

Diminishing the Word of God

In this weeks reading from *Parsahat Va'etchanan* (*Devarim / Deuteronomy 3:23-7:11*), Moshe asks the Lord if he can to go into the Promised Land and the Lord tells him no. The Lord told him to go up to the top of Pisgah and see the Promised Land with his own eyes to look over the Jordan river. It is interesting how the text describes Moshe looking “north, east, south, and west” when the natural assumption is from Pisgah looking across the Jordan he would have primarily been looking westward. Moshe then proceeds to urge Israel to obey God’s instructions for life, so that they will walk in God’s ways and the Lord will extend their lives. Moshe describes this as keeping one’s soul diligently and to not forget the things the Lord has done so that the testimony (the Torah) does not depart from your heart all the days of your life. He goes on to say they should teach God’s word to their sons and grandsons, so they too learn to fear the Lord all of the days of their lives as well (*4:9-10*). The Ten Commandments are repeated and we are told how Moshe interceded on behalf of the people at the mountain of Sinai to save them from the sin of the golden calf. We are told to obey the Lord, His commands, His statutes, and His judgments so that the Lord will prosper us. Moshe warns the people who are entering the Promised Land to tear down the altars, to smash the sacred pillars, to cut down the Asherim, and to burn the graven images with fire the Canaanites have set up in Israel. The Lord repeats saying, “*you are a holy people, the Lord God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all peoples who are on the face of the earth*” (*7:4-6*).

The point all of these things appear to have in common is from *Devarim / Deuteronomy 4:2*, ב לא תספו על-הדבר אשר אנכי מצוה אתכם ולא, *4:2 ‘You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you. (NASB)* Moshe says לא תספו and ולא תגרעו to not “increase” or “decrease” the mitzvot (מצוות, commands). What is the significance of “increasing or decreasing” the command? Notice how the Torah portion lists the result of doing so is a shortened life span, and would lead to one falling into idolatry and adultery, and participating in the sins of the

people of Canaan.

ספר דברים פרק ד

א ועתה ישראל שמע אל-החקים
ואל-המשפטים אשר אנכי מלמד
אתכם לעשות למען תחיו ובאתם
וירשתם את-הארץ אשר יהוה
אלהי אבותיכם נתן לכם: ב לא
תספו על-הדבר אשר אנכי מצוה
אתכם ולא תגרעו ממנו לשמר
את-מצות יהוה אלהיכם אשר
אנכי מצוה אתכם: ג עיניי
כם הראות את אשר-עשה יהוה
בבעל פעור פי כל-האיש אשר
הלך אחרי בעל-פעור השמידו
יהוה אלהיך מקרבך: ד ואתם
הדבקים ביהוה אלהיכם חיים
כלכם היום: [שני] ה ראה |
למדתי אתכם חקים ומשפטים
כאשר צוני יהוה אלהי לעשות
כו בקרב הארץ אשר אתם באים
שמה לרשתה: ו ושמתם וע-
שיתם כי הוא חכמתכם ובינת-
כם לעיני העמים אשר ישמעון
את כל-החקים האלה ואמרו רק
עם-חכם ונבון הגוי הגדול הזה: ז
כי מי-גוי גדול אשר-לו אלהים
קרבים אליו פיהוה אלהינו בכל-
קראנו אליו: ח ומי גוי גדול
אשר-לו חקים ומשפטים צדיקים
ככל התורה הזאת אשר אנכי נתן
לפניכם היום:

Devarim / Deuteronomy 4:1-8

4:1 'Now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgments which I am teaching you to perform, so that you may live and go in and take possession of the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, is giving you. 4:2 'You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you. 4:3 'Your eyes have seen what the Lord has done in the case of Baal-peor, for all the men who followed Baal-peor, the Lord your God has destroyed them from among you. 4:4 'But you who held fast to the Lord your God are alive today, every one of you. 4:5 'See, I have taught you statutes and judgments just as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do thus in the land where you are entering to possess it. 4:6 'So keep and do them, for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' 4:7 'For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the Lord our God whenever we call on Him? 4:8 'Or what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole law which I am setting before you today? (NASB)

