“Do That Which is Right and Good in the Sight of the LORD”:

New Insights and Burgeoning Creativity in the Writing of Nahmanides’ Commentary[[1]](#footnote-1)

Yuval Vadee

A great deal has been written on the commentaries on the Torah that Nahmanides completed in Acre at the end of his life,[[2]](#footnote-2) that is,[[3]](#footnote-3) the additions to his Torah commentary that were written in the land of Israel.[[4]](#footnote-4) About the work of Ofer and Jacobs in concentrating on these additions, Mack writes:[[5]](#footnote-5)

… In this way readers will internalize the fact that Nahmanides’ commentary on the Torah was not written all at once, and that the author saw fit to respond to various criticisms of his commentary, and to incorporate new discoveries and new insights into it, as would anyone who is intelligent and alert and does not rest on his laurels, anyone whose work is growing, developing, and changing with the times and with alterations in his circumstances and in his environment.

Ofer and Jacobs point to changes that were made after the writing of the commentary was complete, primarily after Nahmanides arrived in Israel, but in Spain as well.[[6]](#footnote-6) Recently Marcus has noted changes that were made during the original writing of the commentary in Spain, before the original version of the commentary was completed, examining a single case ­– Nahmanides’ explanation of phrases that use the verb דרשׁ with God as the object. In his comment to Gen 25:22, Nahmanides gave one explanation of this idiom, in his comment to Exod 18:15 he changed his mind and adopted a different explanation, and in his comment to Deut 13:5 he changed his mind once more and offered yet a third explanation, all without revising his comments to the earlier occurrences.[[7]](#footnote-7) Marcus did not sufficiently emphasize the fact that in his comment to Exod 18:15 he explicitly referenced his comment to Gen 25:22, writing, “Similarly ‘and she went to seek the Lord,’ *as I explained there*” (emphasis added). To me, this undercuts the entire basis for analyzing the differences in Nahmanides’ explanation of this idiom in his comments on the various occurrences, since when he wrote his comment to Exod 18:15 his comment to Gen 25:22 was already written, as is evidenced by his saying, in the past tense, “I explained.” This makes it clear that Nahmanides is presenting these differing explanations as identical.

Like Marcus, I shall point in this article to changes that took place while the first version of the commentary was still being written, in Spain. Like Marcus too I will do so by examining a single case – Nahmanides’ explanation of Deut 6:18, “and thou shalt do that which is right and good in the eyes of the LORD.” In contrast to the case discussed by Marcus, where Nahmanides refers explicitly to an “identical” comment that he has already written – making it difficult to describe the alteration as a change in Nahmanides’ thinking – in the case discussed in this article Nahmanides refers to comments that he has yet to write. It is therefore possible to show that this case does involve changes in Nahmanides’ thinking about Deut 6:18, demonstrating a development in his thinking, and to elucidate the circumstances that led to the change.

Nahmanides comments on Deut 6:18 *ad loc.*, but he has already mentioned, in his comments to Exod 15:26 and Lev 19:1, that he intends to discuss it in his Deuteronomy commentary:

I will further explain this when I come to the verse ‘And you shall do that which is upright and good,’ if the good God will show me goodness. [to Exod 15:26]

As I will explain when I reach there [that verse], with the will of the Holy One, blessed be He. [to Lev 19:1]

From these comments it is clear that when he wrote his comments to Exod 15:6 and Lev 19:1, his comment to Deut 6:18 had not yet been written. We may generalize this conclusion and say that Nahmanides’ method in writing his Torah commentary was the standard one of working from beginning to end, commenting on verse after verse in their biblical order It was not a matter of writing comments on individual words, phrases, or verses and collecting them later into a complete commentary.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Naturally, Nahmanides wrote about “that which is right and good” briefly in the earlier comments and at greater length in the place where it actually occurs. This fact has led many people to take all three comments as identical.[[9]](#footnote-9) But careful study shows that what we have here is not an identical idea presented briefly in the earlier comments and more extensively where the actual phrase occurs. Rather, by the time he wrote the comment to Deut 6:18, he had developed a new insight into the verse, different from that presented in the earlier comments.

Two late comments in Deuteronomy were written from the perspective of this new insight, and an examination of these comments will strengthen and deepen this new insight.

I shall first examine the two earlier comments; then the comment to Deut 6:18 and the two comments that followed in its wake.[[10]](#footnote-10)

**The Comment to Exod 15:26**

IF ‘SHAMO’A TISHMA’ TO THE VOICE OF THE LORD YOUR GOD. Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra explained that “[*shamo’a tishma* here] means ‘to understand’ the purport of that which He has commanded[[11]](#footnote-11) you to do. And you will do that which is right in His eyes – this implies the positive commandments – and will give ear to His commandments – this implies the negative commandments.” [Thus the language of Ibn Ezra.]

And in the Mekhilta, the Rabbis have said: “And you will do that which is right in His eyes, this means in business dealings. This teaches us that if a person is honest in his business dealings, and the spirit of his fellow creatures finds pleasure in him, it is accounted to him[[12]](#footnote-12) as though he had fulfilled the entire Torah.” I will further explain this when I come to the verse ‘And you shall do that which is upright and good,’ if the good God will show me goodness.

Nahmanides begins by citing Ibn Ezra’s understanding of the verse.[[13]](#footnote-13) Ibn Ezra explains that the expressions לשמוע ל- or לשמוע ב- do not mean “to hear” but “to understand,” and he therefore interprets the two expressions “that which is right in His eyes” and “give ear to His commandments” as indicating the obligations to (1) understand and (2) fulfill the positive commandments, here called “that which is right in His eyes,” and the prohibitions, here called “His commandments.” Nahmanides then cites the words of R. Eleazar of Modi’in from the Mekhilta. R. Eleazar connects “that which is right in His eyes” to how one conducts business, concluding from this that “if a person is honest in his business dealings, and the spirit of his fellow creatures finds pleasure in him, it is accounted to him as though he had fulfilled the entire Torah.”

