

"BLIND SPOTS"

One of the most morally significant verses in a Sidra full of ethical and religious majesty, is the commandment

לֹא תִּקַּח אֶת אֶבֶן עֲלֵי עֵינַיִם לְבָרִי עֵוֶל, "thou shalt not place a stumbling block before a blind man."

That literalist and fundamentalist sect of the Second Commonwealth, the Saducees, accepted this verse in an exclusively literal fashion (Nid. 57). The Torah, they maintained, means only what it says and nothing more: one must not trip the blind man.

However, the Pharisees -- the Fathers of the Talmud -- expanded the verse to include moral ensnarement as well as physical entrapment. One who is a אֲבִיר, one who causes others to sin, stands in violation of the commandment of לֹא תִּקַּח אֶת אֶבֶן עֲלֵי עֵינַיִם לְבָרִי עֵוֶל, of putting a stumbling block before the blind. Thus, to use the classical Talmud example, one violates this commandment if he is a גִּבּוֹר, if he hands or makes available a cup of wine to the Nazirite, one who had taken an oath not to drink any intoxicating liquors.

What the Rabbis mean to tell us is that no one is perfect. Everyone has "blind spots." Fortunate is the man who is sophisticated enough to realize that he has such blind spots, even if he does not know what they are. Woe to the man who lives by the myth of perfection, and assumes that he is all-seeing and all-knowing. ~~And~~

Such blind spots should not be abused and exploited.

The Sifra expanded the concept to include not only moral blind spots, but personal and psychological ones as well -- to use the language of the Sifra, לֹא תִּקַּח אֶת אֶבֶן עֲלֵי עֵינַיִם לְבָרִי עֵוֶל, one must not place a stumbling block before one who is blind in a particular respect. Thus, the Sifra illustrates this point, if one approaches you and says הֲאִי אֵלֶּיךָ אִשָּׁה יְשִׁירָה, is such and such young woman an appropriate match for this man, either halakhically or personally, אֵלֶּיךָ אִשָּׁה יְשִׁירָה אֵלֶּיךָ אִשָּׁה יְשִׁירָה, do not say she is qualified, when in fact she is not. For then you will be taking advantage of blindness of a man in a particular respect. Or, another example: הֲאִי אֵלֶּיךָ אִשָּׁה יְשִׁירָה אֵלֶּיךָ אִשָּׁה יְשִׁירָה, if one comes to consult you about a personal or business matter, give him advice which, to your full knowledge, is the right one for him. Do not counsel him to do something which you, in your heart, know will not be fully to his benefit.

Thus, the precept of לֹא תִּקַּח אֶת אֶבֶן עֲלֵי עֵינַיִם לְבָרִי עֵוֶל runs the entire gamut of human experience as a halakhic-moral principle. To discourage someone from something he can attain, is to transgress the prohibition of placing a stumbling block before a man who is blind. Conversely,

to encourage someone to something that he is not fit for, or not yet fit for, or no longer suitable for, is to abuse his blind spot: *רָצַח לְעֵינַי*.

In fact, the Rabbis invoked this concept of *רָצַח לְעֵינַי* in any act which incites or provokes another to retaliation. We are told (M.K. 16a) that the maid-servant of the house of R. Judah the Prince -- herself quite a scholar -- put a man into excommunication when she noticed that he struck his adult son. What is the reason for placing the ban on him -- a ban so approved by the Rabbi that they refused to remove it for three years? The maid-servant explained: the father is in violation of *רָצַח לְעֵינַי*, because by striking a mature son, he provokes him to strike the father back -- and that is a violation of a Biblical prohibition punishable by death. The father thus abuses the blind spot of the son's anger, and is in violation of this great commandment.

What the Rabbis meant to say is that to infantilize an adult, to treat a mature and competent person as if he were a mere youngster, is to distort and wreck human relations and to incite unpleasantness, and hence is a violation of this moral norm.

It is only right to apply this precept to the State of Israel, whose Independence Day we have just this week celebrated. I see the concept of stumbling blocks and blind spots as relevant in a broader sense, less technically halakhic.

There are two kinds of blind spots that American Jews have with regard to Israel. There are those who view Israel only in a materialistic fashion -- its military security, its social peace, its financial well-being. For them Israel is defined by the UJA, Bonds, tourism, and General Dayan's latest pronouncements. Of religion, faith, the covenant which binds Jewish people throughout the world to the Land of Israel -- of this they know nothing.

There are others who are blind on the other eye. For them, all of Israel is a question of supporting and enhancing yeshivot, kollelim, religious schools, mikvaot, and charitable institutions for the religious groups. They act as if 1948 never took place, as if military security were not an overwhelming problem, as if the financial well-being of the entire State had no relationship to the survival of the Torah institutions. They are blind too.

