



המוסיף והגורע

Adding and Subtracting

Parashat Re'eh contains the following interesting and famous pair of commandments:

אַתְּ כָּל הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם אֹתוֹ תִשְׁמְרוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת
לֹא תִסַּף עָלָיו וְלֹא תִגְרַע מִמֶּנּוּ.

*All that I have commanded you,
carefully make sure to perform;*

do not add to it and do not detract from it. (D'varim 13,1)

On the face of it, it appears that these are two separate commands: We are forbidden to do more than G-d commanded, and similarly warned against doing less.

The interdiction against subtracting from the Torah's commandments is logical and easy to understand. Clearly, G-d's commands are perfect, containing no unnecessary details. Doing less than what we are commanded is not only insufficient, but also detracts from the parts that we *do* fulfill, leaving us with a worthless fraction of the commanded act.

But the ban on adding to the mitzvot is not as simple. If we fulfill a mitzvah properly, and then add even more, why should this be a problem? Why, actually, is it forbidden to add to the mitzvot?

Let us take the mitzvah of lulav and etrog on Sukkot, for example. We are bidden to take four species – a lulav, an etrog, willow branches, and myrtle branches. If we do so, and then add a fifth species, we have not fulfilled the mitzvah. But why not? Why does the fifth species nullify the original four? Why can't the fifth one simply be ignored?



In short: Why does adding something actually detract from it?

The Rosh HaShanah shofar, fashioned out of a ram's horn, is an example where an addition does not detract. There is a custom among those who love mitzvot to adorn and beautify certain mitzvah-objects by laminating them in gold. Are we permitted to do so for a shofar? If the gold covers the mouthpiece, it certainly disqualifies the shofar, as the gold plating forms a separation between the mouth and the shofar. Similarly, if the plating changes the shofar's sound, it is also unacceptable. Otherwise, the Sages say, this "addition" of gold does not disqualify the shofar.

In other words, if the external addition does not affect the internal essence of the mitzvah, it is acceptable. But if it changes the essence, the "plus" becomes a "minus" – and is forbidden.

In light of this, the verse with which we opened above - *do not add to it and do not detract from it* - should be understood in this manner: *Do not add to it so that you do not detract from it*. That is, it is obvious that we may not detract in the usual sense – but we are also not allowed to detract in the form of adding! The Torah is actually giving a reason for its command, and saying that additions are forbidden because they detract.

According to this, we may conclude that additions that do not detract from the mitzvah are not forbidden.

Let us consider the mitzvah of Sukkah, for example. The Torah teaches us that the simplest Sukkah consists of three walls: two normal-sized ones connected at a right angle, and a third wall that can be as narrow as just a few centimeters (one *tefach*).

Are we permitted to lengthen the third wall more than this minimum, or add a fourth wall? Or would we then be in violation of the ban on "not adding"? Quite obviously, lengthening the walls or building a fourth wall is acceptable, and the Sukkah is perfectly kosher. Why is the extra wall not considered a forbidden addition?

Because, as the Tosafot commentary on the Talmud explains, the essence of the mitzvah of Sukkah is to have a complete (albeit temporary) place to live, as the Gemara derives from the words בסוכות תשבו, "*you shall dwell in Sukkot*" (Vayikra 23,42): "You must sit in the Sukkah as you dwell" (Sukkah 28b). That is to say, the mitzvah is not to "sit down" in the Sukkah, but to "live" in it.



Accordingly, adding another wall does not at all detract from the Sukkah's essence, but rather strengthens it.

■ The Plain Meaning of the Verses

Let us look at the verses forbidding idol-worship:

כִּי יִכְרִית ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֶת הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה בָּא שָׂמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּ אוֹתָם מִפְּנֵיהֶם...

