

Sedra Highlight

- Dr Jacob Solomon

R'EI

The entire [Torah] that I command, you shall observe and perform. Do not add anything to it. Do not take anything out of it (13:1).

Yet nevertheless, the Rabbis instituted numerous mitzvot (for example netilat yadayim), g'zeirot (such as stam yayin) and takanot (for example taking the arba'a minim on all days of Sukkot and not just on the first day). Thus Rashi explains that "do not add to it" refers specifically to an act or a behavior that intrinsically changes the defined form of a particular mitzva. For example, adding a parasha to the existing four to the tefillin, or adding an extra item to the arba'a minim and, as the Chinuch explains, wilfully incorporating these extras as part and parcel of the performance of that mitzva.

The S'forno brings a fundamental insight in explaining this prohibition. He explains "Do not add anything to it" as meaning that one may not "improve" the Torah by using one's sense of 'being good' by adding new commandments for His service. For what human intelligence considers an honor to G-d may be an abomination in His eyes.

In today's terms, the S'forno's

explanation could refer to behaviors that signal virtue in some influential societies today. An example is not eating meat, restricting one's diet to vegetarian food only. Vegetarians justify their practices in many ways. Some emphasize that their regimens avoid unnecessary harm and suffering to animals. Other stress that vegetarianism decreases the market demand for cattle, and thus reduces the global-warming inputs of methane. They are also groups that point to the unnecessary pressure on land for increased cattle farming at the expense of oxygen-creating tropical rain forests. And finally, many people feel uncomfortable about eating meat, especially those that have witnessed slaughtering at close quarters.

So the individual person that goes vegetarian would be unlikely to find Torah teachings blocking his way; not in this day and age where there is no Korban Pesach, for example. The Torah does not force people to eat meat if they don't want to. However, as this parasha expounds, the Torah explicitly does permit eating meat even for secular purposes (12:20), as long as the animal is slaughtered correctly (12:21; Rashi), and is of a permitted species (14:4-8). Claiming that the practice of not eating meat is within the framework of Torah law and should be standard practice would be adding a virtue-signalled

element to the Torah. The vegetarians may think it's the right thing to do. However, the Torah would not accept their sanctimonious gestures when they impose their ways on others in the name of the Torah itself. G-d has His reasons for permitting the slaughter of cattle and eating meat, even if we don't understand them. It is on us to accept that what humanity may consider an honor to G-d may be the very opposite when imposed as a Torah value, and, following the S'forno, is an example of the prohibition of "Do not add anything to it."  