The Major point of the Torah portion for this week is found within the opening verses to the reading which state, ב לא תספו על-הדבר אשר אנכי מצווה אתכם ולא תגרעו ממנו לשמור את-מצות יהוה אלהיכם אשר אנכי מצווה אתכם: 4:2 *'You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you. (NASB)* Moshe says לא תספו and ולא תגרעו to not “increase” or “decrease” the mitzvot (מצוות, commands). To increase is synonymous to “adding” to the command, and to decrease is synonymous to “dismissing” the command. The significance of “increasing or decreasing” the command is related to what Moshe is saying, obeying the commands of God will increase one’s life, whereas, disobedience will lead to a shortened life span, and a life filled with sin will lead to one’s falling into idolatry and adultery, and participating in the sins that are described as what the people of Canaan were doing, which is an abomination to the Lord. The idea of “diminishing the command” is very significant and a serious topic to consider in light of who we are in the Messiah Yeshua as the children of the Most High God. Let’s study this topic a little further.

The Targum Onkelos states the following:

Targum Onkelos on Devarim 4:1-3

IV. And now, Israel, hear the statutes and the judgments which I am to teach you to do, that you may live, and go in to inherit the land which the Lord God of your fathers hath given you. You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor diminish from it, to keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you. Your eyes have seen what the Lord hath done with the worshipers of Baal Peor; for all the men who went after Baal Peor the Lord thy God hath destroyed from among you.

Notice how the Targum Onkelos parallels the diminishing or adding to the Word of God as those who were the worshipers of Baal Peor, those whom the Lord God destroyed. Both the MT and the Targum translation have this comparison which suggests by adding to or subtracting from God’s word, is a type of idolatry and adultery.

The importance of being careful to not add to or subtract from the

command is discussed by the rabbis in the following way by Daat Zkenim and Sforno:

Daat Zkenim on Devarim / Deuteronomy 4:2

’וגו ופיסות אל’, “do not add, etc.,” G’d implies that anyone adding to the words of the Torah, -however well meaning he may be, -will in fact detract from the value of the Torah. [If G’d is perfect, something that every believing Jew accepts as axiomatic, any addition to or deletion from His Torah would make it, ergo Him, imperfect. Ed.] For instance, when the Torah decreed 4 strings of tzitzit for the corners of a four-cornered garment, adding a fifth string would not only not make it holier; but would make it useless, and anyone reciting a benediction over such a tallit would desecrate the holy name of G’d by pronouncing such a benediction. The same reasoning applies to sitting in a sukkah for an extra day or adding another a fifth species to a lulav.

Sforno on Exodus

הערפ ינפל בתישעו, you will be successful in this only if you proceed exactly in the manner in which I instruct you, and in the presence of Pharaoh. When a creature sins against his Creator by doing either less or more than instructed to do, he will fail in what he set out to do. This rule did not only apply to Moses and Aaron when they set out to perform miracles, but it is a general rule applicable to all of G’d’s commandments, and this is why the Torah spelled this out in Deuteronomy 4:2 writing “do not add or subtract from all the commandments which I have commanded you.”

Sforno:

רומשל ונממ וערגת אלו, 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. [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. Ed.]

It is interesting to read how *Daat Zkenim on Devarim / Deuteronomy 4:2* interprets these Scriptures. The rabbis say that whether well meaning or not, if one adds to the Torah, one detracts from the value of the Torah. What does this say regarding the fence laws that are added in the Mishnah? In fact, the addition or a deletion from the Torah makes a man imperfect. The examples given are of the command on the tzitzit, changing the way in which it is to be made makes it useless, and the same comparison is made to adding an extra day to Succot and an extra spice to the lulav. The idea here is that the command is correct in the manner in which it was given, and we are not allowed to add to or take away from the command.

Sforno concludes from this command that one must follow the command according to what is written in the Torah, otherwise one will be unsuccessful in what he set out to do. This applies to everyone. The example that Sforno provides is of King Solomon marrying to many wives, which is a violation of the command, and the result led to his falling into the sin of idolatry. The idea is that *“Solomon relied on his wisdom not to lead him astray and ignored the Torah's commands with disastrous consequences for his kingdom.”* We can take many examples from the Torah, another may be from Parashat Devarim where Moshe explains the people did not have faith in the Lord and being led back into the wilderness, etc.

