



Stumbling Blocks

Rabbi Carmi Wisemon

“You shall not place a stumbling block in front of a blind person; and you shall have fear of your G-d – I am Hashem.” (Leviticus 19:14)

Would any of us really place an obstacle that a blind person could trip over?

Very few of us would have such low morals as to transgress the Torah commandment according to this most literal interpretation. Mankind in general has the basic moral fortitude not to want to harm the blind or the disabled for no reason.

Rashi, who usually follows a literal interpretation of the text, takes pains to explain this verse figuratively as referring to the placing of any sort of obstacle that could cause harm to a person.¹ Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch² details actions that fall into the category of placing a stumbling block: “he who deliberately gives wrong advice, who gives the means, or prepares the way for wrong...who in any way actively or passively assists or furthers people in doing wrong...transgresses this prohibition. ***Thus the whole great sphere of the material and spiritual happiness of our neighbor is entrusted to our care.***”

The halachic midrash, Torat Kohanim, offers two types of stumbling blocks, from which we can learn that we are prohibited from placing a figurative stumbling block before a person who is lacking information which makes him blind in that matter by:³

¹ In his commentary on Rashi, the Maharal notes that the verse, “Thou shall not place a stumbling block” concludes. “You shall have fear of your G-d”, a phrase commonly used in the context of commandments in which only the transgressor knows that they has sinned and no one else. If the verse referred to a physical stumbling block, it would be obvious who tripped the blind person; by interpreting it figuratively it refers to an act in which the transgressor may seek to justify their actions as intended to benefit the person whom they harmed. For this reason the verse concludes “You shall have fear of your G-d – I am Hashem.” Because only Hashem knows a person’s real intentions.

² In his commentary on the Torah, Leviticus 19:14

³ See Torat Kohanim Leviticus 19:14: “(1) And before the blind [refers to] someone who is blind in that matter. If he were to come before you and ask “is this woman permitted to marry a Cohen?” do not say to him that “she is permitted” when she is forbidden... (2) If he were to ask you advice, do not give him advice that is not right for him. Do not tell him to leave early in the morning so that robbers will then attack him. Do not say go out in the afternoon so that he will become parched in the sun. Do not say to him to sell his field and buy with the money a donkey and you subsequently purchase the field.”

- Providing incorrect information which may cause someone to transgress a Torah law (such as marrying a woman whom he is forbidden to marry)
- Providing misleading advice that may cause financial or physical harm (traveling at a dangerous time or selling property).

Other Rabbinic sources extend the concept of the stumbling block to include providing access to situations that are more likely to result in a person sinning.⁴

This third category is therefore:

- 1) Making an object or situation available that can lead a person to succumb to moral, physical or financial damage.

There is another form of the transgression that is so subtle that we may not even be aware that we are stumbling or causing others to stumble. This fourth category is that of creating or placing a person in a situation where they will be unable to exercise self-control and will sin impulsively because of an emotional vulnerability. In Moed Kattan the Talmud states, “It once happened that a maidservant of Rav Yehuda Hanassi’s household saw a certain man who was striking his mature son. The maidservant exclaimed, “Let that man be excommunicated for he has transgressed the prohibition of “You shall not place a stumbling block before the blind.”” By striking an older child who is likely to verbally or physically retaliate, the parent creates a situation in which the child may violate the biblical prohibitions of hitting and cursing one’s parents. (It is important to note that according to Jewish Law if the child does hit his parents he is held accountable for his actions and cannot claim “they made me do it!”)

Thus the fourth category:

- 3) Creating a situation or an emotional state which will lead a person to harm him/herself and others and/or lose control of their cognitive decision making abilities.

I would like to focus on this final category. Contemporary society contains within it a severe and far-reaching stumbling block, which has led to abuse of the environment by endangering the earth’s delicate ecosystems and limited natural resources.

At the turn of the 20th Century, the general population was too frugal and poor to purchase the many material goods from the over- production capabilities of the Industrial Revolution. To overcome this required a change in the spiritual and intellectual values of the people, from an emphasis on values like thrift, modesty, and moderation, towards a value system that encouraged spending and ostentatious display. The solution was the strategy of Consumerism - the creation of a public mindset that encourages over-consumption beyond people’s actual needs. Consumerism equates personal happiness with purchasing and consumption of material possessions. The businesses and governments who stood to gain from increased trade, essentially “blinded” people into believing that happiness could be achieved through endless consumption.