*When Hashem cuts off the nations to which you will come...
and when you drive them out and dwell in their land*

הַשְּׂמֹר לָךְ פֶּן תִּנְקֹשׁ אַחֲרֵיהֶם ... וּפֶן תִּדְרוֹשׁ לֵאלֹהֵיהֶם לֵאמֹר:
אֵיכָּה יַעֲבֹדוּ הַגּוֹיִם הָאֵלֶּה אֶת אֱלֹהֵיהֶם וְאֶעֱשֶׂה כֵן גַּם אֲנִי.

*Beware, lest you be attracted after them...
and lest you inquire about their gods, saying,
"How did these nations serve their gods?
And I will do likewise."* (D'varim 12, 29-30)

This verse is basically warning us not to add foreign elements to our worship of G-d. Why not? The answer is provided in the next verse:

לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה כֵן לַה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ, כִּי כָל תּוֹעֵבַת ה' אֲשֶׁר שִׂנְאָ עֲשׂוֹ לֵאלֹהֵיהֶם,
כִּי גַם אֶת בְּנֵיהֶם וְאֶת בָּנֹתֵיהֶם יִשְׂרְפוּ בְּאֵשׁ לֵאלֹהֵיהֶם.

*You shall not do so to Hashem, your G-d;
for every abomination to G-d that He hates,
they did to their gods, for also their sons and their daughters
they would burn in fire to their gods.* (verse 31)

Adding elements from idol-worship is actually not an addition, but an abomination – an essential detraction that deals a death blow to whatever aspects of true G-d-worship were there to begin with.

And from here, the Torah expands this rule to all of its mitzvot, as we read in the very next verse, which we quoted above:

אֶת כָּל הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם אֹתוֹ תִשְׁמְרוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת,
לֹא תִסֹּף עָלָיו וְלֹא תִגְרַע מִמֶּנּוּ.

*All that I have commanded you,
carefully make sure to perform;
do not add to it and do not detract from it.* (13,1)

As we said above, this means that the Torah is explaining: Do not add in order that you not detract.



■ A Time-Dimension Addition

Let us analyze another dimension in which it is possible to add to a mitzvah: Time.

What is the Torah law regarding one who decides that after the seven days of Sukkot, he wishes to eat or sleep one more night in the Sukkah? Does this mean that he is unacceptably adding to the seven-day mitzvah of Sukkot? Or, since he has already completed his fulfillment of the mitzvah, does this addition make no difference?

The Talmud discusses this question in Tractate Rosh Hashanah, and states that it depends on the person's intention. If he is doing so for the sake of the mitzvah, this means he wishes to add to it, in violation of "*do not add*" – for he wishes to change an essential aspect of the mitzvah, from a count of "seven" days to "eight." But if he merely wants to take advantage of the pleasant weather for an outdoor nap or meal, then he is permitted to do so.

■ The Sages' Laws

What about all the bans and regulations enacted and promulgated by the Sages? Why are these not considered to be forbidden additions to Torah law? Let us study this topic.

The Sanhedrin, the Great Court responsible for determining Jewish Law for the entire nation, had many responsibilities. One of them, as we read in Pirkei Avot (1,1), is to "enact a fence around the Torah" - that is, to enact new regulations to keep the people from transgressing the Biblical laws. In fact, our Sages enacted many such "fences," such as not to eat milk products soon after meat, and even instituted extra "mitzvot," such as lighting candles on Erev Shabbat and Chanukah, and many more.

Are these Rabbinic laws not a violation of the Torah's command not to add to its mitzvot? This is of course a very fundamental question in understanding the Sages' role in Jewish Law.

Several of our early commentators and teachers related to this complex issue, most notably the Rambam (Maimonides). In his magnum opus, the Mishneh Torah, the Rambam explains as follows:

Given that the Court is permitted to enact decrees and forbid that which the Torah permits... for generations to come; and since the Court is even authorized to suspend Torah prohibitions temporarily



– what is included in the Torah’s ban on adding to or detracting from its mitzvot?

The ban prohibits establishing the addition or deduction as a permanent part of Scriptural Law. (Laws of Heretics 2,9)

The Rambam explains that our Sages are empowered to enact regulations and issue decrees on condition that they stipulate clearly that the new laws carry only Rabbinic authority, and not Biblical.

