

Do not deviate from the word that they will tell you, right or left. (17:11)

Rashi explains that one may not deviate from the *halachah* as expounded by the sages, even if they tell you concerning “right,” that it is “left” and, concerning “left” that it is “right.” The question is obvious: if I know that something is definitely “right” or that something is clearly “left,” a thousand sages are unable to change this reality. Does the Torah demand that I commit a falsehood, that I act out a lie? Obviously, this is not what the Torah wants of us. What is the meaning of *Lo sassur*, “Do not deviate,” and what does *Rashi* mean when he says that we must follow *Chazal*, the sages, even when they are clearly contradicting reality?

Horav Yaakov Galinsky, zl, explains this pragmatically. The Torah does not say that we should listen to our sages when they say that “east” is “west” or vice versa – or, concerning night, that it is day. These are absolutes. Night is always night; day is always day; the directions east and west are unalterable entities. The problem occurs when the *rav*/sage/spiritual leader instructs you to go right, while simultaneously motioning with his finger to the north. The man who stands opposite him is obstinate. His right side points to the south, and the *rav* had insisted that he go right.

Understandably, this is only an analogy, but it is one that delivers a powerful message. The reason that we do not see eye to eye with *Chazal* is that we stand opposite them – not together with them, facing the other direction. If we are not on the same page as they are, then our “right” points to a different direction than their “right.” Thus, when they are “right,” we feel that they are wrong. We simply do not have their vantage point, which clouds our perspective.

Rav Galinsky concludes with an interchange that took place between the *Chelkas Yoav* and his *Rebbe*, the *Avnei Nezer*. The *Chelkas Yoav* wrote a *chiddush*, novel thought, and sent it to his *Rebbe* to solicit his approval. The *Avnei Nezer* did not agree with his student’s exposition and consequently, rebuffed it. When the *Chelkas Yoav* next visited the *Avnei Nezer*, *Rebbe* asked the student, “*Nu?*” which was his way of intimating, “Do you accept my ruling?”

The *Chelkas Yoav* replied, “I accept my *Rebbe*’s ruling.” The *Rebbe* asked, “But what do you feel in your heart?” The *talmid* replied, “In my heart, I feel justified in my ruling, but...”

Hearing this, the *Avnei Nezer* stood up and became emotional, “Is this the meaning of, ‘The fear (awe) (that one has) for his *Rebbe* should be similar to the fear one has of Heaven’? If the *Rebbe* says the opposite of you – then you must alter your opinion.” “Accepting” is insufficient, since accepting means that I have a valid opinion – my *Rebbe* has a valid opinion; I must accept his opinion because he is the *Rebbe*. Otherwise, this is not what the Torah teaches us. There is only one reliable opinion – that of the *Rebbe*.