

Parshat Kedoshim 5776

You shall not put an obstacle in front of a blind person . Does the Torah forbid putting down a stone to trip up a blind person?

R Elchanan Samet considers the interpretation of the famous verse of lifnei iveir in this week's parasha. The classic interpretation of lifnei iveir is helping another person to do an aveira, but this is clearly far from the simple meaning of the verse: in what way is he "blind"? and what is the "obstacle"? R Samet suggests four possible levels of interpretation of the verse, which are, in order of their proximity to the simple meaning:

1. Absolutely literally – a prohibition of putting a stone in front of a blind person in order to trip him up.
2. Slightly less literally – "blind" means that this person cannot see this particular obstacle. This would, for example, prohibit concealing a hole in the ground so that someone will fall into it.

Both of these interpretations take michshol as literally an obstacle, but differ in their understanding of iveir.

3. Metaphorically – giving bad advice to someone who does not know any better. The Sifra gives a few examples of this, one of which is quoted by Rashi in his commentary on the Torah: Don't say "sell your field and buy a donkey" when your real intention is to buy the field from him. Here, both iveir and michshol are taken metaphorically. Rashi, the master of pshat, in his only comment, rejects the literal interpretation.

4. The Gemara (Avoda Zara 6b) brings a beraita: R Natan said: how do we know that one may not hold out a glass of wine to a nazir...? The Torah says v'lifnei iveir...

Despite (perhaps because of) the well-known nature of this last interpretation, it requires some thought as to how it fits in with the meaning of the verse. The metaphorical interpretation of michshol is similar to #3. But why is the nazir "blind" – there is no suggestion that he did not know this was forbidden. The Rambam (Sefer HaMitzvot 299) explains that the person's desires, blind his better judgment. This is therefore a more distant metaphorical interpretation of blindness than in #2 and #3.

It is important to note that of the above four interpretations, only #3 and #4 are mentioned by Chazal, and the Rishonim only bring these two interpretations as halacha. In fact, the Gemara (Nidda 57a) does allude to the first interpretation – in a discussion

of the Kutim. It notes that they do not hold [the halacha of] lifnei iveir. The Kutim generally interpreted the Torah literally, so it is difficult to say that they did not hold by an explicit verse in the Torah. Rashi explains that they did not hold the metaphorical meaning of this verse, but the literal meaning, #1 above. This seems a clear indication that according to the halacha, the proper meaning of this verse is not the literal meaning.

R Samet discusses whether the halachic conclusion is that the "obvious" cases, #1 and #2, are forbidden on a Torah level, but #3 and #4 are forbidden Rabbinnically. But this seems unlikely as Chazal and the Rishonim do not mention #1 and #2. The Meshech Chochma states that all four are included in the Torah level prohibition. The Torah Temima also says this, but ends up unsure because Chazal do not bring the first two. Again, this approach also seems unlikely since, if the literal interpretations are part of the Torah level prohibition, then it would be difficult to say that the metaphorical explanations are on the same Torah level. This leaves us with the conclusion that only the metaphorical interpretations #3 and #4 are prohibited at the Torah level, but not the literal ones. This conclusion leaves us with some fundamental questions to understand the Torah's approach to this mitzvah.

Why doesn't the Torah prohibit the literal case of tripping up a blind person? R Samet posits that the Torah does not discuss such base, pointless acts. Usually there is a motivation for someone to do an aveira: they steal because they need the money, people kill out of anger etc, but what justification can there be for deliberately tripping up a blind person for no personal gain? Hence Chazal understood that the Torah only prohibits acts that are possible in a civilised society, for example, giving bad advice so that you can profit from it, or helping a nazir who wants wine in order to further a friendship.

Why does the Torah use metaphor rather than saying plainly what it means? First, it is important to note that the Torah often uses metaphor. The word iveir itself is often used in this way, eg "a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise" (Devarim 16:19), which clearly cannot be taken literally. Similarly, michshol appears 14 times in Tenach, and is never used in a literal sense. The Torah possibly chooses metaphor here so that the prohibition can cover the two very different cases 3 and 4 above, which it would be difficult to do otherwise without more convoluted wording. It may also sound a note of irony that the miscreant does not really feel that he is doing anything wrong: by using the concrete language of a base act – tripping up a defenceless individual – it brings home the seriousness of the action.

Finally, I would like to wish mazeltov to our daughter on her Bat Mizvah this Shabbat.