The underlying explanation of this point is similar to what we said above: Whenever we make an addition that penetrates the essence of the mitzvah, we thereby change or harm its very nature and detract from it. But if the addition remains on a superficial level, and the nature of the Biblical mitzvah is not touched, there is nothing wrong with adding to it.

Of course, not everyone is authorized to add to the Torah’s mitzvot and stipulate that the addition is not Torah-authorized. Only the Sanhedrin, having received its authorization from the Torah itself, can make this decision. As the Torah tells us:

וּבָאתְךָ אֶל הַכֹּהֲנִים הַלְוִיִּם וְאֶל הַשֹּׁפְטִים אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם ...
עַל פִּי הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר יוֹרוּךְ וְעַל הַמִּשְׁפָּט אֲשֶׁר יֹאמְרוּ לְךָ תַעֲשֶׂה.
לֹא תִסּוּר מִן הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר יִגִּדּוּ לְךָ יָמִין וּשְׂמָאל.

*You shall come to the Priests and the Levites
and the judges of that day... According to
the law they instruct you, and by the rules they tell you,
you shall do. Stray not from that which they tell you,
neither right nor left.*

(D’varim 17, 9-11)

■ The Sin of the Tree of Knowledge

The Gemara (Sanhedrin 29a) seeks a source for the Rabbinic teaching that whoever adds, actually subtracts, and finds it in the story of Adam, Eve, and the Tree of Knowledge:

Chizkiya said: From where do we learn that whoever adds, actually subtracts? From that which Adam’s wife Eve said to the serpent: “*G-d said that we may not eat from the Tree of Knowledge, nor may we touch it, lest we die*” (B’reshit 3,3) [when actually G-d had said only, “*Do not eat from the Tree of Knowledge*” (2,17)].



The entire idea of not touching the tree was made up by Eve, and this led her to sin not only by eating the forbidden fruit, but also by giving it to Adam. How so? Rashi tells us that the serpent pushed Eve and caused her to touch the tree. When she saw that she did not die from touching it, the serpent pressed his advantage and said, “Just like touching it caused you no harm, the same with eating it!”

Based on this, a strong question arises: If one may not add to a prohibition because it is liable to lead to a violation thereof, how is it that the Sages instituted extra prohibitions upon the Nazir (one who has taken upon himself not to have his hair cut, to come near a corpse, or to eat grape products)? The Sages ruled (Avodah Zarah 58b) that a Nazir must not even enter a vineyard: “Go around and around, but do not approach the vineyard!” - in order to avoid the temptation to eat from its fruit.

Why did the Sages add on this extra ban, if the Bible itself forbids only eating? What is the difference between the “fence” that Eve made, and this one of the Sages?

In light of the Rambam’s teaching above, the answer appears to be clear. For Eve didn't merely say that touching is forbidden; she said that *G-d said* that touching the tree is forbidden. If she would have said that she feels the tree should not be touched, that would have been fine. But by attributing this new ban to G-d’s word, she infiltrated deep inside the very essence of the command and changed it beyond recognition.

■ The Trap

How did the serpent get Eve to make this mistake? She thought that the Divine commandment against eating from the tree was because the tree itself was repulsive and poisonous, liable to harm anyone who comes near it. By the same logic, she calculated, such a tree was forbidden even to touch.

The snake took advantage of her mistake, and said she need not fear:

וַיֹּאמֶר הַנָּחָשׁ אֶל הָאִשָּׁה לֹא מוֹת תָּמוּתוּן.
 כִּי יֵדַע אֱלֹהִים כִּי בַיּוֹם אֲכָלְכֶם מִמֶּנּוּ וְנִפְקְחוּ עֵינֵיכֶם
 וְהִייתֶם כְּאֱלֹהִים יֹדְעֵי טוֹב וָרָע.