On the one hand, the expression “that which is right in His eyes” applies to the Torah as a whole, which is certainly “right in His eyes”; and on the other hand the midrash bestows on the expression “that which is right in His eyes” a precise a specific reference to business dealings. And what kind of business dealings are these? They must be business dealings done so honestly that “the spirit of his fellow creatures finds pleasure in him.” Doing what is right in God’s eyes, which according to Ibn Ezra is directed at the positive commandments, now in the words of the Mekhilta is presented as directed at a *single* positive commandment, to deal honestly in business in a way that God considers right.

The midrash, then, restricts the reference to doing what is right as directed at business dealings alone. Why business dealings in particular? What does business involve that demands a particular commandment to conduct it in a way that God sees as right? Nahmanides limited himself here to citing what R. Eleazar says in the Mekhilta, comprised for practical purposes of the expressions “a person is honest in his business dealings” and “the spirit of his fellow creatures finds pleasure in him.” What is included in this commandment, in these two expressions? These questions are not answered in the comment, and Nahmanides himself alluded to the fact that he has not gone into detail here, but will do so later: “I will further explain this.” He rounded off the comment in his signature poetic style:[[14]](#footnote-14)

I will further explain this when I come to [אל] “And you shall do that which is upright and good [טוב]”

If the good God [האל הטוב] will show me goodness.

**The Comment to Lev 19:2**

In his comment to this verse, Nahmanides discussed the meaning of the commandment to “be holy” and the meaning of the physical restraint demanded by this verse according to the Sifra. His opinion is that, after the Torah lists a variety of detailed prohibitions, a range of permitted activities remains. The Torah then sets up a general commandment of restraint to further limit the permissible realm. The area that remains permissible after the prohibitions are detailed is sufficiently broad that the commandment of restraint must assert: Satisfy physical needs to the extent that you must in order to maintain the body and fulfill the commandments, and no more.

After presenting the idea of restraint and various examples of its practical application, Nahmanides supports the idea by means of the argument that this is not the only positive, general commandment that comes on the heels of a detailed list of prohibitions. Rather, this is something that the Torah regularly does:

And such is the way of the Torah, that after it lists certain specific prohibitions,[[15]](#footnote-15) it includes them all in a general precept. Thus after warning with detailed laws and all[[16]](#footnote-16) business dealings between people, such as not to steal[[17]](#footnote-17) or rob or to overcharge one another, and other similar prohibitions, He said in general, And you shall do that which is right and good, thus including under a positive commandment the duty of doing that which is right and of agreeing to a compromise [when not to do so would be inequitable]; as well as all requirements to act “beyond” the line of justice [i.e., to be generous in not insisting upon one’s rights as defined by the strict letter of the law, but to agree to act “beyond” that line of the strict law] for the sake of pleasing one’s fellowman, as I will explain when I reach there [that verse], with the will of the Holy One, blessed be He.[[18]](#footnote-18) He. Similarly in the case of the Sabbath, He prohibited doing certain classes of work by means of a negative commandment, and painstaking labors [not categorized as “work,” such as transferring heavy loads in one’s yard from one place to another, etc.] He included under a general positive commandment, as it is said, but on the seventh day you shall rest. I will yet explain this with the help of God.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The Torah’s method of listing detailed prohibitions and adding to them a more general, positive commandment is here expressed in two particular areas: business and the Sabbath. With regard to business dealings, the Torah lists detailed prohibitions (e.g., not to steal or rob or to overcharge one another), on top of which it sets up a general commandment to do what is right. As for the Sabbath, here too the Torah details various prohibited kinds of work and then adds a more general commandment to “rest” from “painstaking labors.”

It appears, however, that Nahmanides is here developing and broadening in some measure the way this topic is specified by R. Eleazar in the Mekhilta. The Mekhilta speaks of business conduct, but Nahmanides specifies “detailed laws and all business dealings between people.” The different readings of Nahmanides’ comment at this point are quite significant. In some manuscripts, and in the text edited by Chavel, appears the word בכול, implying that there is a single topic here: “detailed laws *regarding* all business dealings between people.” But most manuscripts have וכול,[[20]](#footnote-20) implying two things (“detailed laws” *and* “all business dealings”), not one. Among the examples provided by Nahmanides it appears that only “not to overcharge one another” belongs to the limited realm of business conduct, while “not to steal” and “not to rob” fall outside a business framework. Therefore, even leaving aside the preponderance of manuscript evidence, it would appear correct to adopt the reading “and all,” meaning that “not to steal” and “not to rob” would be examples of the “detailed laws,” while “not to overcharge one another” would be an example from the business realm. The expression “between people” thus applies both to the “detailed laws” and to “business dealings.”

If this is correct, then Nahmanides has broadened the limited realm of business conduct alone to include every kind of financial interaction between people. He thereby provides a new definition of “that which is right and good,” insisting upon “honesty and equity that go beyond the letter of the law, acting in a way that will win the approval of others.”

