

REMEMBER TO NISHMAH



He took the record of the covenant and read it aloud to the people. And they said, "All that God has spoken we will do and we will listen!"
- **Exodus 24:7**

When the Jewish people accepted the Torah at Mount Sinai, we enthusiastically declared our obedience to God: "Na'aseh v'nishma!" "We will do and we will listen!" This foundational declaration is emblematic of Jewish resilience. Our commitment to doing what needs to be done, in spite of the challenges, has helped us persevere for millenia. However, while this approach is powerful, it isn't always the one that we need.

In the aftermath of trauma, we can easily become consumed by a sense of restlessness and a need to "do," or a task to "na'aseh," without taking time to pause and "listen" to our hearts. When the Jews escaped Egypt and transitioned into life in the desert, they likely felt that way, compelled to "do" without listening to how they were feeling in that moment. Perhaps that's what God was reminding them to do a few verses later.

At this point in the chapter, Moshe, Aaron, Nadav, Avihu and the elders approached Mount Sinai and the Torah describes a strange vision of God and a block of sapphire the sages had as they ascended.

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Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and seventy elders of Israel ascended, and they saw the God of Israel—under whose feet was the likeness of a pavement of sapphire, like the very sky for purity. Yet [God] did not raise a hand against the leaders of the Israelites; they beheld God, and they ate and drank. - Exodus 24:9-11

This scene has puzzled sages for centuries, especially the presence of this strange stone. Rashi, the medieval commentator, asserted the stone in the vision symbolized the Jewish enslavement in Egypt and the bricks they were forced to make. Following Rashi's suggestions, perhaps God noticed their restlessness and sought to show the elders what they ought to be doing — sitting with their pain — rather than rushing to ascend Mount Sinai and accept their next set of tasks. They had just gone through something traumatic and needed to address it, to nishmah, to listen to the pain they were carrying, just like God was doing with their pain.

Sitting with painful or uncomfortable emotions does not come naturally to us as humans. We are hardwired to avoid damage and injury, so when we experience pain, whether physical or emotional, we naturally seek to make it stop. This tends to lead us to see emotional discomfort as a problem that needs to be fixed, both in ourselves and in others. While we, of course, want to seek comfort in times of strife, when we move forward too quickly we can invalidate emotion or make ourselves and others feel “wrong” for feeling that way.



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Many therapeutic approaches, with dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) being one of the most common, encourage you to challenge yourself to work toward tolerating and understanding emotional distress rather than avoiding or attempting to change it. Just as exposure helps us to overcome fear, exposure to experiencing distress can over time make it feel more “normal” and we can use these feelings as information to develop a deeper understanding of ourselves and our emotional needs.

When we face our own challenges we need to remember to nishmah, to listen to what we need for ourselves in those moments – not just what we need to do next. Addressing our pain fully is the only way we can actually heal. Once the elders finally did that, they “ate and drank,” not because they wanted to but because they finally had the peace of mind to do so.