⁴ The Talmud (in Pesachim 22b) states, “From where do we derive the law that a person should not hand a cup of wine to a *Nazir* (one who has sworn off all grape derivatives)?...Scripture states; ‘and before a blind person you shall not place a stumbling block.’” In giving a cup of wine to a *Nazir*, one is neither forcing nor explicitly persuading that person to drink it, but this act may bring them physically closer to transgressing their Nazirite vows by giving them close access to wine.

In his book, Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism⁵, Richard H. Robbins explains that for consumerism to take hold in the United States the public's perception and buying habits had to be transformed. Advertising aggressively shaped consumer desires and created value in commodities by imbuing them with the power to transform the consumer into a more desirable person. Luxuries became necessities. In 1880, \$30 million was invested in advertising in the United States; today that figure has climbed to well over \$120 billion. The concept of "Fashion" helped to create anxiety and restlessness over the possession of items that were not 'new' or 'up-to-date.' In addition to the rise in advertising techniques, workers were given higher wages to increase their buying power in order to create a consumer economy. The advent of the credit card in the 1950s, enabled people to buy things that they would not normally consider purchasing. Originally meant to stimulate economic growth, credit shopping actually leads to increased consumer debt.

Individual home ownership, for example, is a concept that is not practiced in many developing countries, where extended families live together. Individual homes increase the amount of resources used, as well as increasing sales for related industries. In the 1920s, Herbert Hoover wrote, "A primary right of every American family is the right to build a new house of its heart's desire at least once. Moreover, there is the instinct to own one's own house with one's own arrangement of gadgets, rooms, and surroundings." Today, individual homes are only getting bigger.

The US Department of Commerce, created in 1921, serves to illustrate the role of the federal government in the promotion of consumption. The Commerce Department encouraged maximum consumption of commodities, producing films and leaflets advocating single-dwelling homes over multi-unit dwellings and suburban over urban housing. Our present standard of housing is just one example of how the powers of consumerism have changed accepted norms, creating raised expectations of standards of living and are subsequently causing us to use up more of the earth's natural resources.⁶

A great many of our environmental concerns are caused by the subtle, but potentially lethal stumbling block of consumerism. Consumerism has brought about many of the environmental crises facing the world today, such as global warming (by increasing burning of fossil fuels), species extinction- (through the clearing of forests), the proliferation of landfills, and subsequent contamination of water from the residue of the chemicals used to produce more material goods. The environmental movement, with its mantra of "Reduce Re-use Recycle" is a response to the excessive over-production of a consumer society. As society conditions us to equate personal happiness with consumption of material goods, we are fighting an endless battle to minimize the environmental damage caused by the over-production and subsequent disposal of consumer goods which we really do not need.

⁵ Allyn and Bacon, 1999),

⁶ Another such example is the credit card. Workers were given higher wages to increase their buying power in order to be able to create a consumer economy. The world's first credit card was introduced in the United States in the 1950s, expanding consumer credit by enabling people to buy things that they would not normally consider purchasing. By the 1970s shopping habits had been transformed by credit. An effect of this credit was to increase consumer debt, while creating mass markets for consumer goods that stimulated economic growth.

Today we find ourselves simultaneously the victims and culprits of “Lifnei Eever Lo Titen Michshol”—do not place a stumbling block before the blind. The consumer is blinded (almost from birth) by advertising and the resulting need to consume, so that we no longer know if we are really in need of this item. We are constantly searching to find ways to sell our own products, in order to accumulate enough wealth to purchase other people’s products, because we have been blinded into thinking that we need them to be happy.

We need to learn to produce, sell and consume less unnecessary products, whose waste can be seen in the proliferation of land-fills that dot the urban landscape. Whether we produce, market, sell or encourage the latest electronic gadget, ostentatious *simcha*, luxury home, late model car or 99-cent toy that will break the next day, we should consider if what we are doing is ethical. The Jewish and environmental response is to REDUCE our levels of consumption. In a world in which the public has been tripped into consumerism and over-production, our challenge is to reverse this trend.

Suggested Action Items:

1. Watch “The Story of Stuff,” (www.storyofstuff.org) a short internet clip about where our resources come from and where they go. Sign up for updates and share the link with your friends!
2. Organize a toy exchange (or a hat exchange, or a book exchange) in your community, so that you don’t need to buy new products. (The goal here is not to give to the poor, but to share products so that you and your neighbors do not need to buy new things if the perfect thing is being unused in your neighbor’s house.) For a step-by-step guide to planning your exchange, visit <http://www.canfeinesharim.org/article.aspx?id=111669149772>.

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