This definition, not being expressed by direct quotation of the words of R. Eleazar in the Mekhilta, provides further clarification of Nahmanides’ comment to Exod 15:26. There, I posited two areas: one, the need for a specific commandment to do “that which is right and good” with regard to business conduct; and two, the application of this positive commandment. From Nahmanides’ comment to Lev 19:2, we understand that financial dealings are not the only topic for which the Torah sets a general, positive commandment following a list of detailed prohibitions. Just as with “be holy” and “rest on the Sabbath,” this is in fact the Torah’s standard method wherever this approach is necessary. The necessity for such an approach in financial affairs is that the prohibitions can define what is forbidden to do, but they do not tell us what one *ought* to do, the positive and practical way in which one ought to conduct business. This is precisely what the commandment to do “that which is right and good” defines. The applications of this commandment are: “doing that which is right and of agreeing to a compromise, as well as all requirements to act “beyond” the line of justice for the sake of pleasing one’s fellowman.”

This is in fact Nahmanides’ interpretation of R. Eleazar’s words in the Mekhilta:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Mekhilta | Nahmanides |
| a person is honest in his business dealings | doing that which is right and agreeing to a compromise |
| the spirit of his fellow creatures finds pleasure in him | acting “beyond” the line of justice |

This comparison makes clear that this commandment is implemented in two respects ­– the “doing what is right and agreeing to a compromise” included in the command to “be honest in one’s business dealings,” and the “acting beyond the line of justice” included in the expression “the spirit of his fellow creatures finds pleasure in him.”

I would like to emphasize the new element in Nahmanides’ interpretation of the Mekhilta by presenting a different understanding of R. Eleazar’s statement, which to me is the plain sense of it: When one does business in a way that wins the approval of others, that is the proof that he is doing business honestly. But if that is correct, then Nahmanides’ interpreting is adding a new distinction, one that does not appear in the Mekhilta. He has thereby created two applications for the commandment to do “that which is right and good.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

Comparison of the comment on Exod 15:26 and that on Lev 19:2 reveals the following picture: In Nahmanides’ opinion, the commandment to do “that which is right and good” is a general commandment applying to financial dealings between people, and to those dealings alone. It supplements the detailed prohibitions that apply to such dealings, out of the necessity of regulating the positive, practical aspect of such dealings. This commandment is to be implemented in two ways: on a basic level, by conducting business honestly; on an additional, further level, by conducting business in a way that goes beyond the letter of the law.

In the comment on Exod 15:26, Nahmanides merely cites the words of the Mekhilta, which do not sufficiently clarify the matter. He therefore concludes by saying, “I will *further* explain this” (emphasis added). But in the comment to Lev 19:2, though Nahmanides has cited R. Eleazar’s comment to support what he says about “be holy,” he does further clarify the matter, and his allusion to Deut 6:18 therefore is phrased “*as* I will explain *when* I reach there, with the will of the Holy One, blessed be He.” He concludes as well by making a verbal connection the word רצון:[[22]](#footnote-22)

including under a positive commandment the duty of doing that which is right and of agreeing to a compromise; as well as all requirements to act “beyond” the line of justice for the sake of pleasing [לרצון] one’s fellowman, as I will explain when I reach there [that verse], with the will [ברצון] of the Holy One, blessed be He.

Does Nahmanides indeed explain that phrase when he gets to Deut 6:18 *as* he does in his comments to Exod 15:26 and Lev 19:2?

**The Comment *ad loc* – Deut 6:18**

AND YOU SHALL DO THAT WHICH IS RIGHT AND GOOD IN THE SIGHT OF THE LORD. In line with the plain meaning of Scripture the verse says, “Keep the commandments of God, His testimonies, and His statutes, and, in observing them, intend to do what is right and good in His sight only.” And [the expression in the verse before us] that it may be well with you is a promise, stating that, when you will do that which is good in His eyes, it will be well[[23]](#footnote-23) with you, for God does good unto the good, and to them that are upright in their hearts. Our Rabbis have a beautiful Midrash on this verse.[[24]](#footnote-24) They have said: “[That which is right and good] refers to a compromise and going beyond the requirement of the letter of the law.” The intent of this is as follows: At first he [Moses] stated that you are to keep His statutes and His testimonies which He commanded you, and now he is stating that even where He has not commanded you, give thought, as well, to do what is good and right in His eyes, for He loves the good and the right. Now this is a great principle, for it is impossible to mention in the Torah all aspects of man’s conduct with his neighbors and friends, and all his various transactions, and the ordinances of all societies and countries. But since He mentioned many of them – such as, You shall not go up and down as a talebearer; You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge; neither shall you stand idly by the blood of your neighbor; You shall not curse the deaf; You shall rise up before the hoary head and the like – he reverted to state in a general way that, in all matters, one should do what is good and right and honest,[[25]](#footnote-25) including even compromise and, going beyond the requirements of the law. Other examples are the Rabbis’ ordinances concerning the prerogative of a neighbor, and even what they said [concerning the desirability] that one’s youthful reputation be unblemished, and that one’s conversation with people be pleasant.[[26]](#footnote-26) Thus [a person must seek to refine his behavior] in every form of activity, until he is worthy of being called “good and upright.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

The commandment “and you shall do that which is right and good in the sight of the LORD” follows immediately after the commandment “You shall diligently keep the commandments of the LORD your God, and His testimonies, and His statutes, which He has commanded you” (Deut 6:17). Nahmanides therefore explains v. 18 as supplementing the commandment of v. 17.[[28]](#footnote-28)

After presenting the plain-sense interpretation of the verse, which teaches that this a general commandment, to be implemented in the more specific commandments by means of one’s intention to keep God’s commandments for no other reason than that you wish to do what He finds right and good, without question, he cites a rabbinic interpretation of the verse (which also appears in Rashi’s comment): “[That which is right and good] refers to a compromise and going beyond the requirement of the letter of the law.” He thereby bestows upon it a much broader meaning.

