

If They Tell You That Right Is Left

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Within the Jewish world, there are differences in interpretation and approach. To some that is disturbing. After all, we learned in this week's Torah portion:

According to the Torah they shall instruct you and according to the judgments they speak to you, you shall do, not turning from the word they pronounce to the right or to the left.

It sounds simple: Follow the Torah and don't deviate from it.

But wait. Every Orthodox Jew in the world deviates from the Torah, at least eight nights every year, for on the eve of Hanukkah they light candles and say *asher kidshanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu lehadlik ner shel Hanukkah*, who has sanctified us with commandments and commanded us to kindle the lights of Hanukkah."

Where in the Torah are we commanded to light Hanukkah lights? Hanukkah, as you may recall, is not mentioned in the Bible, for one simple reason: The Maccabees fought off the Seleucids after the Bible was completed. Their story is told in the Books of the Maccabees, which were written in Greek and not Hebrew, and were not included in the *Tanach*, the Hebrew Scriptures.

And this is just the tip of the iceberg. Rabbis are not mentioned in the Bible, nor are the prayers we say in the synagogue, nor are many of our observances, like Simchat Torah or Shavuot as the celebration of the giving of the Torah, or even Bar Mitzvah. Early on it was recognized that the Torah is just the beginning, and

that each generation provides learned interpreters who extend the Torah and answer the questions of their times, what we call *Torah She-Baal Peh*—the Oral Torah.

So what then is this verse about not turning to the right or to the left?

Some very famous commentators on the Torah, including Rashi, Ramban, and Jonah of Gerona, say it means that if the leaders of your generation says that left is right and right is left, then you must follow them. They compare it to the time when Rabbi Joshua and Rabbi Gamliel had a dispute about the sighting of the new moon that initiated the month of Tishrei and thus about which day was Yom Kippur. The scholars recognized that Rabbi Joshua was correct in terms of the moon, but Rabbi Gamliel was the Nasi, the head of the academy, and so the day he decreed Rosh Hodesh, the beginning of the month, was the official month. The great scholar Rabbi Akiva visited with Rabbi Joshua and urged him to accept Rabbi Gamliel's decree, arguing that we can have no Torah if each person goes their own way. And so on the day that was Yom Kippur according to Rabbi Joshua's sighting of the new moon, he went and appeared before Rabbi Gamliel, in regular work clothes with his staff and his purse. Unity is important, and without some unifying principles the Jewish people would not have been able to hold together in exile.

But not everyone agrees with this interpretation of the verse. The Yerushalmi, the version of the Talmud produced in Israel after the destruction of the Second Temple, tells us that we are to follow the leaders of the generation only when they tell you that right is right and left is left; otherwise they are like the false

prophets described in the Bible who lead you to deviate from the true teachings. Commentators who interpret the text in this way also tell the story of a famous incident among the formative rabbis of the Talmud. It's an incident that followed the earlier story.

They note that the rabbis deposed Rabbi Gamliel as the head of the academy on the day that he treated Rabbi Joshua in a high-handed manner, and instead they put a young Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah in charge. It was not right for Rabbi Gamliel to lord his authority over Rabbi Joshua, they insisted, nor to demean him. When a leader has done wrong, we do not have to follow him, and certainly we should not listen to anyone who distorts the message of the Torah.

So who's right? On the one hand, bad things happened to the Jewish people in the time of the Judges, when they didn't stick together, but each person and each tribe did what seemed right in their own eyes. But on the other hand, we are a tradition that is very sensitive to rulers who lift up their heads above their brethren, as described in this week's Torah portion concerning the king. We believe in evaluating the truth of the message, no matter who is the messenger. Maimonides tried to bridge the gap by saying that the obligation to follow the Sanhedrin only applies in matters of Biblical law and not in their rabbinic extension. He also tried to limit the application of this verse to its original setting of judicial decisions and says it applies when you are among a group of judges. In Jewish law a case might be heard by 3 or 7 or even more judges depending on its seriousness. Once the majority rules, those in the minority must obey the decision.

So many generations after this argument, we are grateful to be part of a tradition that engages in dialogue and dispute over the text of the Torah. No one understood the text to limit the growth of Torah, or to keep us from puzzling out its words in new ways to meet the challenges of new times. When we are part of a decision-making process, then we must abide by the decision made by the community. But in general, we are to use our own reason to establish when right is right and left is left.