the community to tell them G-d's words.

This time, however, Moses preceded the reading of the Torah with offering sacrifices. Who offered those sacrifices? The youngsters of the Jewish people.

This seems to be the first time that he prioritized the young over the old. And they were the ones to demonstrate this overwhelming commitment — we will do and we will listen.

(Proof for this approach: in the first two instances, the Torah clearly says that the entire nation responded, "we will do." This time, however, it just says, "they responded." The mention of the entire nation is conspicuously absent.)

## The Key to the Holy Temple

The importance of the youth is evident in another important aspect of Jewish history, the Holy Temple.

The Talmud relates that during the destruction of the first Temple, the young priests gathered on the roof with the keys to the Temple, turned to G-d and said, "Master of the world, we have not merited to be faithful purveyors of the Temple. Here are your keys." They threw them upwards, and a hand emerged from heaven and received them (Taanis 29a).

The Rebbe points out a simple fact from the story: the keys to the Temple were obviously in the hands of the youth.

The lesson, he explained, is to remember that the keys to our spiritual Holy Temple are in the hands of our young. Every person has a Holy Temple deep in his heart, and it needs to be unlocked and revealed.

Who has the power to accomplish that? Who has the keys?

The young. They have the enthusiasm, the charisma, and the passion to open the Holy Temple for every Jew (Toras Menachem vol. 3 pg. 313).