As in the comment to Lev 19:1, here too Nahmanides presents a basic level of detailed commandments supplemented by a more general one. But whereas Nahmanides based his comment on Exod 15:26 on the statement of R. Eleazar in the Mekhilta pointing specifically at the realm of business conduct (broadened by Nahmanides to include all sorts of financial interactions), the background to his comment on Deut 6:18 is v. 17, which is about keeping all the “commandments, testimonies, and statutes.” His interpretation of the commandment to “do that which is right and good” in his comment to Lev 19:2 follows a series of financial prohibitions; he therefore takes it to be adding a dimension that the detailed *financial* prohibitions do not cover. But here the general commandment is supplementing something much broader: *all* the commandments “that the LORD your God has commanded you.” It must therefore be adding a dimension that none of the commandments touch upon – that one must make sure to do that which is right and good even “outside the realm of the commandments.”

This “outside the realm of the commandments” stems from the fact that “it is impossible to mention in the Torah all aspects of man’s conduct with his neighbors and friends, and all his various transactions, and the ordinances of all societies and countries.” The Torah makes many of them explicit, but not all. As described by Nahmanides, this area “outside the realm of the commandments” must include all sorts of interactions between people.[[29]](#footnote-29) In his comment to Lev 19:2 the specifics are the commandments not to steal or to rob or to overcharge someone, all of them prohibitions in the limited area of financial conduct (the “detailed laws” and “the business dealings”). But here Nahmanides presents completely different examples: the prohibitions of tale-bearing, taking vengeance or bearing a grudge, standing idly by the blood of one’s neighbor, and cursing the deaf, and the commandment to “rise up before the hoary head.” These examples extend far beyond finance to the entire realm of human interaction: the relationship to “the other” – ” all aspects of man’s conduct with his neighbors and friends, and all his various transactions, and the ordinances of all societies and countries.” Nor are the detailed examples solely prohibitions, as is clear from the inclusion of the commandment to rise up before the hoary head.

As in the comment to Lev 19:2, all the examples cited here are also from Leviticus 19. There is certainly a significant concentration of commandments regarding human interaction in that chapter, but it would seem that Nahmanides is deliberately choosing his examples from there in order to forge a comparison between his comment to Lev 19:2 and his comment here, emphasizing the new insight he adopts here for the first time. In the comment to Lev 19:2 he still maintained the limited interpretation of “that which is right and good” as referring to financial interactions; here a new insight has dawned on him: that there is a much broader significance to this commandment. This broader description – “*all* aspects of man’s conduct with his neighbors and friends, and *all* his various transactions” – is a departure from that of the comment to Lev 19:2.

Yet the areas pointed to in the Leviticus comment – the “detailed laws” and “the business dealings” – actually do include “all his various transactions, and the ordinances of all societies and countries.” The link between the “detailed laws” (הדינים) and the “ordinances of all societies and countries” can be seen in a number of places in Nahmanides’ commentary:

**My ordinances shall you do, and My statutes shall you keep, to walk therein: I am the LORD your God.** (Lev 18:4) – Now by way of the simple meaning of Scripture, the term *mishpatai* (My ordinances) is to be understood in its simple sense. It is a reference to the laws stated in the section of *V’eileh Hamishpatim* (*And these are the ordinances*) and in the whole Torah. Therefore He states here, *which if a man do, he shall live by them*, as these laws were given so that man should live, and for the development of countries, and peace among men, so that no one should cause harm to his fellowman or kill him.

**Behold, I have taught you statutes and ordinances … What great nation is there, that has statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day?** (Deut 4:5, 8) – Now he admonished them concerning “the statutes,” which are His decrees, and “the ordinances,” which are the laws, for these need greater reinforcement because the reason for the statutes is hidden from us and also because it is “by *mishpat* [ordinance] that they will establish the Land” (Prov. 29:4) … Additionally, the statutes and ordinances are righteous in themselves, fair and good for the welfare of society and countries.

Deut 4:8 uses the word צדיקים: “What great nation is there, that has statutes and ordinances so *righteous* as all this law, which I set before you this day?” But Nahmanides recasts the verse in terms of the expression “that which is right and good.”

Note further that, although “statutes” (חוקים) certainly do appear in the verse, the end of Nahmanides’ comment is only about the “ordinances” (משפטים).[[30]](#footnote-30)

In light of all this it is clear that in the expression “all his various transactions, and the ordinances of all societies and countries” Nahmanides includes all the areas that he mentioned in his comment to Lev 19:1 – the “detailed laws” and “the business dealings” – to which he adds the expression “all aspects of man’s conduct with his neighbors and friends.” He begins specifically with that phrase because precisely that is what he is now adding to his original interpretation, at Lev 19:2.

Since this the new point of his comment here, Nahmanides does not need to repeat the examples that he cited in his comment to Lev 19:1 – “not to steal” and so forth – which belong to the realm of the “detailed laws” and the “business dealings,” nor “not to overcharge anyone” (which belongs to the financial realm), but he does add examples which come from Leviticus 19 but belong to the new area of “all aspects of man’s conduct.”

At this point the words of R. Eleazar in the Mekhilta receive a completely new meaning. Previously, in his comments to Exod 15:26 and Lev 19:1, Nahmanides has maintained that “do that which is right and good” refers to interactions first in the limited realm of business dealings and subsequently with a wider sense of all kinds of financial interactions; now he sees interaction as just one example of a much wider realm of human activity. Previously Nahmanides related the expression “a person who is honest in his business dealings” as referring to “doing that which is right and agreeing to a compromise,” and the expression “the spirit of his fellow creatures finds pleasure in him” to “acting beyond the line of justice.” Now he ignores the “person who is honest in his business dealings” and refers only to “the spirit of his fellow creatures finds pleasure in him,” tremendously broadening its meaning: “compromising and going beyond the requirements of the law,” e.g., with regard to the neighbor’s right of first refusal, and even simply “that one’s youthful reputation be unblemished, and that one’s conversation with people be pleasant … until he is worthy of being called ‘good and upright.’”

