

Parashat Va'etchanan 5779, 2019:

You Should Neither Add nor Subtract

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The halachic imperative to refrain from adding or subtracting from the *mitzvot* of the Torah is found both in our *parasha* and in Parashat Re'eh:

Do not add to the word (*lo tosifu*) which I command you, nor diminish from it (*v'lo tigra'u*), to observe the commandments of the L-rd your G-d which I command you. (*Sefer Devarim* 4:2, Parashat Va'etchanan, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Everything I command you that you shall be careful to do it. You shall neither add to it (*lo tosaf*), nor subtract from it (*v'lo tig'ra*). (*Sefer Devarim* 13:1, Parashat Re'eh)

Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself upon the words of the *Midrash Sifrei* to *Sefer Devarim* (*Piska* 82), suggests the following interpretation of “*lo tosaf*” — do not add:

You shall neither add to it: [e.g., placing] five chapters in *tefillin* [instead of four], or [using] five species for the *lulav* [instead of four], or [reciting] four blessings [instead of three] for the blessing of the *kohanim*. (13:1)

Like the *Sifrei*, Rashi focuses on the specifics of existing *mitzvot*. We see this in his above-found explanation of “do not add,” and regarding “nor diminish from it” (4:2), wherein he states: “And so, too, *v'lo tigra'u* [from it i.e., three instead of four *tzitzit* or species of plants for the *mitzvah* of *lulav*].”

Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, known as the Netziv (1817-1893), takes a different approach to our *pasukim* (verses). In his Torah commentary, *Ha'emek Davar* on *Sefer Devarim* 13:1, he emphasizes the difference in language that obtains between verse 4:2 that is written in the plural — “*lo tosifu v'lo tigra'u*,” and verse 13:1 that is written in the singular — “*lo tosaf v'lo tig'ra*.” He suggests that verse 4:2 in the plural form is referring to those individuals who might want to “customize” a particular commandment in a heartfelt effort to actualize their overwhelming love of Hashem. In order to prevent this, the Torah employs the plural form, as if to say to *klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people), “No matter what you may think or feel, you may not alter any *mitzvah* of the Torah in order to serve your subjective spiritual needs.” After all, did not *Dovid HaMelech* (King David) declare: “*Torat Hashem temimah* — Hashem’s Torah is absolutely perfect.” (*Sefer Tehillim* 19:8)

In contrast, according to the Netziv, the formulation of the prohibition to add or subtract from the Torah that appears in verse 13:1, stated in the singular, contains an entirely new dimension than that found in verse 4:2. It is addressed to *Chachmei Yisrael* (the Sages of the Jewish people) and, in particular, to the Sanhedrin — the Supreme Court of the Jewish nation:

And here, over and above the well-known warning to individuals to refrain from adding to a positive commandment, we find [a new adjuration issued to] the various Sanhedrins [that will exist throughout history]. Herein, they are hereby warned from adding to that which has been accepted within the *Torah SheB'al Peh* (Oral Law), whether regarding a positive commandment or a negative prohibition...therefore it is written in the singular form, since every nation is referred to in this fashion [that is, as one entity]. This [grammatical construction] is particularly apropos in the case of the Sanhedrin, since it is the source of the entire nation’s halachic rulings... (Translation and brackets my own)

In the Netziv's estimation, *bal tosif* (you should not add) and *bal tigr'a* (you should not diminish), therefore, represent a total of two distinct *mitzvot* that contain two levels of prohibition. The text of *Sefer Devarim* 4:2 is addressed to individuals among the Jewish people who might seek to alter *Torah She'Bichtav* (the Written Torah) in order to achieve greater spiritual heights. In contrast, the wording in 13:1 is primarily an admonition to the Sanhedrin to refrain from changing the accepted *Massorah* (historical transmission) of *Torah SheB'al Peh* which, like *Torah She'Bichtav*, was received by *Moshe Rabbeinu* (our teacher, Moses) on Mount Sinai.

With Hashem's help and our deepest desire, may we strive to fulfill the *mitzvot* of both *Torah She'Bichtav* and *Torah SheB'al Peh* with authenticity and joy, and may this enable us, as individuals and as a nation, to draw ever closer to our Creator. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha's* name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio** *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.