

NOT A MITZVAH MORE, NOT A MITZVAH LESS

by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene

The Mitzvah:

The Torah instructs not to add or detract from the details of a mitzvah. This means, for example, not to have 5 compartments of tefillin (rather than 4) or take 3 species on Succos (rather than 4) etc (Devarim 13:1). Rather, a mitzvah should be fulfilled exactly as instructed .

Everything in the Torah is accurate and precise - down to the last detail.

Nothing is extraneous. Nothing is superfluous. This is true in the general sense - there are a total of 613 Biblical commandments, nothing more and nothing less (excluding Rabbinical edicts)- and also vis-à-vis the particular details within each individual mitzvah.

What is the underlying principle to this rule?

Simply put, it is a manifestation of the axiom: Toras Hashem temimah , "the law of G-d is perfect" (Tehillim 19:8). The laws originate from G-d, Creator and Master of the Universe, Who is the epitome of Perfection (Sefer HaChinuch). In stark contrast, man and all other creatures are imperfect because they are, by their very definition, "creatures".

It is not up to mortal man -with all his imperfections - to tamper with the Perfect Word of G-d.

Where something is flawless, additions and subtractions both constitute shortcomings. A Torah scroll is invalid if there is one letter extra or one letter missing. Importantly, a surplus is as much a blemish as is a deficiency. In the words of the famous Talmudic principle: "One who adds detracts" (Sanhedrin 29a). A useful illustration of this lies in the laws concerning the status of a kosher animal. In the same way that a beast cannot be used as an offering if it is missing a limb, so too, is it non-kosher if it has an extra limb (Chullin 58b).

The specific component in a mitzvah is not unlike the physician's carefully prescribed dosage of a powerful medicine. It is essential that the precise measurement be administered to the patient. Anything stronger may be lethal; anything weaker will be ineffective.

Were a person to remove a component on the motherboard, he would not be surprised if he finds out that his computer no longer works. Similarly, the impact of tefillin in the heavenly realms just doesn't work with five compartments. Nine great Torah scholars do not constitute a minyan - that requires ten Jewish men. Every part counts. The intricacies and details are therefore "integral" components to the mitzvah. Any deviation is significant enough a compromise such that it actually

loses its classification as a mitzvah; it is no longer a fulfilment of the Divine Will.

Sacrilegiously, to fiddle with a mitzvah is nothing short of usurping G-d and substituting man in lieu as arbitrator of the law. Where the determinant is human selection based upon rationalization, rather than obedience based upon submission, this reverses the pivotal foundation of mitzvah observance. The Jewish nation embraced in its entirety (included the inscrutable decrees) on account of it being the word of G-d irrespective of whether it appealed to their intellects.

Not accepting "everything" means accepting "nothing".

Were a slave to only accept 612 of his master's commands, but reject one of them, he is, in effect, rejecting all 613 dictates (Rabbeinu Yonah). And so it is with regard to the individual component within every mitzvah. It goes without saying that every "individual" mitzvah is of infinite worth. Thus, if a Jew is - for whatever reason - not yet holding on observing a particular mitzvah, he should not mistakenly think that he should not observe all the other mitzvos he does perform.]

What a Jew ideally wants to do is to perform mitzvah observance as the "command" of G-d (loyal to the meaning of the word "mitzvah") in the most perfect and optimal manner humanly possible.

His quest is to perform the perfect, most complete mitzvah. Nothing more. Nothing less. The course material is presented by Osher Chaim Levene, author of "Set in Stone: The Meaning of Mitzvah Observance" (Targum/Feldheim), a writer and educator in London.