



“Right is Left and Left is Right”: A Rebuttal

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In the “About” section of Acher’s Musings Blog, <https://achersmusings.wordpress.com/about/>, it says thusly:

“Many people are... fooled into believing that they cannot think for themselves. They need a Rebbeh, a Gadol to think for them and to get them closer to Hashem. That is diametrically opposed to the views of Judaism. We believe that each... person has the ability to connect with Hashem on their own. They can look to others for inspiration but...”

How to square the circle? I am referring to what is called Daas Torah. In conversation, people tell me that if I question the binding nature of Daas Torah, then how I can go to any Gadol (or rebbe or rabbi) for spiritual guidance or Halachic direction? Rather I must simply accept Daas Torah. To buttress the point, the proponent of Daas Torah, will, almost invariably, point to the famous adage, where it says that even when they (Daas Torah, let’s just say) tells you that: “right is left and left is right, listen to them.” QED, and they could walk away in triumph, having trounced another of those nefarious Daas-Torah heretics.

Not so fast. The categorical acceptance of the purported truism that there is an unchallenged Halachic obligation to “listen to them” even if they say “right is left and left is right” is, I believe, one of the fundamental misconceptions of Orthodox intellectual thought. (Come back to this blog and you will find out about the other ones, I assure you.)

Let the facts speak for themselves. The Torah (Deuteronomy 17:11), speaking of the authority of the Beis Din Hagadol (The Great Court) says: “You shall not deviate from the verdict that they announce to you either to the left or to the right”. The Sifre declares: “Even if it appears to you that they are telling you that right is left and left is right, listen to them.” This interpretation is unequivocally saying that if they (The Great Court, and for our purposes, Daas Torah) tell you that right is left and left is right (in other words, something that your puny brain is telling you to be blatantly incorrect) one must accept that without challenge. One must subordinate his own intellect--which is professing that right is right and left is left--to the intellect of Daas Torah who says that it is the case that left is right and right is left. One must accept as correct something that he views as illogical and unreasonable to the extreme.

But that is putting the cart before the horse! The Yerushalmi does not agree with the aforementioned Sifre. And the Bavli in Horayos appears to be backing up the Yerushalmi. The Yerushalmi in Horayos states categorically: “One might think that if they tell you that right is left and left is right, you must listen to them. Therefore, the verse tells us to go to the left or to the right, until they tell you that right is right and left is left.” In plain English, one must listen to

them only if they tell you the eminently sensible notion of right is right, but not if they declare that right is left. In my view, the schism could not be more fundamental or more profound. I admit that many attempts have been made to reconcile the irreconcilable, this Yerushalmi with the previously mentioned Sifre. I am in the school of thought that believes that these two statements are contradictory to one another, and that is that. (For a fuller discussion of all that is involved see <https://www.scribd.com/doc/39842329/Kaplan-Lawrence-Daas-Torah-A-Modern-Conception-of-Rabbinic-Authority>.) As I see it, the Gemara says that one must accept their ruling only if they say that right is right and left is left. That is, only if they say something that one assesses as fundamentally logical and reasonable, can one accept their counsel. But, significantly, there is no injunction about accepting their dictates if they say left is right or right is left--in other words, something that is spurious.

Although there are times in Judaism that disagreements between different authorities leave us at an impasse, unsure of what to with absolute, or even partial, certainty, this is not one of those times. In a clear contest between the Yerushalmi (buttressed by the Bavli) verse the Midrash, the Yerushalmi will invariably win.

Perhaps we can use this Yerushalmi to square the circle. Following this Yerushalmi one ought to be able to go to, or be inspired by, Gedolim, while at the same time not make the intellectual decision to recognize their pronouncements as binding, however illogical or flawed they appear to be.