A side-by-side comparison of the three comments will make this point clear:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Exod 15:26 | Lev 19:1 | Deut 6:18 |
| this means in business dealings | after warning with detailed laws regarding all business dealings between people | since He mentioned many of them |
|  | such as not to steal or rob or to wrong one another | such as, Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer; Thou shalt not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge; neither shalt thou stand idly by the blood of thy neighbor; Thou shalt not curse the deaf; Thou shalt rise up before the hoary head |
|  | and other similar prohibitions | and the like |
|  | He said in general, And thou shalt do that which is right and good | he reverted to state in a general way that, in all matters, one should do what is good and right |
|  | thus including under a positive commandment | including even |
| if a person is honest in his business dealings | the duty of doing that which is right and of agreeing to a compromise | compromise and, going beyond the requirements of the law. |
| and the spirit of his fellow creatures finds pleasure in him | as well as all requirements to act “beyond” the line of justice for the sake of pleasing one’s fellowman | Other examples are the Rabbis’ ordinances concerning the prerogative of a neighbor, and even what they said [concerning the desirability] that one’s youthful reputation be unblemished,[[31]](#footnote-31) and that one’s conversation with people be pleasant. Thus [a person must seek to refine his behavior] in every form of activity, until he is worthy of being called “good and upright.” |

Nahmanides builds his Deuteronomy comment on the foundation of his Leviticus comment both in its structure and in its wording, recasting it with new content that matches the new insight he has now achieved.

What caused Nahmanides to change his interpretation of “that which is right and good”? What changed circumstances engendered the new insight?

Nahmanides’ interpretive domain includes both *peshat* and *derash* – plain-sense interpretation and creative interpretation – two hermeneutical methods with a tangled and complex relationship.[[32]](#footnote-32) The existence of *peshat* and *derash* side by side ends up forging a connection between them. Here too the birth of the new insight was the fruit of a coupling of *peshat* and *derash*. The guidepost of the plain-sense reading of the text, presented at the beginning of Nahmanides’ comment, links this verse to its predecessor. Nahmanides reads “that which is right and good” contextually, as if applicable to the previous verse’s insistence on keeping all the commandments, thereby granting this new commandment a meaning that touches on keeping all the commandments, so that beside the practical aspect of keeping all the commandments one must also fulfill an intellectual aspect, intent on performing each of the commandments in order to do “that which is right and good” in God’s eyes. When Nahmanides shifts to the rabbinic, midrashic interpretation, he takes with him the guidepost of the plain-sense interpretation, the reading of the commandment to do “that which is right and good” as a follow-up to the instruction to keep all the commandments. He therefore broadens the application of this general commandment to the full spectrum of human behavior, not limiting it to financial matters alone. In the Exodus and Leviticus comments his starting point is the words of R. Eleazar in the Mekhilta, which are plainly restricted to business dealings; even when Nahmanides expands them to cover a full range of financial matters, their application remains limited.

The references in his Exodus and Leviticus comments to his comment here at Deut 6:18 were made from within this more limited approach; that is, he assumed that he would be interpreting the phrase “that which is right and good” as he did in those earlier comments, but “with the will of the Holy One,” “the good God who showed him goodness,” having reached this point Nahmanides significantly broadened his understanding of the commandment to do “that which is right and good.” The earlier references have led scholars to connect his approach in Exodus and Leviticus to his comment here,[[33]](#footnote-33) but in reverse – by recasting the understanding of his comments in Exodus and Leviticus along the lines of his approach here in Deuteronomy.[[34]](#footnote-34) However, as I have shown, those two comments differ from this one.

**The Comment to Deut 12:28**

Nahmanides discusses the commandment to do “that which is right and good” in two later places in his Torah commentary, each time retaining the new interpretation first presented at Deut 6:18. The first is a comment on Deut 12:28, “Observe and hear all these words which I command you, that it may go well with you, and with your children after you forever, when you do that which is good and right in the eyes of the LORD your God.” The latter phrase, of course, matches the phrase of Deut 6:18, “that which is right and good in the sight of the LORD.” But Deut 12:28 invokes “all these words” without specifying them as do the other such references in the book of Deuteronomy. Nahmanides comments:

He [Moses] did not mention here the statutes and ordinances, nor His testimonies and His commandments, but said *all those words* in order to include in this observance the good and the right, as I have explained in the section of *Va’ethchanan*.

For Nahmanides, who understood 6:18 as commanding something *in addition* to the other commandments, the second half of 12:28 must also be adding a further commandment to do “what is good and right in the sight of the LORD your God.” He therefore explains the beginning of the verse to mean that “all these things” is intended to refer to keeping all the commandments, *including* the commandment in 6:18 to do “that which is right and good.” His reference at this point to his comment on 6:18 is called for because 12:28 is phrased similarly. The difficulty caused by the uniquely comprehensive style of 12:28 in citing “all these things” can be resolved in light of the explanation he has given for 6:18.

**The Comment to Deut 26:16–17**

In contrast to the previous comment, which discusses a verse with a phrase like that of Deut 6:18, in the comment to be discussed next Nahmanides interprets words that in no way resemble “do that which is right and good in the sight of the LORD” as if they are in fact directed at “that which is right and good”:

AND THAT YOU WOULD WALK IN HIS WAYS – to do the good and the right, and do kindness one to another.

