



From the desk of
MORDECHAI MALKA
 Chief Rabbi of Elad, Israel
 Founder and President of Or Hamelech Institutions
 Member of Chief Rabbinate of Israel



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עיר התורה שקרובה אליך

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Parashat Vaetchanan

HAMELECH

The Mitzvah of Not Adding or Subtracting From the Torah

Our parasha states (Devarim 4:1-3), "And now Yisrael, listen to the decrees and laws that I teach you to perform, so that you may live ... You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor shall you subtract from it ... Your eyes have seen what Hashem did with *Ba'al Pe'or*, for every man that followed *Ba'al Pe'or* - Hashem, your G-d, destroyed him from your midst."

Questions:

- 1) We know that our Torah is *Torat Hashem temima* – it is perfect and complete. Still, the question must be asked: Why we are forbidden from being more stringent than the Torah?
- 2) The Torah explains that we are not allowed to add anything to the Torah "because you saw with your own eyes what Hashem did to those who went after *Pe'or*." What is the connection between *Pe'or* and adding on to the Torah?

New Torah

To our great distress, we see movements in *Eretz Yisrael* that want to create a new Torah. They say that the Torah must change to fit our times, to accommodate our technological and scientific age. They want to change the status quo that has existed from the beginning of the State of Israel and make compromises to make life easier for the current generation. They would like public transportation to run on Shabbat, businesses to

remain open for those who are interested, and to abolish the strict supervision of *geirut* (conversion). By doing this, they feel that they will improve the Torah for our generation and make it acceptable for everyone. However, if they would be wise, they would understand that this is similar to a person wanting to trade his heart made by Hashem for a heart made in a laboratory. Rav Shach once visited a sick person in the hospital. When the doctors and professors came to visit the patient, Rav Shach turned to one of the professors, one of the greatest heart experts in the world and asked him a question: With all the advancements in science and technology today, is it possible to make a heart better than the one that we are born with? The doctor was taken aback by the question. He thought for a while and concluded that even after all his education and all his expertise, it would still be impossible to make a heart better than the one that Hashem created; there was not even any possibility for making any changes or improvements. The same is true with the Torah. The Torah is *Torat Elokim* and not a creation of man. Hashem gave the Torah for all generations, knowing everything that would happen from the giving of the Torah until the end of time. Therefore, Hashem forbade us from adding or subtracting anything to His perfect Torah.

The Danger of Changing the Torah - Three Explanations

The commentators compare the Torah to different things, to help us understand the danger



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of adding or detracting from the Torah. The *Dubno Maggid* compares the 613 mitzvot to a watch: a watch cannot function unless every part is working together in harmony. If somebody adds a part to the watch or takes away one of the watch's parts, he will certainly damage the watch. So too, with the 613 mitzvot of the Torah - if one adds or subtracts from them, he will damage the Torah. The *Aderet Eliyahu* compares the Torah to a person's body, as the 613 mitzvot of the Torah parallel the 248 limbs and 365 sinews of the human body. Just like any addition or subtraction to the limbs and sinews of the body would hurt and damage the body, the same would be true if one were to add or subtract from the mitzvot. The *Alshich* offers a parable to explain the danger and foolishness of tampering with the Torah: The king's son was going on a tour of the kingdom. Before he left, the king told him that under no circumstances was he to make any bets or wagers during his trip. The son went on his tour and eventually arrived in a certain city. The mayor of the city was overjoyed to see the prince and gave him a royal reception. At the reception, the mayor said in front of the distinguished crowd that he knew that the king's son had a certain deformity on his back. The prince denied the charge, but the mayor stuck to his story - he was even willing to wager a large sum of money that the king's son would take off his shirt and prove to everyone that he had no deformity. The king's son thought a minute, remembering his father's warning. He was convinced though, that his father never meant a wager such as this one,

where he knew without any doubt that he would win. The king's son lifted up his shirt, showed the distinguished audience his back and proved that the mayor's claim was nonsense. Smiling he took the large sum of money that he made from the man. Eventually, the prince returned to his father and happily showed him his winnings. The king, however, was enraged. "The mayor bet me that he could get you to stand shirtless in front of a crowd of people! Our bet was for far more than the amount that you won from him!" The same is true regarding our Torah. Although we may think that something will be a surefire improvement, Hashem has warned us not to tamper with the Torah in any way. If we ignore His warning, we will only end up making things worse.

People Today

To our regret, people love new things and love to make changes. They think that with the advancement of science and technology everything is flexible. The Israeli mind can't believe that something can't be changed. Israeli's have become famous for this, as this anecdote demonstrates: They once caught a spy working at the airport in Lod. How did they catch him? When he completed his task, they noticed that he used every screw that was included in the assembly kit. They realized that this man could not be a real Israeli, because every Israeli thinks that if they give him five screws, he really only needs three or four for the job. Someone who uses every screw must be a spy.



