

על פי התורה (17:11) פרשה. The first pasuk we're going to do is (17:11) פרשה שופטים. This is fairly straightforward, you should listen to the chachomim and you should not deviate from whatever they tell you, right or left. R' Yitzchak Berkovits quotes Rashi on the pasuk who says that you have to listen to the חכמים even if they tell you that right is left and left is right. R' Berkovits asks a question. If someone came to you and said to you, right is left and left is right, would you not respectfully say to him, "I'm sorry, I think you're making a mistake"? As Jews, we are trained to be independent thinkers. We are renowned for our critical eye. If so, how can we possibly understand what Rashi is saying to blindly follow the rabbis when we know that right is right and left is left?

R' Berkovits says that the answer is פשוט. Rashi does not come and tell you if the rabbis tell you east is west or west is east that you have to listen to them. He says right or left because right and left are subjective. Our perception of them depends on the way that we are facing. For instance, when facing someone else, your left is their right; your right is their left. Therefore, concludes R' Berkovits, Rashi is telling us that if the rabbis are telling you that right is left, make sure you turn around, because it's your perspective that's wrong.

In exactly the same vein, in an unrelated pasuk, right at the beginning of the פרשה, it says (16:21), לא תטע, בית המקדש. No trees are allowed to be planted in the בית המקדש. In the very next pasuk it says לא תקים לה מצבה אשר שגא ה' אלקיך. So R' Moshe Feinstein brings an incredible insight into these two פסוקים, especially the pasuk regarding מצבה. What is a מצבה? A מצבה is a single slab of stone. We know today what a מצבה is, נעבעך, when someone passes away, we put up a מצבה, which means a single stone. What was the problem with a מצבה? The פשוט פשוט, as well known in the גמרא, is that the גוים used to do their קרבנות and bring their עבודה זרה on a מצבה. But R' Moshe has a different take on it. He says it says (שמות כ"ב) - You should make a מזבח made out of אבנים, out of stones. What's the difference between a מזבח of אבנים and a מצבה? A מצבה is one stone. A מזבח is a number of stones. R' Moshe says a מצבה represents one spot. You've done one thing; you're stuck in that one spot. אבנים represents steps. אבנים can represent a series of אבנים, a series of steps where you can move. Our job in our life is to always constantly strive to move upward. A מצבה means stationary, standing still. After a person passes away, we build a מצבה because that's as far as he got. This is his level of accomplishment, whatever he accomplished, more or less, hopefully more, is what he did. The מצבה to us represents lack of accomplishment, and אבנים represent creativity. In the same vein, was brought down very clearly, I believe it's in the גמרא, what's the difference between לך בשלום and לך לשלום? When a person says to somebody לך בשלום, it's not a good thing. לך בשלום means that that's it, you have completed your job. That's not to a living person. What you tell a living person is לך לשלום which means keep on trucking. A מצבה means end. It's, that's it. It's all over. מצבה is what cemeteries are full of. And מזבח מאבנים is what we're working on, our עבודת השם, which is ongoing.