The reason for this is Nahmanides’ broad view of Deut 26:16–19:

This day the LORD your God commands you to do these statutes and ordinances; you shall therefore observe and do them with all your heart, and with all your soul. You have avouched the LORD this day to be your God, and that you would st walk in His ways, and keep His statutes, and His commandments, and His ordinances, and hearken unto His voice. 18 And the LORD has avouched you this day to be His own treasure, as He has promised you, and that you should keep all His commandments; 19 and to make you high above all nations that He has made, in praise, and in name, and in glory; and that you may be a holy people unto the LORD your God, as He has spoken.

In his introduction to Deuteronomy and his other comments on the beginning of the book, Nahmanides views the first five verses of Deuteronomy as setting up the explanation of the law that is the main part of the book of Deuteronomy. But instead of that explanation following immediately, Moses interrupts the natural sequence by prefacing the explanation with an introduction that combines reproach with compassion – reproach of the Israelites for their actions, and examples of the kindness and compassion with which God has treated them. The purpose of this introduction is to make them aware of God’s kindness, to ensure that they do not return to their previous sinful ways, and assure them that God will continue to treat them kindly. This introduction extends from Deut 1:6–4:40. After this introduction, in 4:44–49, comes a repetitive resumption of Deut 1:1–5, with these words at its center: “This is the law which Moses set before the children of Israel; these are the testimonies, and the statutes, and the ordinances, which Moses spoke unto the children of Israel” (4:44–45). The repetitive resumption is then followed by the explanation which gives the book its name of Deuteronomy, literally “Repetition of the Torah” (משנה תורה). In this repetition we find “the explanation of the Torah and the completion of the commandments.” The “completion” refers to the commandments that have not yet appeared in the Torah,[[35]](#footnote-35) about which the Torah emphasizes that they too were addressed to the Israelites by Moses “according unto all that the LORD had given him in commandment unto them” (Deut 1:3). This kind of commandment is called by Nahmanides a new (מחודשת) commandment.[[36]](#footnote-36) The exposition is a repetition of the commandments that have already been given, “in order to clarify them further and to give additional instruction about them”[[37]](#footnote-37) or to warn the Israelites about them again. The text emphasizes that they were spoken at Moses’ own initiative and not by God’s command: “Moses took upon him to expound this law” (Deut 1:5). In the rest of the commentary, this kind of commandment is called an “explanatory” commandment.[[38]](#footnote-38) The exposition of the commandments is the main part of Deuteronomy, extending from 5:1–26:19.

At the end of this exposition comes a concluding paragraph, Deut 26:16–19, which Nahmanides expounds in his own summary. He therefore explains v. 16 with the same phraseology he used at the beginning of his commentary to Deuteronomy, in order to define the subject of the exposition:

THIS DAY THE LORD YOUR GOD COMMANDS YOU TO DO THESE STATUTES AND ORDINANCES [Deut 26:16]. Now Moses finished explaining the Torah to them and issuing all the new commandments which God commanded him to declare to them. Therefore he said, “This day the LORD thy God commands you to do these statutes and ordinances, for I have already completed everything for you.” He mentioned, *and you shall observe and do them with all your heart, and with all your soul*. I have already explained the terms “heart” and “soul.”[[39]](#footnote-39)

“Moses finished explaining” corresponds to “Moses took upon him to expound” of 1:5, and “all the new commandments which God commanded him to declare” corresponds to “according unto all that the LORD had given him in commandment unto them” of 1:3.

Nahmanides presents the Israelites’ reception of this “exposition of the Torah” as corresponding to the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai. That is how he describes it in his comment to the first verse of the book:

Then Moses called all Israel that were before him … and then began the explanation of the Torah with the Ten Commandments in order that they hear them with the explanation from the mouth of the one who received them from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He. Afterwards he informed them of the Unity of God, as it is said, *Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is One*, and all the commandments in this book. This is why Scripture explained here *which Moses spoke unto ‘all’ Israel*, and there it is stated, *And Moses called unto ‘all’ Israel* [emphasizing that *all* were present], because the explanation of the Torah and the completion of the commandments must be in the presence of “all” Israel just as was the Giving of the Torah [itself on Mount Sinai].

Through this “exposition event,” Moses is fashioning a renewed acceptance of the Torah, for now the Israelites are accepting the commandments already included in the Torah together with the additional commandments in the exposition. Nahmanides’ own exposition of the first half of 26:17, in the concluding paragraph of the exposition, takes this perspective:

YOU HAVE AVOUCHED THE LORD THIS DAY. The meaning thereof is: “Since you have accepted the entire Torah upon yourselves with all its interpretations, details, and new promulgations, you have thus magnified God and exalted Him, that He alone will be your God; you will in no way avow another god.”

After beginning the exposition “with the Ten Commandments in order that they hear them with the explanation from the mouth of the one who received them from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He,” Moses informed them of the commandments, the first of them being “the Unity of God,” followed by “all the commandments in this book.” The unity of God is the basis of all the other commandments and therefore comes first; on the other hand, the acceptance of the commandments creates the unity of God: “Since you have accepted the entire Torah upon yourselves with all its interpretations, details, and new promulgations, you have thus magnified God and exalted Him, that He alone will be your God; you will in no way avow another god.”[[40]](#footnote-40)

Nahmanides expounds the second half of 26:17 as a specification of “the entire Torah” that the Israelites accepted at the “exposition event,” that is, all the commandments in Deuteronomy. Since he has already defined “that which is right and good” as a higher-level positive commandment, Nahmanides includes this important commandment among those mentioned in the second half of this verse:

AND THAT YOU WOULD WALK IN HIS WAYS – to do the good and the right, and do kindness one to another. AND KEEP HIS STATUTES, AND HIS COMMANDMENTS, AND HIS ORDINANCES. He [Moses] singles out the statutes and ordinances [for the reason] I have explained,[[41]](#footnote-41) and he includes in the expression and His commandments all the commandments – positive and negative. AND HEARKEN UNTO HIS VOICE – this refers to whatever He will command you concerning other deeds through me or through the rest of the prophets, as I have explained. It is possible that the expression HIS COMMANDMENTS refers to the positive commandments, and HEARKEN UNTO HIS VOICE means the avoidances, that is to say, the negative commandments..

