

Parashat Vaetchanan

Deuteronomy 3:23-7:11

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בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ
בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לְעֲסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה.

*Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav
v'tzivanu laasok b'divrei Torah.*

Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of all, who hallows us with
mitzvot, commanding us to engage with words of Torah.

Deuteronomy 4:1-4

1 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. 2 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. 3 You saw with your own eyes what the LORD did in the matter of Baal-peor, that the LORD your God wiped out from among you every person who followed Baal-peor; 4 while you, who held fast to the LORD your God, are all alive today.

Rashi

You shall not add anything. By, for example, adding a fifth text to your phylacteries, a fifth species to the four waved on Sukkot, or a fifth fringe to your garments.

Gersonides

You shall not add anything. The reference is to adding something that detracts from the Torah's purpose... But an addition that preserves the intent of the Torah, like the "fences" added by our Sages, is perfectly fine.

Nechama Leibowitz

The Torah had, admittedly, to warn man not to imagine that he could improve on the commands by doing *more* than God had ordered. He might think that additions were therefore permissible. But surely any diminution was expressly forbidden by the earlier admonition to hearken to the statutes and ordinances. Anything less than those statutes and ordinances constituted disobedience.

Ha'amek Davar

This admonition [to not add] follows the phrase *that you may live*, to imply that, though there are other means of achieving communion with the Divine (by sacrifice, fasts and abstinences), it is far better to attain godliness through the statutes and ordinances of the Torah. *You shall not add* therefore implies that you should take care that these other means, not sanctioned by the Torah do not lead you to add to tradition, even if such addition springs from a desire to improve your observance and is performed out of love of God. *You shall not diminish* from the laws of tradition in order the better to perform them.

Nechama Leibowitz, on the *Kli Yakar*

The passage urging us not to add nor diminish constitutes one single admonition. We are actually bidden by the text not to add to the Torah's precepts. If we observe this, then, we shall automatically be saved from the pitfall of diminishing. The text is to read as follows: "Do not add to the message which I have commanded you and you will not diminish therefrom." The second verb phrase is a cause of result. Only the first is imperative.

Sforno

You shall not add...nor diminish...that you may keep the commandments of the Lord. Do not think that if the reason for the prohibition disappears, that there will then be no sin in diminishing, as King Solomon imagined when he stated, “I shall multiply and not turn away.”

Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 21b

Said R. Isaac: Why were the reasons of the Torah not revealed? Because in the two cases where they were revealed, one of the world's great men was misled. It is written: *neither shall [the king] multiply wives to himself, that his heart not turn away.* Said King Solomon: I shall multiply and not turn away. It is written: *For it came to pass when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart...*

Deuteronomy 4:5-8

5 See, I have imparted to you laws and rules, as the LORD my God has commanded me, for you to abide by in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. 6 Observe them faithfully, for that will be proof of your wisdom and discernment to other peoples, who on hearing of all these laws will say, “Surely, that great nation is a wise and discerning people.” 7 For what great nation is there that has a god so close at hand as is the LORD our God whenever we call upon Him? 8 Or what great nation has laws and rules as perfect as all this Teaching that I set before you this day?

Deuteronomy 6:17-19

17 Be sure to keep the commandments, decrees, and laws that the LORD your God has enjoined upon you. 18 Do what is right and good in the sight of the LORD, that it may go well with you and that you may be able to possess the good land that the LORD your God promised on oath to your fathers, 19and that all your enemies may be driven out before you, as the LORD has spoken.

Rashi

What is right and good. This refers to a willingness to forgo what might be permitted according to the strict letter of the law.

Ramban

The straightforward sense of these words is that you must keep His commandments, doing so for no other reason than that you wish to do what He finds good...This is in fact something of major importance. It is impossible for the Torah to include every potential human interaction, social, commercial, and political. But once it has mentioned a number of them, it repeats the instruction to do what is right and good, encouraging people to voluntarily yield some of their prerogatives.

Babylonian Talmud Baba Metzia 30b

Said R. Yochanan: Jerusalem was destroyed only because they acted in accordance with the letter of the Torah and did not go beyond it.