*You will not die, for G-d knows that once you eat of it,
 your eyes will be opened and you will be like G-d,
 knowing good and evil.* (B'reshit 3,4-5)



“This tree is top-quality!” the snake told her. “The only reason G-d forbade it to you is because He does not want you to be like Him!” Eve looked at the tree, considered what the snake had said, and totally fell for his trap:

וַיִּרְאֵהָ הָאִשָּׁה כִּי טוֹב הָעֵץ לְמֵאֲכָל וְכִי תִאֲוָה הוּא לְעֵינַיִם
וְנִחְמָד הָעֵץ לְהַשְׂכִּיל ...

*The woman saw that the tree was
good for eating, a delight to the eyes,
and desirable for gaining intelligence ... (verse 6)*

In other words, she began to feel that the situation was not quite what she had thought. The tree was actually “*attractive*” and a “*delight*,” perhaps the serpent was right in saying that the Tree of Knowledge was the best tree in all of Eden, and contained true Knowledge of G-d. Her next step, not surprisingly, was to take a bite of its fruit.

If, however, she had been more precise in understanding the Divine command, she would not have fallen into the snake’s trap. For Hashem had clearly stated:

וּמֵעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וְרַע לֹא תֹאכְלוּ מִמֶּנּוּ ...

*And from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil,
do not eat... (2,17)*

G-d told her straight out that the tree was the Tree of Knowledge! She did not notice that the serpent had not told her anything new!

Furthermore, let us note that the Torah introduced this story by writing clearly:

וַיִּצְמַח ה' אֱ-לֹהִים מִן הָאֲדָמָה כָּל עֵץ נִחְמָד לְמִרְאָה וְטוֹב לְמֵאֲכָל
וְעֵץ הַחַיִּים בְּתוֹךְ הָגֶן וְעֵץ הַדַּעַת טוֹב וְרַע.

*Hashem sprouted from the earth
all sorts of trees beautiful to see and good to eat,
and the Tree of Life in the garden, and the
Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. (verse 9)*

From here we see that all of the trees in the garden, including the Tree of Knowledge, were “*beautiful to see and good to eat*”! Why, then, was Eve so amazed to see, as we read above in verse 6, that the tree was 1) *good for eating*, 2) *a delight to the eyes*, and 3) *desirable for gaining intelligence*?



The explanation for all of this is that she actually “tricked” herself. Because she added on the prohibition against touching – not as her own extra precaution, but as part of the Divine command – she actually changed, harmed and detracted from the actual essence of G-d’s command.

■ The Extra Letters

The above-quoted Talmud passage tells us two other sources (in addition to the story of Eve and the forbidden fruit) for the principle that “whoever adds, actually subtracts.” Rav Mesharshaya learns it from the description of the measurements of the Ark of the Covenant in the Tabernacle. The Ark’s length was *אמתיים וחצי*, *two and a half amot* (Sh’mot 25,10). The word *אמתיים*, which means “two amot,” is actually comprised of the word meaning 200, plus the letter *aleph* at the beginning. We thus see that adding the small letter *aleph* to the word actually detracts from its value.

The next source is supplied in the Gemara by Rav Ashi, who quotes another measurement from the Tabernacle: *עשתי עשרה יריעות*, *eleven sheets of goats’ wool* (Sh’mot 26,7). He notes that the word meaning “eleven,” *עשתי עשרה*, is spelled the same as the word for “twelve,” except that it has an extra letter – *y*, *ayin*. Once again, we see that adding a letter detracts from the value of the word.

Both of these sources sound a bit strange and irrelevant to the fundamental determination that “whoever adds, actually subtracts.” Is it really of significance that there are two cases in which one letter detracts and does not add? What does the Gemara mean here?

When we delve deeper, the secret is revealed.

After Adam and Eve sinned by eating of the forbidden fruit, G-d fashioned for them garments of skin, as is written:

וַיַּעַשׂ ה' אֱלֹהִים לְאָדָם וּלְאִשְׁתּוֹ כְּתוּנֹת עוֹר וַיְלַבְּשֵׂם.