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The Story of the Wagon Driver in the Winter

This is similar to the story told about a wagon driver, who was hired by a businessman to deliver his merchandise to the big winter fair. The business man stipulated that he would only pay the wagon driver if the merchandise made it to the fair before it started. The wagon driver agreed, but unfortunately due to the road conditions, he only arrived after the fair had finished. The merchant refused to pay him and the wagon driver took him to a *din Torah*. The Rav ruled in favor of the merchant, but the wagon driver claimed that the Rav was mistaken. The Torah, the wagon driver said, was given in the summer when the roads are clear. It doesn't apply to this case, which took place in the winter when snow and rain made the roads impossible to ride upon. Just like the wagon driver's logic is ridiculous, so too, is the logic of those who claim that the Torah does not speak to our times.

Mitzvot That We Add Only Lead to Destruction

The *Dubno Maggid* offers a parable to demonstrate what happens when we add to the mitzvot: Once Shlomo borrowed a spoon from his neighbor. His neighbor later returned him two spoons. When Shlomo asked his neighbor why he was returning him two spoons when Shlomo had only given him one, his neighbor looked at him in wonder. "Didn't you know that your spoon was pregnant? She gave birth to another spoon." Shlomo thought that his neighbor was insane, but gladly took the extra spoon. The story repeated

itself several times. One day Shlomo's neighbor asked to borrow silver candlesticks. Shlomo smiled knowingly and happily gave his neighbor the candlesticks. However, as time went by, he noticed that his expensive candlesticks had still not been returned and asked his neighbor about them. His neighbor gave him a pitiful look and sighed, "Oy, it shouldn't happen to anyone, but your candlesticks passed away." Shlomo yelled at his neighbor, "Who ever heard of candlesticks dying?" The neighbor gave him a piercing look and said, "If they can give birth, they can die." This is exactly what happens when we try to add on to the Torah - although we think that we are gaining from adding something to the Torah, at the end, we see that we have lost much more than what we have gained.

Anyone Who Adds - Subtracts

We learn this fundamental point from Adam *Harishon*. In *Masechet Sanhedrin* (29a) it says that because Adam told Chava not to touch the tree even though Hashem only commanded him not to eat from the tree, the *nachash* was able to trick Chava. The *Midrash Aggada* explains that the *nachash* went and touched the tree. He told Chava that just as he didn't die from touching the tree, so too, she wouldn't die if she ate from the tree. Adding on to the Torah was also the root of Shaul's downfall. He was told to wipe out *Amalak* – men, women, children, and animals. However, he let the best of the animals live in order to bring them as *korbanot* to Hashem. Shmuel rebuked him for this, telling him that he had rebelled against the word of Hashem. The *Ralbag* explains



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that any change in Hashem's mitzvot is considered a rebellion against Him. Even though Shaul had good intentions, Hashem was disgusted with what he did and cut off his royal line. Adding one's ideas into the Torah is not helping the Torah, but is a *churban haTorah* (destroying the Torah).

The Connection to *Ba'al Pe'or*

From all the above, we see that one cannot change the Torah and any attempt to do so will only bring damage and destruction. This is because the Torah is not a manmade creation, but is *Torat Hashem*. If there are certain things in the Torah that a person does not understand, it is only due to the limitations of the human intellect. This is what I believe is the Torah's intent in connecting the prohibition to add or detract from the Torah to the punishment that the Jewish people received for worshipping *Ba'al Pe'or*. The worship of *Ba'al Pe'or* involved a person taking care of his bodily needs on the *avodah zara*. Any rational person cannot imagine how this can be a form of idol worship. Even though the Torah forbid worshipping any idol in the manner that it's normally worshipped, the Jewish people did not think that this type of worship qualified as idol worship. If anything, the opposite should be true - this was a desecration of the idol. However, the Jewish people did not understand the true depth of the *Pe'or* worship and the outlook of those who worshipped it. By taking care of their needs on the idol, *Pe'or* worshippers wanted to show that they believed that there was no god in the world who could restrain them and that a

person is free to do whatever he wants. Therefore, any act that would disgrace and embarrass the idol was considered a great form of worship, as it showed that the worshipper was in no way subordinate to the idol and could do as he pleases. We see from this, that when we follow human logic and not the Torah, we will come to sin.

Words of Mussar

We must know that there is no such thing as perfecting the Torah. The Torah is consistent for all generations, and we are obligated to fulfill the Torah according to *halacha* without making any changes. Although at times it would seem that there is room for improvement, this only comes from our lack of understanding, and no good will come from any change we plan on making. This idea is especially important to keep in mind as *Tu B'Av* approaches. *Chazal* say there were no happier days for the Jewish people than *Tu B'Av* and *Yom Kippur*. One of the reasons that *Tu B'Av* is such a joyous day, is that starting from *Tu B'Av*, the nights get longer, and one has more time to learn Torah. We must make sure that what we are learning is *Torat Hashem*, without any changes or substitutions. This is because only through *Torat emet*, the Torah of truth, will we merit "*Ki orech yamim b'yimina u'smola osher ve'kavod*, In the Torah's right hand is lengthy days, and in its left hand is wealth and honor." *Amen ve'amen*.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rav Mordechai Malka