

Mitzva "+"s and "-"s

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Parashat Re'eh, 5773

The Tora appears to allow for practices that are only marginally acceptable; consequently, anything that the Tora does not explicitly allow must be by definition objectionable.

Devarim 13:1¹ instructs the Jewish people to be careful neither to add nor subtract from the commandments. This is the second time (see 4:2)² over the course of less than ten chapters that the Tora formulates such a demand. The Vilna Gaon explains the need for two verses dealing with this theme by associating the first with the prohibition against completely eliminating or adding an entire commandment,³ and understanding the second as a warning regarding the performance of one of the 613 in an altered unauthorized manner.⁴ When it is recognized that there even some practices included in the Tora, e.g., Nedarim (vows) in general (BaMidbar 30:3 ff)⁵ and the state of being a Nazirite in particular (BaMidbar 6:2 ff.),⁶ are nevertheless frowned upon in the Tora text (Devarim 23:23)⁷ as well as in other biblical texts (Kohelet 5:3-5),^{8 9 10} innovating religious categories that are nowhere to be found in the Tora and claiming for them D'Ortayta status would understandably be all the more problematic.

¹ All this Word which I Command you, that shall ye observe to do; thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it.

² Ye shall not add unto the Word which I Command you, neither shall ye diminish from it, that ye may keep the Commandments of the LORD your God which I Command you.

³ E.g., positing that Sha'atnez (Devarim 22:11--Thou shalt not wear a mingled stuff, wool and linen together) is not a Mitzva that the Tora Commands.

⁴ E.g., accepting the Commandment of Sha'atnez, but redefining it as the prohibition against the mixture of things other than wool and linen.

⁵ When a man voweth a vow unto the LORD, or sweareth an oath to bind his soul with a bond, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceedeth out of his mouth.

⁶ Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them: When either man or woman shall clearly utter a vow, the vow of a Nazirite, to consecrate himself unto the LORD.

⁷ But if thou shalt forbear to vow, it shall be no sin in thee.

⁸ When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for He hath no pleasure in fools; pay that which thou vowest. Better is it that thou shouldst not vow, than that thou shouldst vow and not pay. Suffer not thy mouth to bring thy flesh into guilt, neither say thou before the messenger, that it was an error; wherefore should God be Angry at thy voice, and Destroy the work of thy hands?

⁹ Nedarim could be categorized as falling under the rubric of "Dibra Tora Neged Yetzer HaRa" (lit. the Tora legislates so that the Evil Inclination can be stunted)—human nature craves Halachic structure, even if creating such structures bring about the possibility of additional sins due to non-compliance with the vow. Therefore, in addition to Nedarim, one could include the Mitzva of the Female War Captive (Devarim 21:10 ff.)—ideally a marriage relationship should not be based upon lust, but the alternative during wartime could be worse, with the war captive being abused and then left with no support structure; the blood avenger (BaMidbar 35:24 ff.)—while revenge is not a practice that is encouraged in light of VaYikra 19:18, the alternative of having a mob from the victim's family pursue the perpetrator is a worse alternative; and the requirement for one who has slandered the virtue of the wife he has just married to stay married to her (Devarim 22:13 ff.)—if she is now rejected by him, the odds of her remarrying are not good.

¹⁰ One would have thought that swearing using God's Name would obviously be even worse than taking vows. Yet two verses in the Tora give a different impression:

Devarim 6:13

Thou shalt fear the LORD thy God; and Him shalt thou serve, and by His Name shalt thou swear.

Why would an individual think that it was legitimate to alter the totality of the Mitzvot of the Tora by either adding or subtracting?

The verses instructing us to adhere precisely to Tora Commandments beg the question as to why someone might ever think that it would be permissible to tamper with the totality of the Mitzvot of the Tora. The very nature of each individual Commandment would appear to contain within it the implicit obligation to conform to what has been ordered, regardless of one's personal opinion regarding the appropriateness or meaningfulness of what he has been asked to do. Within a military context, failure to obey an order from a superior officer generally leads to significant negative consequences; God certainly qualifies as the Jewish people's Commander-in-Chief at all times and in all places. Aren't we therefore always "on duty" and completely subject to any and all Commandments which we have been given?

