

ADDING IS SUBTRACTING

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

But of the fruit of the Tree that is in the middle of the garden, the Almighty says, "*Do not eat it, and do not [even] touch it, lest you die.*" (Bereshith 3:3)

Adam added to God's command not to eat from the tree when he told Chava that she may not even touch it. As a result, when the snake pushed Chava into the Tree of Knowledge and she saw that she did not die, she was enticed to eat of its fruit as well.¹ Adam's action set a precedent for future generations: anyone who adds to the truth of Torah will eventually come to subtract from it.²

The principal danger in adding to the words of the Torah is that human words may be in error. If people mistakenly think that words which someone has added are in fact part of the Torah, and those words are proven false, they will assume that the Divine part of the Torah is false as well. Adam said that something which God had permitted (i.e., touching the tree) was forbidden by God, and not just a fence to protect the law. It was wrong of him to add to the Torah.³ (When the Sages incorporate their own enactments into halachah, on the other hand, they expressly state that they are coming only to safeguard Torah law, not to add to it.)

Chava's words also did not conform to what she was told. While Adam was guilty of adding to God's words, Chava was guilty of subtracting from them. God had told Adam that eating from the Tree of Knowledge would surely cause death. Chava told the snake that she could not eat from the Tree lest she die. Her choice of words left some room for doubt whether or not she would actually die, and so the snake, capitalizing on Eve's doubt, was able to convince her that the Almighty had "lied," and that she would not die if she were to eat from the Tree.⁴

It is clear that changing the Torah can have very harmful repercussions, but what about simple exaggerations that work their way into normal conversations? May one add a few details to a story, for example, to make it more exciting? Although such "lies" may do no harm, exaggerating is a sign that one entertains a love for sheker. Cultivating this trait can accustom one to lying, and can lead one to other serious offenses such as bearing false testimony.⁵

1. Rashi on Bereshith 3:3.

2. Sanhedrin 29a.

3. Minchath Chinuch, Mitzvath Bal Tosif.

4. Seforno on Bereshith 3:3.
5. Sha'arei Teshuvah 3:181.

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