



Parashat Kedoshim 2008  
Rabbi David Silverberg

Among the laws presented in Parashat Kedoshim is the prohibition of *lifnei iver lo titein mikhshol* – "Do not place a stumbling block before a blind man" (19:14). *Chazal*, in a number of contexts, explained this image of a "stumbling block before a blind man" as an allegory for misleading somebody. The Torah here forbids not actually placing an obstacle in the path of a blind pedestrian, but rather causing a person to "stumble" in the figurative sense. The Sages generally speak in this regard of two kinds of "stumbling blocks":

- 1) offering unsound practical advice, such as recommending an unwise purchase or business venture, or advising somebody to travel during harsh conditions;
- 2) assisting a person in transgressing the Torah.

In both situations, the individual is guilty of leading his fellow along the wrong path, causing him to "stumble" either practically or spiritually.

One might, at first glance, question the accuracy of the Torah's analogy in reference to these situations. In the first instance, where a person offers his fellow unsound advice, we could easily explain that the victim is described as "blind" in the sense of lacking knowledge or acumen. Just as a visually impaired individual relies on others to lead him along the correct route, so does a person lacking expertise in a given area rely on the advice and guidance of those with skill and training in that field. As Rashi comments on this verse, "Before a person who is blind with regard to a certain matter – do not give advice that is unsuitable for him." The Torah thus employs "blindness" as an analogy for the lack of knowledge or skill, and admonishes those with such knowledge to guide the "blind man" along the path of success.

In what sense, however, does the "blindness" analogy accommodate the second category of *lifnei iver*, namely, offering a person assistance in violating the Torah? In this instance, one transgresses *lifnei iver* even if his fellow is perfectly aware of the prohibition in question and nevertheless insists on committing the forbidden act. Thus, for example, if a person wishes to partake of forbidden food, one may not provide him with that food, even if he informs the prospective violator of the food's forbidden status. In this case, one does not mislead; he does not guide an unsuspecting victim along the wrong route. We might compare this case to a situation of a person who asks his fellow to show him a dangerous path that passes near thieves and wild beasts. Here, too, the prospective sinner specifically asks to be led along the path of wrongful behavior. In what sense, therefore, can he be described as a "blind man" before whom one must not place a "stumbling block"? (It is possibly due to this question that Rashi, in his Torah commentary, mentions only the example of offering unsound advice, and omits the case of assisting a person in transgressing the Torah.)

Maimonides implicitly addresses this question in his codification of this *halakha* (Hilkhot Rotzei'ach 12:14):

Whoever causes a person who is "blind" in a certain matter to stumble, by offering unsound advice, or by supporting transgressors – who is blind and does not see the path of truth because of his heart's desire – violates a negative command, as it says, "you shall not place a stumbling block before a blind man."

According to Maimonides, a prospective sinner is "blinded" by his passions, which not only test his commitment and personal resolve, but can also blur his moral vision and cause him to become "blinded" to the "path of truth." A person controlled by his instincts and impulses cannot chart his course based on objective truth and clear judgment. He is incapable of accurately differentiating between right and wrong, and instead blindly insists on the propriety of the behavior that his heart desires. The Torah thus justifiably applies the "blind man" analogy to such a person, who lacks the clarity and objectivity to choose the path of piety and virtue. Just as a blind man walks without being able to determine the safe and correct route, so does the person controlled by his sinful instincts go through life without the ability to determine the path of spiritual fulfillment which he ought to follow.