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Upcoming EVENTS:

Torah for Elul at
the JCC in NYC

Tuesdays
Sept. 12th and
19th, 7pm

Chaviva Levin—
“Teshuva and
Apostasy in
Medieval
Ashkenaz”

8:30 pm

Rabbi
Saul Berman -
“Teshuva:
Repairing
Relationships”

Blind Man's Bluff

By Dr. Leor Gottlieb,
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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 Parshat 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 defini-

tion 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 prevent 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’ ”.

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 portrayed 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 deserved good Jewish education and steering the child towards 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 further 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.

A very surprising metaphoric understanding of the blind man is found in Midrash Tehillim on Ps 146:8 “YHWH restores sight to the blind”. The Midrash tells us that God placed a curse [in our Parasha] on one who wrongs a blind man because He knows the blind man’s suffering. “And when He shall cure the whole world, the first to be

cured shall be the blind. Who are the blind? These generations, they that obey the Torah like blind men. They all read [the Torah] but know not what they read, they repeat [the Torah] but know not what they repeat. But in the future ‘the eyes of the blind shall be opened’ (Is 35:5)”.

This explosive critique of *Lomdei Torah* cannot be narrowed down to the time of the Midrash alone. Can we honestly say that our generation’s *Lomdei Torah* are any better than those in the Midrash’s times? The growth in the number of *Lomdei Torah* in our generation may be unprecedented. But do these Torah disciples even entertain the notion that they may read but know not what they read, that they are in fact blind to the essence and meaning of the very Torah that they devote their life to? More often than not, we meet individuals and groups that, on the contrary, give the feeling that they think they know even that which they haven’t read yet. And if there is anyone who is blind and knows not what he reads, it’s the other person, or better yet, the other group.

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 convinced 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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