

TOO MUCH LIGHT IS BLINDING

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor shall you subtract from it.

Be'er Mayim Chaim: Chazal teach that adding and subtracting include performing a particular mitzvah by adding to or subtracting from the required elements in the commandment. For example, subtracting from the mitzvah of tefillin does not mean ignoring it. That would simply leave the person without the benefit of fulfilling that mitzvah. Rather, it means donning tefillin with only three sections of Torah text, rather than the requisite four. One who does so not only misses the opportunity to perform the mitzvah, but has violated a prohibition to boot.

Why, though, should this be? Why is a mitzvah improperly executed worse than not performing it at all?

We should be able to grasp some of what is behind this pasuk if we reflect on one quality of mitzvos in general. In kabbalistic understanding, every mitzvah is accompanied by an *ohr*, a "light," or a particular kind of spirituality radiating from Hashem's pure essence. Our growth, our connection with HKBH, comes from receiving and incorporating that *ohr*. Like each *yom tov*, each mitzvah offers a different *ohr* to the person who performs the mitzvah with which it is associated.

While this may strike you as straightforward and uncomplicated, it certainly is not. In fact, at its root it is incomprehensible. Just like we cannot grasp the essence of the Divine, so too we cannot really process anything that emanates from Him. Whatever this *ohr* is, we would imagine that we simply cannot fathom it, experience it, or gain from it. How can the finite encompass the Infinite?

While perfectly understanding how this is so evades us, we know that somehow, this is precisely what happens. Hashem gave us the ability to absorb each *ohr*, and be elevated by it. By its nature within Hashem, the *ohr* is so "bright" that it would overwhelm any lesser being. In order to be useful to us, the *ohr* must be partially hidden by various filters as it passes through^[2] the spiritual *olamos* / worlds to reach us. When it does, it is in a form that can interact with our *neshamos* on the level that they find themselves, attached to this physical world.

There's the sticking point. The *oros* must arrive in the exact measure necessary to be held by the vessels that are available to receiving and holding them. Those measurements are reflected in the basic contours of a mitzvah. The nature of these *oros* determines that there be four *parshios* in tefillin, two in a *mezuzah*, four groups of *tzitzis* on a garment, and three lines of *berachah* in the blessing by *Kohanim*.

When we change the numbers, more happens than simply the failure of the mitzvah. The back story is that in the attempt to do a mitzvah, Hashem has matters arranged so that the attendant *ohr* is made available to us. If we add on to the mitzvah, the *ohr* is increased. The surfeit of *ohr*, however, overwhelms the receiving mechanism. The *ohr* then cannot be contained by the waiting vessel, and returns to its source. The recipient, however, is left in worse shape than before making the ill-fated mitzvah attempt. The mere encounter with the *ohr* leaves a mark, a trace of the *ohr* that struck it momentarily. This residue becomes fair game for the *chitzonim*/ negative forces that surround us, attempting to sustain themselves from the holiness of the *oros*. Had the *ohr* found a proper recipient, those forces would have been subdued. Since all that remains is this trace amount of *ohr*, the *chitzonim* and *kelipos* prevail

The result is the return of the *oros* to higher worlds, while the intended recipient not only fails to be elevated, but sinks lower than before. It is weighted by the negative forces that attached themselves to the faint afterglow of the *oros* that came, only to have to return.

Similarly, one who "subtracts" from a mitzvah essentially undercapitalizes the mitzvah. The *ohr* that arrives is weak, diffuse. The *chitzonim*/ negative forces are attracted to the spirituality of the *ohr*. Had the *ohr* been present in the strength that it was intended, they would be subdued. Having been dimmed, the *chitzonim* "feast" on it, without being repelled. Here as well, the recipient is dragged down to a lower spiritual level, to a place more compromised than had he not attempted a mitzvah at all.

The net loss in both cases is the reason why the Torah treats adding or subtracting to a mitzvah more harshly than simply failing to observe it at all.

[1] Based on Be'er Mayim Chaim, Devarim 4: 2

[2] It is crucial to understand that when we employ words like "pass through," "receiving," "holding" and others, we use figurative language. These verbs are not meant literally – nor could they, in dealing with spiritual concepts that do not work within our spatio-temporal world. We use words that are familiar to us to poorly approximate what we can somewhat faintly grasp about spiritual processes.