Blind Man’s Bluff
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This week’s Parasha, famous for its Berakhot and Kelalot, also describes in great detail what our forefathers were commanded to do immediately after crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land. Entering Israel meant that the Torah was no longer going to be just discussed and studied in theory – it was finally going to be fully implemented as it was meant to be: an all-encompassing constitution of a sovereign people living in their homeland. The inauguration, if you will, of Israelite national Torah life was to be bolstered and safeguarded by two pedagogic and symbolic acts: The writing and preservation of the Torah on large stones (Dt 27:1-8) and the oath of blessings and curses on Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Eval (Dt 27:11-26; not to be confused with the Berakhot and Kelalot of Dt 28).

The Torah specifies twelve basic social-moral foundations for the ceremony on the mountains and stipulates that he who transgresses any one of them shall be cursed (Arur). Among these we find Arur Mashgeh Ivver BaDarech – Cursed be one that misguides a blind person on the road (Dt 27:18). When taken literally, this verse needs almost no explanation. How cruel must one be to deliberately exploit a blind man’s handicap and send him unwittingly in the wrong direction? Our verse reminds us of the perhaps more famous verse in Parashat Kedoshim that prohibits placing an obstacle in the blind man’s path: VeLiphne Ivver Lo Titten Mikhshol – and before a blind person you shall not place a stumbling block (Lev 19:14).

Interestingly enough, we find that in both places, traditional Jewish exegesis broadened the definition of the wronged blind man and perceived the actual blindness relatively. Any student of Rashi recalls that the blind men in Kedoshim and Ki-Tavo are explained as Suma BaDavar, i.e. blind regarding the issue at hand. In both places Rashi claims that the Torah prohibits giving any person (even if he has 20/20 vision) bad advice intentionally.

It is quite fascinating to see how the various Targumim, Midrashim and Talmudim make the exegetical leap from the seemingly straightforward blind person in the text to include any person who is intentionally deceived. Some of the Targumim make the first step – conceptually, but not necessarily chronologically – by choosing to translate the Biblical Ivver as Akhsanaya DeDami Le-Samiya, i.e. a stranger who is like a blind man. According to this type of translation, both Kedoshim and Ki-Tavo are still dealing with deceptive road instructions and prohibit misleading not just a physically blind person, but any person who is unfamiliar with the roads of that area.

The prohibition is broadened by Chazal to include various possibilities of causing someone to err and perform a religious transgression, a meaning which is quite common in present-day Jewish discourse. Thus the Mishna (Bava Metzia 5:11) groups all participants in a loan of usury (Ribbit) as transgressors of Liphne Ivver. The Talmud (Avoda Zara 6b) uses Liphne Ivver as the source for the prohibition of handing a glass of wine to a Nazir. And it is the Siphra (Kedoshim 2) that formulates the general definition that was later accepted by Rashi: Suma BaDavar, and illustrates the notion of this prohibition with three examples of deceit: deliberately lying about a young maiden’s pedigree in order to cause her to be married to a Kohen, deliberately sending off a fellow man into a dangerous situation in order to
cause him harm; deliberately giving bad business advice
in order to procure personal gain. All these are considered
by the Siphra as placing a stumbling block before a blind
person. Interestingly enough, the use of our verse to pre-
vent deceit in Shidukhim can be found already in one of
the Dead Sea Scrolls (#4Q271 – about 2 centuries before
the compilation of the Mishna): “And if [a man gives his
daughter to betro]th, he shall tell him all about her defects,
lest he bring upon himself the judgment of [the curse,
which says] ‘he who leads the blind astray on the road’
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The examples are not limited to questions of marriage and
money. The following Talmudic anecdote (Moed Katan
17a) incorporates Liphne Ivver into education and parental
guidance. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi’s handmaid (who is por-
trayed in several Talmudic stories as being very learned
and well-versed) saw a man beating his teenage son. She
retorted by saying that this father should be placed under ban
(Shamta) since beating a grown son is precisely what
the Torah meant by the prohibition of Liphne Ivver. Rashi
explains that beating the son leads him to rebel against
the father and go astray, thus depriving the child of his de-
served good Jewish education and steering the child to-
wards a life of sin.

Whether the use of the blind man as a metaphor is the
intended Peshat of the Torah or whether it is a broadening
of the Biblical meaning on the part of the Rabbis, the fact
that this blind man cannot be left as is tells us something
about Judaism in general. When one uses a parable or a
metaphor to teach about something else, that means the
parable or the metaphor itself is a given and needs no fur-
ther explanation. The Judaism that sees the blind man as
a metaphor is a Judaism that does not need to be told that
exploitation of blindness is abominable and therefore it
seeks to expand the verse’s meaning and include other
social wrongdoings. It is a Judaism that strives to find
measures of protection against all forms of deceit, whether
in business, in family life or in education. It is a Judaism
that knows that honesty on all levels is part of society’s
fundamental backbone and is therefore included in the
nation’s formative ceremony in our Parasha.

If we are to take this Midrash seriously, the most important
lesson we must learn from it is the acceptance of other
Lomdei Torah. In an age where we find so much religious
hubris, where groups build their self-pride and definition on
the denigration of others and the “poor” quality of their
learning and observance, it might do us some good to air
out this Midrash and let its lesson resound. Yes, I am con-
vinced that my way of learning and observing the Torah is
best, but let it never be said that it’s either my way or “the
highway”. The slight chance that we are all no different
than blind men, that we read but know not what we read,
should teach us tolerance towards other individuals and
groups that share the goal of learning and upholding the
Torah. Yes, perhaps they’ve got it all wrong. But only the
long, patient path of history will be able to answer that for
certain. Till then, we should all enjoy the benefit of the
doubt.

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