

Devarim 28:13-14

(These verse conclude a long list of blessings for those who observe Hashem's commandments.)

"You will be placed by Hashem at the head and never at the tail - you will only be above, and you will never be beneath – when you listen (tishma) to the commandments of Hashem your G-d to observe and do.

and you will not (V'lo Tassur) stray right or left from all (mikol) the things which I am commanding you today, to go after other gods (elohim) to serve them."

Question: Isn't verse 14 redundant? If one is already listening to the commandments, observing them, and doing them, how could one be straying from them right or left?

Question: Why is straying right or left from the commandments equated with, or perhaps limited to, serving other elohim?

Ramban in his Commentary suggests that the redundancy is not an issue, and verse 14 merely a rhetorical flourish. The mention of idolatry, he says, is to inform us that one who follows other gods is considered to have strayed from all (mikol) the commandments). Ramban mentions, however, the position of the Halakhot Gedolot that this is an independent if somewhat peculiar commandment; it is a negative commandment not to be neglectful of any of the positive commandments.

In his glosses to the Rambam's Book of Mitzvot, however, Ramban offers a more interesting possibility. There he suggests that verse 14 should be read neither as a condition nor as a commandment, but rather as the final blessing. G-d here promises us that if we observe his commandments we will not even be tempted to serve other elohim. Meshekh Chokhmah suggests that this blessing was fulfilled when, as the Talmud records, the Men of the Great Assembly killed the inclination for idolatry. (That story itself obviously deserves more extended discussion. It has a certain intuitive validity in the Western world, but likely not for Jews living among Hindus, and even we Americans have witnessed a neo-Pagan revival in recent decades. Professor Tamar Ross has a fascinating discussion of this in the first issue of the Edah journal, which touches on the broad issue, too broad for this forum, of why Tanakh presents all idolaters as worshipping physical objects rather than as worshipping what they understand to be symbolic representations of their gods. This topic is explored at great and highly controversial length by Yechezkel Kaufmann.)

Seforno offers an entirely different perspective. He suggests that the prohibition is against discarding any detail of Jewish law, especially civil law, where one might be tempted to replace it by custom. His claim that this applies especially to civil law is intriguing in light of the principle that "the law of the land is the law" and other similar principles by which Halakhah generally defers to secular civil law.

Seforno adds that often the desire to change rituals or laws is based not in rebellion but in respect for great men, which he believes is here the correct translation of "elohim". The Torah here warns that such respect is not permitted to lead one to adopt their practices in place of halakhah. It seems to me likely that he is here negotiating delicately, and fairly successfully between affirmation of the greatness of people outside the halakhic and Jewish frameworks and refusal to allow that to force him to abandon belief in the objective truth of Judaism.

See Abrevanel for an entirely different, but to mind also entirely unconvincing, explanation.

Shabbat Shalom!

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