*Hashem made for the man and his wife cloaks of skin,
and He clothed them. (3,21)*

In the Medrash of Rav Meir, it is not written *כתנות עור*, *cloaks of skin*, but rather *כתנות אור*, with an *aleph* instead of an *ayin*, meaning *cloaks of light*. With this “change,” Rav Meir wishes to note that the new garments were the skin tissues of the human body – emphasizing that before the sin, Adam and Eve were made exclusively of light! In other words, the sin brought



about a situation in which the light of their soul was covered with the “clothing” that was their skin.

G-d thus “added” clothes – but this was actually a “detraction,” in that the light of the soul was now covered and hidden by the skin of the body. All this is alluded to by the switching of the letters *aleph* and *ayin* – the same letters involved in the two above-cited sources noted by Rav Mesharshaya and Rav Ashi.

The answer to our question is, then, that these two added sources by Rav Mesharshaya and Rav Ashi are actually a return to the first source brought by the Gemara – the story of the Tree of Knowledge.

■ The Seventy Elders of the Sanhedrin

Let us expand upon this עור-אור, skin/light contrast in the context of the appointment of the Sanhedrin in the Sinai Desert. Moshe Rabbeinu, from whom rays of light emanated – rendering him a source of pure “light” – is the one whom G-d has assigned to appoint the judges. Following Israel’s sin of lusting for meat, Hashem commands him to appoint 70 elders who will help him lead the nation:

... וַיִּאָסֶף שִׁבְעִים אִישׁ מִזְקְנֵי הָעָם ...
וַיֵּאצֵּל מִן הָרוּחַ אֲשֶׁר עָלָיו וַיִּתֵּן עַל שִׁבְעִים אִישׁ הַזִּקְנִים
... וַיִּתְנַבְּאוּ וְלֹא יָסְפוּ.

*Moshe assembled seventy men of the elders of the people...
G-d caused the spirit upon Moshe to emanate
and He bestowed it upon the seventy elders...
and they prophesied and did not stop.* (Bamidbar 11,24-25)

On the face of it, it appears that the situation had greatly improved. Instead of just Moshe alone receiving Divine spirit, 70 other elders were also receiving it. This seems to be a welcome net gain!

But this is not the true picture. In fact, all the prophetic light that filled Moshe Rabbeinu was now directed through the wise men standing around the tent, meaning that instead of one powerful source of prophecy, there were 70 little ones. The Nation of Israel thus received the prophetic light in a “concealed” fashion; they gained 70 elders, but lost the direct prophecy of Moshe.



Thus, just as with Adam, the *aleph* (whose gematriya value is 1) of light was covered by the *ayin* (70) of the skin, and so too, the one – Moshe Rabbeinu – was “covered” by the 70 elders. “Whoever adds, detracts.”

■ Why Do We Blow the Shofar?

The above will also lead us to a deeper understanding of the following Talmudic passage in Tractate Rosh HaShanah (16a):

R. Yitzchak said: “Why do we blow the shofar?” The other scholars responded: “Why do we blow?! Because the Merciful One commanded us to blow!”

Rather, R. Yitzchak meant: “Why do we blow *teruah* sounds?” The others once again retorted, “Because the Merciful One said זכרון תרועה - we must blow for a remembrance of the *teruah*!”

Rather, R. Yitzchak’s question was, “Why do we blow regular blasts and *teruah* blasts while standing, and then both of them again while sitting?” To this, the answer came: “In order to confuse Satan.”

This is of course a very puzzling passage. R. Yitzchak asked an unclear question, and in the end, the Gemara explains that he really meant something different than what he said. Is it truly possible to understand from R. Yitzchak’s original words the question that the Gemara ultimately ascribed to him?

In truth, what R. Yitzchak was really asking, as the Gemara ultimately concluded, was, “Is it not a violation of the ban on ‘*do not add*’ to blow the Rosh HaShanah shofar twice, both standing and sitting?”

To solve this problem, R. Yitzchak had to first clarify the essence of the mitzvah of blowing the shofar, in order to know whether the additions would change this essence. If the mitzvah’s essence is not changed, and perhaps might even be strengthened, then there is no problem in adding to it. Therefore, when he asked why we blow, he was really asking, “What is the essence of these shofar blasts?”

