

Spotlight on...Vaetchanan

Parashat Vaetchanan continues Moshe's speech to the nation that began last week in Devarim, on the eve of his death. He imparts many pieces of wisdom and commandments onto them throughout Devarim. In chapter 4 verses 1 & 2, Moshe says:

And now, O Israel, give heed to the laws and rules that I am instructing you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you.

You shall not add anything to what I command you or take anything away from it, but keep the commandments of the LORD your God that I enjoin upon you.

וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁמַע אֶל-הַחֻקִּים וְאֶל-הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר
אָנֹכִי מְלַמֵּד אֶתְכֶם לַעֲשׂוֹת לְמַעַן תַּחֲיוּ וּבִאתֶם וְיִרְשַׁתֶּם
אֶת-הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם נָתַן לָכֶם: **לֹא תֹסֵפוּ
עַל-הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מִצְוֶה אֶתְכֶם וְלֹא תִגְרַעוּ מִמֶּנּוּ
לְשֹׁמֵר אֶת-מִצְוֹת ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מִצְוֶה אֶתְכֶם:**

These simple words take on a variety of interpretations.

1. Before studying any rabbinic interpretations - what do you think Moshe means when he says not to add or subtract from Hashem's commandments?
2. Rashi comments "For instance, to place five chapters in the tefillin (instead of four), to use five species of fruit and plants in the lulav, and to place five fringes on one's garment. Thus, too, must we explain the following words ולא תגרעו, You shall not take anything away from it." According to Rashi, what might our instinct be with regard to fulfilling the commandments? Why might we be inclined to add to the mitzvot? Why would we be wrong?
3. Seforno comments "A person should not make the mistake made by King Solomon that he can ignore a prohibition since he knows the reason for the prohibition and can create conditions when such a prohibition would not be justified. [to explain: the Torah had forbidden a king to marry too many women, warning that these could lead him astray. Solomon relied on his wisdom not to lead him astray and ignored the Torah's law with disastrous consequences for his kingdom.]" According to Seforno, what might our instinct be with regard to fulfilling the commandments? Why might we be inclined to add to the mitzvot? Why would we be wrong?
4. What else would you add to these two interpretations?