The danger is that if we overlook either element, the spiritual or the material, and play to either weakness, we place a stumbling block before *רָצַח לְעֵינַי*, before such blind spots, and thus jeopardize all of Israel and all of the Jewish people.

The great danger is that unless Jews of the Diaspora are alert both to the body and the soul of Israel, we will lose out both in

the physical and spiritual realms.

It is concerning this dual problem that I believe it appropriate to relate to you -- a nightmare. It is something the great Israel novelist and Nobel laureate, Sh. Y. Agnon, of blessed memory, wrote in one of his famous novels (*אשה באש*) many years ago. Agnon tells of Yitzhak Kumer, a young lad from a Galician shtetl, who was overcome with feelings for Zion and made his long trek from the poverty of Galicia to the equally grinding poverty of Palestine in the days before Tel Aviv existed. Kumer then becomes one of the partially employed inhabitants of Jaffa. There his poverty continues, but his style of life changes. He loses the religion of his fathers, and becomes another one of the early workers who built up the State of Israel. However, at one point he decides to turn to Jerusalem, and with that comes the return to his ancestral faith. Slowly, he begins to rehabilitate himself spiritually. He begins to lay the tefillin, to pray the *שמונה עשרה*, to say the *ברכה*. And in the crisis of religious return, Yitzhak Kumer has a dream. It is this: he is running, and he does not know for sure what it is that he is fleeing. But he is panic-stricken. And in his headlong flight, he loses his shoes and then his hat. He sees a place to which to escape -- a little synagogue on the second story which can be reached only by grasping a fire-escape ladder and entering through the window. He proceeds to do this in his desperate flight, climbs the ladder, plunges in through the open window. Thereupon, the window shuts close right on him. And there he remains -- bare-headed within, barefoot without.

I take this nightmare as symbolic of the forebodings of Agnon -- and all of us -- about the possible disasters that may afflict our people. Our danger is that we may remain bareheaded, *בלי כיסוי*, within -- our inner lives, our spiritual and religious lives, will be bereft of any of the sacred and traditional values that have long graced our people. At the same time, we live under the threat of economic and material disasters -- of remaining barefoot, deprived shoes and clothing, without, i.e., in the realm of economics and physical survival.

Agnon is warning us against both blind spots -- the blind spot of the secularist who does not understand that as a people we cannot continue and cannot survive if we are bareheaded within; and of the religionist, who does not understand that the cruel world in which we live, and in the circumstances which history has spun out for us, we cannot be barefoot without, walking humbly and begging for crumbs from the tables of strangers. We simply cannot remain that way, half in shul, and half out of shul, bareheaded and barefoot, bereft spiritually and deprived materially.

As we begin the 25th year of Israel's independence, we must express our concern for both realms and resolve to continue in both areas in our active support and assistance for the State of Israel. We shall not and must now allow ourselves to be tripped because of either blind spot.

And in this firm resolve and determination, we must also understand that the fulfillment of *לפני אור לא רחוק יבואו*, in this expanded sense, should be taken not only passively and negatively -- that of not tripping up a man who is blind, or that of merely not being blind; but we must be activists and positively and constructively see that we shall, to the best of our ability, remove the blindness from our people, and enhance their foresight.

It is this note upon which I would like to conclude -- that this extended meaning of "Thou shalt not place a stumbling block before the blind man," is meant to encourage us towards an active development of sight as well as a negative refraining from injuring one who is blind in a particular area.

The *ברכות הבוקר*, the morning blessings, are today recited all consecutively in the synagogue at the beginning of the service. However, originally each blessing was recited at a different point in the process of getting up and getting dressed. When did one recite the blessing of *ברוך אתה ה'... ברוך אתה ה'... ברוך אתה ה'...* "Blessed art Thou O Lord... who makes the blind see?"

There are two *גורסאות* or versions. In the Baraita we read: *ביום שיתעורר אדם יברך*, when a man opens his eyes he makes a blessing of *ברוך אתה ה'... ברוך אתה ה'...*. However, the reading of Alfasi is *ביום שיתעורר אדם יברך*, when he puts his hands to his eyes, i.e., he rubs his eyes upon awakening. Maimonides too follows Alfasi and declares that the blessing *ברוך אתה ה'... ברוך אתה ה'...* "Who makes the blind see," should be recited *כשתעבור ידיו על עיניו*, when he rubs his eyes.

It is not enough merely to see. It is not adequate merely to open one's eyes. One does not fulfill his moral stature by not tripping the blind man and looking ahead himself. He has to do more than that. One must act, one must be *מגדור ופיו על עיניו*, he must put his hands to his eyes, i.e., he must open his eyes actively in order to avoid the pitfalls. He must transform sight into vision, and seeing into doing.

Only then do we achieve true moral fulfillment. For then we have imitated God, and like Him we are *ברוך אתה ה'...*, we make the blind see.