Moses sets the higher-level positive commandment to “do that which is right and good” (Deut 6:18), which supplements the instruction to “keep the commandments” of Deut 6:17, right after the commandment about the unity of God (6:4–16). Here at the end of Moses’ exposition of the law, Nahmanides provides a corresponding explanation: “You have avouched the LORD this day” = the unity of God; “that you would walk in His ways”[[42]](#footnote-42) = “do that which is right and good”; and “keep His statutes, and His commandments, and His ordinances” = keeping all the commandments.

**Brotherliness and Kindness**

Nahmanides defines “that you would walk in His ways” as “to do the good and the right,” as well as “to do kindness one to another.” Kindness to others is mentioned just once in Nahmanides’ Deuteronomy commentary, in his comment on the prohibition of taking interest on a loan (Deut 23:20). Nahmanides explains that this is forbidden “because of brotherliness and kindness,” since lending at interest “is agreed upon by both parties and is done voluntarily.” Nahmanides also brings into the discussion the commandments to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18) and the remission of debt (Deut 15:1–11). In doing so, Nahmanides explains the blessings granted to those who remit debts and avoid lending at interest as resulting from the commandments demanding charity and kindness. To this kind of commandment Nahmanides opposes a different kind of commandment, which he presents with the following examples:

Scripture mentions a blessing only in connection with charity and acts of mercy, and not for [the mere abstention from] robbery, theft, and fraud.

These three examples, of course, are identical with those that Nahmanides used in his comment on “do that which is right and good” in the framework of his comment to Lev 19:2. There, as noted, Nahmanides was still defining “that which is right and good” strictly in financial terms: not to steal, not to rob, not to overcharge. But in his comment to Deut 6:18, where the phrase “that which is right and good” actually occurs, Nahmanides applies the phrase to all the commandments, a supplement that completes the full picture of “all aspects of man’s conduct with his neighbors and friends, and all his various transactions, and the ordinances of all societies and countries,” of which the Torah could include only a portion. The Torah *does* include commandments regarding business conduct (“not to overcharge anyone”); commandments regarding more general financial dealings (“not to steal”); and other commandments regarding interpersonal actions more generally (“not to go up and down as a talebearer”), including commandments to be kind, like the remission of debts and the prohibition of taking interest. But even all these cannot include everything. The commandment to “do that which is right and good,” therefore, includes the entire realm of interpersonal actions, including the commandment to “do kindness one to another,” and not merely those acts of kindness specifically commanded in the Torah.

**Conclusion**

In this article I have presented the development of Nahmanides’ interpretation of the phrase “do that which is right and good” in Deut 6:18. I have shown that originally, before commenting on the verse where that phrase occurs, he alludes to it briefly, interpreting it in connection with the comments of R. Eleazar in the Mekhilta relating it to “detailed laws and business dealings.” The purpose of the verse would thus be to supplement the various prohibited financial activities with a positive commandment to conduct oneself properly. But by the time he reaches that verse in the course of his Deuteronomy commentary, the plain sense of the text has influenced the way Nahmanides understood R. Eleazar’s midrash. Now, therefore, he interprets the verse as intended to supplement all the commandments, and it applies to interpersonal actions of all kinds, not just financial ones. Correspondingly, in his Leviticus commentary Nahmanides gives examples of “detailed laws and business dealings,” whereas in Deuteronomy he presents not only new examples of prohibitions but also one positive commandment, all belonging to the realm of interpersonal behavior. Further on in Deuteronomy, in accordance with this new interpretation, Nahmanides comments on two additional texts, in the latter of which it is clear that “all aspects of man’s conduct” include a requirement of kindness to others.

In light of this explanation of Nahmanides, it is clear that his commentary was dynamic, constantly developing. It is not merely that he came back after the conclusion of his commentary to make changes, but that he changed his mind during the process of writing, before the commentary was first finished. At an early stage, Nahmanides saw Deut 6:18 (in his mind’s eye) in a limited context; at a later stage, he changed his perspective, viewing it as having much broader significance.

I conclude with a request for more research in this area. This article has dealt with only a single instance, the development of Nahmanides’ exegesis of one phrase, “that which is right and good,” a verse that Nahmanides explains briefly before he reaches it, alluding to a fuller discussion that will come later. But that later discussion finds Nahmanides having changed his understanding of the text. In order to test whether there are other such occurrences it is necessary to examine all the cases in which Nahmanides interprets a verse earlier in his commentary but referring to a fuller comment to come, and yet when he finally reaches the verse it is evident that he has changed his interpretation.[[43]](#footnote-43)

**Manuscripts of Nahmanides’ Commentary to the Torah**

1

2

**Print Editions**

א

ב

**Bibliography**

1. \* I thank Prof. Jonathan Jacobs and R. Yehuda Tropper for their insightful comments. MSS of Nahmanides’ commentary to the Torah will be identified by numbers, printed editions by letters; see the list at the end of this article. The English translations of Nahmanides’ comments are based on those of Chavel, accessed via mg.alhatorah.org, with slight alterations; biblical quotations in English are based on the 1917 JPS translation (again with alterations where necessary). This permits close comparison with Nahmanides’ original Hebrew.