Sephorno accounts for the impetus to ignore certain Mitzvot by positing that the individual thinks that the reason why a particular Commandment was originally given does not currently apply. Since God obviously would not want us to do something which was inherently absurd, we can assume that we are exempt. The commentator (following R. Yitzchak's approach in Sanhedrin 21b)¹¹ notes that such an attitude is exemplified by Shlomo HaMelech, who despite the three specific negative commandments that are given to Jewish kings in Devarim 17:16-17, i.e., he is not to have too many horses, wives and/or too much wealth, felt that as long as he did not cause Jews to live in Egypt in order to obtain these horses, did not allow his numerous wives to adversely affect his religious observances, and kept a proper perspective regardless of the wealth that he would personally acquire in his royal capacity, he could honor these Commandments in the breach. Not only was Shlomo incorrect in terms of his general approach, when he presumed that it was permissible for any intelligent individual to consider himself to be exempt from at least some of God's Commandments due to an idiosyncratic analysis of why he is confronting extenuating circumstances, but David's son apparently also failed to understand his own personal weaknesses and vulnerabilities, as reflected in Melachim Alef 12:1-8.¹²

Ibid. 10:20\

Thou shalt fear the LORD thy God; Him shalt thou serve; and to Him shalt thou cleave, and by His Name shalt thou swear.

See Nechama Leibowitz' Gilayon on Parashat Eikev 5719 for a series of sources that attempt to account for this phrase: <http://www.nechama.org.il/cgi-bin/pagePrintMode.pl?id=727>

¹¹ R. Yitzchak also said: Why were the reasons of [some] Biblical laws not revealed? —

Because in two verses reasons were revealed, and they caused the greatest in the world [Solomon] to stumble. Thus it is written: (Devarim 17:17) "He shall not multiply wives to himself," whereon Solomon said, 'I will multiply wives yet not let my heart be perverted.' Yet we read, (I Melachim 11:4) "When Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart."

Again it is written: (Devarim 17:17) "He shall not multiply to himself horses;" concerning which Solomon said, 'I will multiply them, but will not cause [Israel] to return [to Egypt].' Yet we read: (I Melachim 10:29) "And a chariot came up and went out of Egypt for six [hundred *shekels* of silver]."

¹² And Rechavam went to Shechem; for all Israel were come to Shechem to make him king. And it came to pass, when Yerovam the son of Nevat heard of it--for he was yet in Egypt, whither he had fled from the presence of king Shlomo, and Yerovam dwelt in Egypt, and they sent and called him--that Yerovam and all the congregation of Israel came, and spoke unto Rechavam, saying: 'Thy father made our yoke grievous; now therefore make thou the grievous service of thy father, and his heavy yoke which he put upon us, lighter, and we will serve thee.' And he said unto them: 'Depart yet for three days, then come again to me.' And the people departed. And king Rechavam took counsel with the old men, that had stood before Shlomo his father while he yet lived, saying: 'What counsel give ye me to return answer to this people?'

Seporno's approach explains why someone would wish to eliminate Mitzvot; what about the concern about adding Mitzvot?

The biased and therefore unreliable rationalism that the Seporno worries will lead individuals to justify omitting Commandments, is attributed by R. Shmuel David Luzatto (ShaDaL) to underlie the drive to add to Mitzvot as well. ShaDaL suggests that, for example, were one to begin to sacrifice animals not specifically authorized by the Tora on the Tabernacle/Temple alter, such as the deer and the antelope, perhaps others will come to eventually justify and engage in human sacrifice. Consequently there is the risk of the "slippery slope", and in the words of ChaZaL, "Kol HaMosif, Gore'a"¹³ (anyone who adds, in the end subtracts), as well as "Aveira Gorreret Aveira"¹⁴ (one transgression smooths the path for the next).

Is there an inherent qualitative difference between eliminating a Mitzva as opposed to adding one?

While the decision not to perform a Commandment can usually be attributed to the psychological need to assert one's independence and autonomy *vis-à-vis* God by striving for a modicum of freedom from Divine Obligation, a desire to change the commandments by adding to them, may appear, at least at first glance, as something positive, a manifestation of the pursuit of performing the Mitzva in a better and more spiritually meaningful manner. But, as is obvious in ShaDaL's example, when the individual loses sight of the fundamental values that Judaism advocates, as in the case where one fails to recognize how human sacrifice is an abomination in God's Eyes, "the road to hell can be paved with good intentions." The only assurance therefore, that one has not to draw false conclusions regarding the purpose of the Commandments leading to improper observance, is to carry all of them out completely and precisely, without alterations, both additions and subtractions being deemed unacceptable.

