



THE NEW OLD PATH

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Sometimes Less is More

Despite the fact that God has informed him that he will not be the one to bring the Jewish People home, Moshe continues to teach them Torah ahead of their entry into the Land of Israel. Amidst his preamble to the Ten Commandments, Moshe states: ‘You shall not add onto the matter that I command you and neither shall you detract from it’ (*D’varim* 4:2).

Two laws are included in this statement. The first is the prohibition against adding in any way to the commandments of the Torah. This means that it is forbidden, for example, to extend the festival of Sukkot by an extra day, to put a fifth set of strings on one’s *tzitzit* or to add an extra compartment inside one’s *tefillin* box. The second law is the prohibition against detracting in any way from the commandments of the Torah.

Both of these elements are perplexing. The first seems to be somewhat counterintuitive, whereas the second seems obvious. A desire to add to the commandments may stem from a person’s alacrity towards religious

life and depth of connection to the Creator. Why would such a seemingly praiseworthy act be prohibited? And regarding the second proscription, given that the Torah states on many occasions that its laws are eternal, it is inconceivable that it would be permitted to detract from its commandments in any way. So, what is the meaning behind this verse?

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Sforno explains that the second element is indeed necessary, in order to prevent people from wrongly assuming that there are commandments that apply only in certain situations or to particular people. This was the case with King Solomon, who believed that contrary to the Torah’s explicit command, many wives and many horses would not cause him to go astray (BT, Tractate *Sanhedrin* 21b). This tendency to believe that sometimes we are beyond the scope of a law occurs in our day-to-day lives. How many of us have driven

slightly above the speed limit on a quiet deserted road, 'safe' in the knowledge that it is not really dangerous since we are in control? Even King Solomon, the wisest man to ever lived (Melachim I 5:10), was not immune to the pitfall of assumed immunity when he knew the reasoning behind the commandment. Sforno explains that the verse teaches that there are no exceptions, and no one is 'above the law'.

An explanation of the prohibition against adding to the Torah's commands may be understood by way of an analogy that my father often recounts. A great architect designs an exquisite structure. He hands the plan to his foreman, who in turn instructs the labourers as to its implementation. Amidst construction, one of the labourers decides that if he increases the height of a certain fence slightly, the beautiful structure will be better protected. What results, to the dismay of the original architect, is that the wall now conceals some of the edifice's tremendous beauty. The architect may consider every minor detail and intend, 'to know what I was walling in or walling out, and to whom I was like to give offence' (Robert Frost, *Mending the Wall*), but without this knowledge, by adding a little to the original design, the labourer detracted from the beauty.

Rabbenu Bachya explains that one should be careful not to presume that one's addition is the will of God, 'for the perfect Torah does not need addition or detraction, and whoever adds, [really]

detracts.' The Talmud derives this idea from an episode at the beginning of the Book of B'reishit (BT, Tractate *Sanhedrin* 29a). Soon after man is created, God permits free reign over the Garden of Eden, with one exception, 'from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, do not eat from it' (B'reishit 2:17). In the first-ever addition to a divine commandment, Chava relays to the snake, 'God said do not eat and do not touch' (3:3). Rashi notes that her being more stringent than God's command was what led to man's ultimate downfall.

The rabbis, like an architect's foreman, are entrusted with the delicate methods of safeguarding the commandments, and a person can indeed choose to take upon oneself a specific stringency, within rabbinic guidelines. Nevertheless, there are individuals who press to universalise personal stringencies, thus hindering an appreciation of the true essence of the beautiful Torah that they seek to preserve. Through erecting supplementary 'fences' from within, they fence off much of what the Torah has to offer. Earlier on, Moshe states explicitly that extra fortification and walls are a sign of weakness, as they reflect a lack of intrinsic strength and assurance (Rashi on Bamidbar 13:18). And here, Moshe warns the original Torah 'labourers', prior to their entry into the land, not to append anything to the perfect blueprint. ■

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