Moshe said according to the Targum Onkelos, *“You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor diminish from it, to keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you.”* The primary issue is the one of *“adding to”* and *“diminishing from”* the Word of God. The Aramaic Targum Onkelos, similar to the MT, connects the giving of the Torah to the mighty deeds the Lord is working in one's life (e.g. *to deliver Israel on both a national and a individual scale*). The importance of believing, listening to, obeying, and keeping the command of God is connected to the Lord working and moving in one's life, either from a positive perspective (*blessings*), or a negative perspective (*trials meant to*

draw us back). In *Devarim / Deuteronomy 6:4-6* (the Shema), we read, “6:4 *Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!* 6:5 *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.* 6:6 *These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart.*” (NASB) While reading these verses, modern American evangelicals often operate in auto-pilot mode and heartily nod and say “*amen!*” in response to the general concepts and principles conveyed in 6:4 and 6:5. The verses that follow, specifically *Devarim / Deuteronomy 6:6* are frequently deflected, dismissed, or ignored entirely for a variety of “*reasons,*” which are often conveyed in the form of protests which I have personally heard from a number of Christians.

Typical Protests to the Torah

1. “*But that’s the Old Testament.*”
2. “*But that was written to Israel.*”
3. “*But that’s not relevant to us today (and therefore not written to me specifically).*”
4. “*But the details don’t apply to me because of Jesus and I’m not Jewish*”

These are nothing less than modern displays of “*adding to*” and/or “*diminishing from*” the Word of God. This attitude and theme permeates man’s rebellious reaction to the clear pronouncements of God. Remember how the Lord God told Israel that the Land is good, to go in and take the Land, but the people said, “*let’s send in spies first to see how good the land is, to see if it is true?*” The Lord God operates and works according to His Word and therefore if we are not applying God’s word to our lives, are we trying to change the way in which the Lord works? Take for example, the Lord God gave promises to Abraham which obligated Himself to fulfill. In the Torah, though the Hebrew nation that was delivered from Egypt did not “*know*” Abraham personally, they were about to be blessed according to the promise that God had given their father Abraham hundreds of years earlier. What this tells us is the Lord God can fulfill what

He has promised if we obey His Word. What does this have to do with diminishing the Word? According to the Torah, it was not only the Lord's intention to get Israel to the promise land but it was His intention to ensure that they were blessed and succeeded while they possessed the land. This is a very important aspect of the covenant relationship, the Word of God had to have preeminence in the nation of Israel to ensure they had great success. How does this apply to us today?

The Apostolic Writings tell us that the Word of God itself is prophetic (*1 Peter 1:19-21*). The Lord God works according to what He has spoken. The Torah tells us prophetically, that when Israel entered into the Promised Land, they would face challenges and be presented with influences (false gods) which will affect their relationship with the Lord. Moshe warned that these things and more could influence one to diminish the Word of God in his/her life. That is how the deception of the enemy functions; the evil one understands that he cannot change prophecy but if he can diminish the Word of God in a person life, he can hinder the prophecy or promise over that person or nation. The effects of diminishing the command is to stop the power of God from being manifested in one's life by diminishing God's authority (*e.g. one begins to live in whatever manner he/she chooses*).

Note what Sferno states regarding being careful to not diminish God's authority in our lives.

Sferno on Devarim / Numbers 4:1

:ועתה ישראל: after you have seen the decree of G'd to exile you if you sin, be on guard to meticulously observe His commandments without adding to them or detracting from them. An addition or a detraction will both have destructive consequences for you.