An alternative explanation for the prohibition against adding and subtracting vis-à-vis the Tora's Mitzvot.

A more theological explanation for the directives in Devarim 4:2 and 13:1, arises in light of the rule of R. Chanina, quoted in Kiddushin 31a, Bava Kama 38a, 87a, and Avoda Zora 3a: "Greater is the one who is Commanded and fulfills the Commandment, than the one who is not

And they spoke unto him, saying: 'If thou wilt be a servant unto this people this day, and wilt serve them, and answer them, and speak good words to them, then they will be thy servants forever.' But he forsook the counsel of the old men which they had given him, and took counsel with the young men that were grown up with him, that stood before him.

¹³ Pesikta Zutrata, Beraishit, Parasha Beraishit, Chapt. 3

HaShem Said: "Do not eat from it and do not touch it". Even though the Holy One, Blessed Be He did not Say to Adam not to touch it (the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil), he commanded Chava (who did not experience the Divine Revelation), "Do not touch it", in order to make the rule stricter and to keep her far from sin. This is what ChaZaL meant when they said, "Kol HaMosif Gore'a". Because the Serpent pushed Chava so that she would make contact with the tree and didn't die as a result. The Serpent said to her: Don't you see that just as when you touch it you will not die, similarly if you eat from it you won't die. And in this way she was seduced, as it says, "And the Serpent said to the woman, 'You certainly will not die!'"

¹⁴ Avot 4:2. Although the same Mishna also states, "Mitzva Goreret Mitzva" which could be interpreted that if a new Mitzva is fabricated, it in turn will bring about the fulfillment of other Mitzvot, one could counter that this is true only when the Mitzva in question is truly a part of the Tora system, as opposed to a practice that a human being has made up.

Commanded, and (nevertheless) fulfills the Commandment.” When an individual takes upon himself a religious practice that is not mandatory for him, the action is accompanied by the suspicion that perhaps the decision to voluntarily undertake this action has more to do with the individual's personal pursuit of meaning, than his seeking to carry out God's Will. On the other hand, when one performs a religious ritual precisely and for no other reason than the belief that this is the Will of God, a statement has been made more about the person's relationship with the Divine, than any feelings about himself. Consequently, altering even a mandatory Commandment to make it more precisely conform to one's own desires and understandings would appear to at least potentially shift it from the category of something that was commanded, to an action that is merely optional and the result of some type of need for self-expression.

Conclusion.

Perhaps Rabban Gamliel Benose Shel R. Yehuda HaNasi put it best, when he said (Avot 2:4), "Make His Will like your will, so that He Will Make your will like His Will." The perceived clash between the desires, understandings, and objectives of each of us, including the great Shlomo HaMelech, and the components of the lifestyle that God Demands of us, may arise because we have insufficiently internalized not only the rationale of a specific commandment, but also the overall implications of what it means to be a true Eved HaShem (servant of God). Were we able to achieve a greater level of Hitbatlut (self-diminishment), then all sorts of Mitzvot that presently appear to be beyond our ability and interest, would suddenly make so much more sense and would become so much more doable. The whole of the Tora is greater than the sum of its individual Mitzvot, regardless of the amount of adding and subtracting in which we may try to engage.

As Ellul and Yomim Noraim approach, it is time to strive to perceive and realize spiritual wholeness, by diminishing the adding and subtracting of observances that disrupt our becoming all that we can be Jewishly.

See my recent essay on “Paying Attention to Mitzvot Kallot” for additional thoughts on this topic [http://images.shulcloud.com/376/uploads/Pubs/RabbiSpeeches/5773/Eikev-\(5773\)-Navigating-the-problem-of-Mitzvot-Kallot.pdf](http://images.shulcloud.com/376/uploads/Pubs/RabbiSpeeches/5773/Eikev-(5773)-Navigating-the-problem-of-Mitzvot-Kallot.pdf)