If the essence of the mitzvah is to create tremors in our soul, to shock us and awaken us to our misdeeds, then adding extra shofar blasts will certainly serve the correct purpose and will help bring about new paths of true repentance. The Gemara explains that this is, in fact, the case: The shofar blasts seek to block the intentions of the Satan, who wants only bad for us – and we therefore blow so many times, both sitting and standing, in order to fulfill the essence of the mitzvah and “confuse the Satan.”



This is very similar to the example we cited above regarding the walls of the Sukkah. Since the purpose of the mitzvah of Sukkah is to live in it the way we live in our permanent home, it is clear that by adding more walls, we are only enhancing the mitzvah, and certainly not detracting from it.

■ Do Not Be Overly Righteous

In conclusion, let us analyze the following three difficult verses written by King Shlomo:

אל תְּהִי צַדִּיק הַרְבֵּה וְאַל תִּתְחַכֵּם יוֹתֵר לְמַה תִּשׁוּמִם.
*Do not be overly righteous, nor overly wise;
 why should you bring desolation upon yourself?*

אַל תִּרְשָׁע הַרְבֵּה וְאַל תְּהִי סָכָל לְמַה תָּמוּת בְּלֹא עֵתָּה.
*Do not be overly wicked, and do not be a fool;
 why should you die before your time?*

טוֹב אֲשֶׁר תִּקְחֶנּוּ בְּזֶה וְגַם מִזֶּה אַל תִּנְחֹ אֶת יָדְךָ
 כִּי יִרָא אֱ-לֹהִים יִצֵּא אֶת כָּלֶם.

*It is good to take hold of this,
 and also from the other do not withdraw your hand,
 for he who fears G-d will discharge himself of them all.* (Kohelet 7,16-18)

The message of these verses seems to be: “Be slightly righteous and slightly wicked, for a G-d-fearer grasps onto both ends of the rope.” This is clearly illogical. Rather, the key to understanding this passage is found in the Gemara:

“And he [King Sha’ul] fought in the valley” (Shmuel I 15,5):

R. Mani said: It means, “Because of what happened in the valley.” That is, when G-d told Sha’ul, “*Now go and smite Amalek*” (verse 3), Sha’ul protested: “If on account of one person [found dead], the Torah said to bring an *eglah arufah* in the valley (D’varim 21,4), how much more so should all these persons [not be killed]! And if the people sinned, what sins did the cattle commit? And if the adults sinned, what did the little ones do?”

A Divine voice came forth and said: “*Do not be overly righteous.*”

And when Sha’ul said to Doeg, “*Turn and kill the priests*” (Shmuel I 22,18), a Divine voice came forth and said, “*Do not be overly wicked.*”



This passage can be concisely explained as follows: “Do not be overly righteous, lest you be overly wicked.” This parallels what we have learned: “Do not add to the mitzvah, lest you actually detract from it.” Sha’ul’s desire to reach a level of perfect righteousness actually led him to a great sin. His frustration and self-anger at not reaching the highest heights resulted in destructive behavior.

Accordingly, the explanation of the above verses is this: “Do not jump so quickly to the level of ‘perfection,’ lest you soon find that you are actually not perfect – and are left with nothing to return to, other than to ‘switch sides’ altogether in frustration and become totally sinful. If you wish to ascend in holiness (*take hold of this*), do not totally abandon your current level; rather, preserve and maintain it in case it is needed in the future (*and also from the other do not withdraw your hand*). Thus, if you fail at the level you strove to reach, you will have to where to return.”

In general, of course, it is advisable to attempt to ascend the levels of righteousness gradually, without jumps.

And as King David wrote in his Psalms:

תּוֹרַת ה' תְּמִימָה מְשִׁיבַת נַפְשׁ...
*The Torah of Hashem is perfect
and rejuvenates the soul...* (Tehillim 19,8)

The Torah is complete and perfect. Any addition can become a deficiency that will only cause it harm.

