



Rabbi David Silverberg
Parashat Re'eh

Toward the beginning of Parashat Re'eh, Moshe commands *Benei Yisrael* to dismantle all the sites of pagan worship that they will encounter upon entering the Land of Israel, to the point where they “obliterate their [the pagan gods’] names from that place” (12:3). Immediately thereafter, Moshe warns, “You shall not do thus to the Lord your God” (12:4). *Chazal*, in the *Sifrei* and the Talmud (Makkot 22a), interpret this verse to mean that we may not treat our own sacred sites and articles in the manner described in the previous verse. Meaning, it is forbidden to dismantle or otherwise damage the Temple and its articles, and it is likewise prohibited to erase God’s Name. When Moshe admonishes the people not to “do thus to the Lord your God,” he means that we may not act toward our holy sites and sacred articles in the manner that he requires we treat objects of idolatry.

Maimonides, interestingly enough, discusses this prohibition in two different contexts in his *Mishneh Torah*. First, in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* (6:7), he writes:

One who dismantles even a single stone in a destructive manner from the altar or the Sanctuary, or from anywhere else in the [Temple] courtyard, is liable to lashes, for it says regarding idolatry, “for you shall break their altars,” and it says, “You shall not do thus to the Lord your God.”

He returns to this *halakha* later, in *Hilkhot Beit Ha-bechira* (1:17):

Similarly, one who dismantles a single stone from the altar, or from anywhere in the Sanctuary or in between the hall [leading into the interior chamber] and the altar, in a destructive manner, is liable to lashes, as it says, “You shall dismantle their altars... You shall not do thus to the Lord your God.”

Rav Shimon Diskin, in his work *Mas’at Ha-melekh*, suggested that Maimonides’ two references to this prohibition reflect its dual nature. In *Hilkhot Beit Ha-bechira*, of course, Maimonides deals with the relatively narrow framework of the laws relevant to the Temple and its contents. Naturally, one of these laws is the prohibition against mistreating the sacred articles. In *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*, however, Maimonides discusses this *halakha* in relation to its broader religious implications. The Torah did not merely forbid dismantling any part of the *Mikdash*; it stated that one should not treat the *Mikdash* as one is required to treat sites of pagan worship. In *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*, Maimonides lays down the fundamental principles of Jewish belief, particularly as they stand in direct contrast to pagan belief. In this context, he makes reference to the Torah’s warning concerning the proper treatment of our sacred articles, as opposed to the obligation to obliterate idolatry in *Eretz Yisrael*. This prohibition relates not only to the

intrinsic sacred quality of the *Mikdash*, but also to the need to draw a fundamental distinction between our faith and others. The fact that *Benei Yisraeal* were to destroy pagan temples and altars does not negate the value of using physical structures for religious purposes. Our opposition to foreign rituals should never be mistaken for opposition to all religious rituals. The Torah encourages the use of sacrifices and religious articles in the service of the Almighty, and the obligation to eliminate all vestiges of pagan cults must not be transferred to our own institutions of *avodat Hashem*.

In the next section, Moshe warns *Benei Yisrael* not to be lured by the appeal of the pagan rites they will observe upon entering the land (12:30). Witnessing the way the idolatrous Canaanites worshipped, *Benei Yisrael* might be impressed and decide to adopt these practices in their worship of God. Moshe therefore exhorts, “You shall not do so to the Lord your God... Everything that I can command you – you shall ensure to perform; do not add onto it, and do not diminish from it” (12:31-13:1). Here, Moshe addresses the opposite concern that prompted his earlier warning not to destroy sacred articles. Earlier, the fear was that *Benei Yisrael*’s zealous obliteration of idolatrous structures may be transferred to their own religious structures. Here, by contrast, Moshe is concerned that the people may be too tolerant in their attitude toward idolatry, and find some redeeming value in some features of pagan cults that are worth introducing in our own religious practices.

These two sections thus address two different concerns: that we may tamper with our own faith in an overzealous attempt to oppose foreign religious ideals, or out of unwarranted respect and admiration for those ideals. Moshe strongly urges us to resist both tendencies, and to simply obey God’s commands – “do not add onto it, and do not diminish from it.” Rather than trying to “improve” the Torah by eliminating the features that bear a degree of resemblance to other faiths, or by introducing elements of other faiths, we are called upon to simply accept, embrace and follow the Torah as it was transmitted to us, with the firm belief and conviction that it requires no “improvements.”