   On changes and \*\*processes of development of the creativity \*\*among medieval authors, among them Nahmanides in his various \*\*compositions, see Henshke [5769], \*\*not in the biblio\*\* pp. 120–121 with n. 6, and Yosef Ofer and Jonathan Jacobs, *Nahmanides’ Torah Commentary Addenda Written in the Land of Israel* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2013), 17–21. On \*\*processes of development of Nahmanides’ worldview that come to expression in his various creations in the course of his life see Haviva Pedaya, *Nahmanides: Cyclical Time and Holy Test* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2003), 87–88, and more recently Oded Yisraeli, *R. Moses b. Nachman (Nachmanides): Intellectual Biography* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Per R. Yitzhak of Acre; see H. A. Erlanger, *Sefer meir’at einayim ve-hu biur sodot hatorah beferush haramban z”l al hatorah kefi kabbalato mipi soferim usefarim l’rabbenu yiẓhak b”r shemuel demin acco zẓ”l* (Jerusalem: n.p., 1993), 227a. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As Ofer and Jacobs call them in their 2013 book. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Already in the second half of the 19th century cataloguers of Hebrew manuscripts in the various libraries noted the existence of lists of these additions at the end of many of the manuscripts (Steinschneider 1864, 119; Neubauer 1886, 783; and Margaliot 1899, 157); Eisenstein [5719] was the first to make note, with regard to MS 9, of passages appearing already in various versions as an organic part of Nahmanides’ commentary to the Torah and to present them as additions; Kahana [5729] collected the additions attested in letters sent by Nahmanides from Israel back to the Diaspora, in which he instructs that they be incorporated into his commentary; Sabato [5765] collected additions that were not attested in these letters but focused only on Genesis; Ofer [2008] worked on lists of the attested additions, preparing the ground for study of the unattested ones; Ofer and Jacobs (2013) conducted an extensive study of the additions, collecting and discussing both the attested and unattested ones; Shneur [5774] worked on eight additions that deal with geographical matters; Jacobs [2012] broadened the discussion to include the motivation for some of the additions: books that Nahmanides discovered in Israel; Ofer [2013] extensively discusses the additions that have to do with Rachel’s tomb. See also, more generally, Ofer and Jacobs [5773] 21–26. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Mack [5776] 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Chapter 6 of their book, “Early Additions,” deals with seven additions that Nahmanides added to his commentary while he was still in Spain, using as their criterion the expressions “and again I found,” “I afterwards found,” and “afterwards I saw.” See Ofer and Jacobs [5773], 579–600. They find two further sections in which there are indications of an even earlier stage of the text. See ibid. 290–291 and 533–535. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Marcus 5781. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This process is recognizable also from many other comments, both those alluding to later texts on which he will comment in the future and those alluding to earlier texts on which he has already commented. Nahmanides continued this practice in the comments that he added when he was in Israel and asked that they be incorporated as an organic part of his commentary. Ofer and Jacobs [5773], 166–167, raise the possibility that Nahmanides’ desire to incorporate these later comments seamlessly into his commentary and not as subsequent clarifications led him, in a comment that was added to the Genesis commentary, to refer in the future tense to a passage in the Leviticus commentary that had already been included in the earlier version of his commentary.

   This description of Nahmanides’ general writing process is not intended to contradict the possibility that at certain points Nahmanides incorporated into his commentary some passages that had already been written before he began writing the Torah commentary. R. Yehuda Tropper is currently working on an analysis of an extremely important passage of this kind, which will include the analysis of several additional passages of the kind.. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Meira 5734, 260–265; Hanokh 5742, 123–131; Halbertal 5766, 286–291; Rotenstein 5773 פט. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Nahmanides commentary is taken from the HaKeter edition, ed. M. Cohen, [www.mgketer.org](http://www.mgketer.org), corrected with reference to the manuscripts. Significant alterations in the places that require emendation will be marked and explained in the notes. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In some of the Mss (4, 18, 19, 26, and 36) this is שצוך ‘what He has commanded you’ but is corrected to שיצוך ‘what He will command you’. In Ibn Ezra’s commentary as we have it the comment reads שצוה what He has commanded’. Ibn Ezra’s original comment would seem to have been שיצוה ‘what He will command’ as the context demands. In the short commentary, Ibn Ezra himself comments on “giving ear to His commandments” as follows: “which He will command.” This example \*\*mamhishah that Ibn Ezra’s comments as given in Nahmanides’ commentary must be taken into account in establishing the correct text of Ibn Ezra’s commentary – even though here Nahmanides has altered Ibn Ezra’s comment. See further \*\*?? n. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Mss 1, 3, 5, 6, 8, 9 ,13, 16, 23, 27, 29, 32, 34, 35, 37 have מעלין (corrected to מעלה), as do printed editions ה and ו; others have מעלה עליו (4,11, 18, 22, 25, 26, 30, 33, 36, 38, ד, ז, ח) or מעלה עליו הכתוב (2, 7, 10, 19, 20, 21, 24, 28, א). ב and ג have מעלין עליו הכתוב. Nahmanides’ short commentary \*\*? is an important textual witness here, since in this commentary there exist \*\*? Mss so early that they date to close to Nahmanides’ own time: 1284 and 1301, while the earliest manuscripts of the long commentary date to the 14th century. On the short commentary and the date of these two manuscripts, see \*\*Yisraeli (5774), 485–486. Of the three main texts presented in this paper, only the one appears in the short commentary, and in a significant majority of the Mss, including the two oldest, the text is מעלים/ן עליו. See also \*\*Hurowitz (5691), 158 and the textual versions given there. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Jacobs (5777) has shown that [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)