Sferno on Deuteronomy 1:37

גם בי התאנף ה' בגללכם, this was in order that you would have reason to cry throughout the ages, as G'd had decreed in Numbers 14:28 When that verse referred to דבַר ריכם, "your words," the objectionable words G'd had referred to were: "our children and wives will become loot," (Numbers 14:5). Moses told the people at this stage the

real reason for his impending death, even though the cause occurred already 38 years earlier. At that time G'd had announced His decree אם יראה איש באנשים האלה, *adding that by contrast* יהי לבזו ישראליים, *“your children concerning whom you had predicted that they would wind up as loot, as prisoners of war, would conquer the land.”* The major point Moses is making, [and I am paraphrasing the author who quotes Psalms 106:26-27, Ezekiel 20:23, as well as Psalms 106:32-40] is that were it not for the fact that he also had not been allowed to enter the Holy Land, they would have been condemned to extinction. The fact that he, the innocent leader, had been included in their punishment was for the sake of the nation's survival as such, even if traumatic exile experiences lay ahead of them. (compare our author on Devarim / Deuteronomy 4:1) גם בי התאנף ה' בגללכם וזה כדי שתתקיים בכם בכיה לזמנכם לדורות כמו שיעד באמרו אם לא כאשר דברתם באזני כן אעשה לכם. והדבור באזניו בזה הי' באמרם נשינו וטפינו יהיו לבזו. ולכן ספר ענין מיתתו אע"פ שלא היה עד סוף ל' ח' שנה אחרי כן והניד אותו בתוך דבריו של הקב"ה שהיו בשנה השנית לצאתם ממצרים שאז אמר אם יראה איש באנשים האלה ואמר גם כן וטפכם אשר אמרתם לבזו יהי' שהית' הכונה שהטף לבסוף יהיו לבזו כמו שבאר המשורר באמרו וישא ידו להם להפיל אותם במדבר וגו' ולזרותם בארצות וכן העיד יחזקאל באמרו וגם אני נשאתי את ידי להם במדבר להפיק אתם כו; ובהגידו ענינו בתוך דבריו של הקב"ה ה' הודיעם כי מניעת הכנסו עמם לארץ היתה סבה שתתקיים בהם יותר לרע הגזירה שנגזרה שטפם יהיה לבזו לדורות וזה בעצמו העיד המשורר באמרו ויקציפו על מי מריבה וירע למשה בעבורם וגו' ויחר אף ה' בעמו:

Sforno states that there are very destructive consequences if we are not careful with the commandments. The people were worried that their children would be carried off as loot during war; the Lord however chose their children to go in and take the Land. Notice how these children were raised to know the Lord, and when they were older, they walked in His

ways and obeyed His word to go in and take the Land. (*Mishley / Proverbs 22:6*)

The most significant application for our lives from this week's Torah portion is with regard to what Moshe says *לֹא תִגְרַעוּ וְלֹא תִסְפּוּ* and to not "increase" or "decrease" the mitzvot (מִצְוֹת, commands), he is warning us not to diminish the voice of God in our lives. If we choose to diminish the voice of God in our lives, we will be robbed of the potential to become everything the Lord God has intended for us to be. We are told to live our lives according to the "promise / prophecy" which the Lord God has spoken over and about us. The Apostle Paul told Timothy, "*This command I entrust to you, Timothy, my son, in accordance with the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you fight the good fight,*" (*1 Timothy 1:18, NASB*). Notice how Timothy was commanded to go to war in the kingdom of God according to the prophecies which were given unto him. What were those prophecies? Were they a prophetic word that was spoken and not recorded or was Paul speaking of the Scriptures, the Torah? When we live in obedience to the Word of God, we live according to the Spirit of Prophecy, and we are diminishing the work of the flesh which is sin. When we live by faith in the Messiah Yeshua, we again are living by the Spirit of Prophecy, in the prophetic word that spoke of the Lord sending His Messiah to deliver us from the evils of this world, and lead us into the World to Come. As we continue in God's Word, and as we lay down our lives for Him, the Spirit of God begins to increase in us and we begin to grow in grace, in wisdom, in knowledge, and in the revelation of the Lord's will and plan for our lives. This the meaning of the Spirit of prophecy...living in the power of the revelation of God! Living according to God's Word, we are given the ability to discern between good and evil, to live life to the fullest, to love one another and our enemies, and to live in the power of the Holy Spirit. Halelluia!



