



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

VAYIKRA > Acharei-Kedoshim

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May 2, 2015
Acharei-Kedoshim

Deaf, Blind and Heartless



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

We are all blind to something. Some of us are blind when it comes to our families, some when it comes to money matters, and others when it comes to God.

We all have blind spots.

The confluence of our Torah reading (*Parshat Acharei Mot-Kedoshim*), Pesach Sheini, and Lag B’Omer, teaches us an invaluable lesson about the human condition – how we are all meant to be the eyes for others’ blind spots. And never to place obstacles – even ones we believe are “beneficial” – in front of the blind spots of our fellow human beings.

A beautiful and eye-opening story about a blind boy miraculously cured at the gravesite of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, teaches us what it truly means to be a Zohar, a shining splendor illuminating the entire world.

This is what it means to be *Kedoshim* – holy because God, our Lord, is holy.

DEAF, BLIND AND HEARTLESS

1. Blinding Brilliance (Joke)

Stevie Wonder, the blind musician, and Jack Nicklaus, the champion golfer, are in a bar. Nicklaus turns to Wonder and says, "How is the singing career going?" Stevie Wonder replies, "Not too bad, the latest album has gone into the top 10, so, all in all, I think it is pretty good. By the way, how is the golf?"

Nicklaus replies: "Not too bad, I am not winning as much as I used to but I'm still making a bit of money. I have some problems with my swing but I think I've got that right now."

"I always find that when my swing goes wrong I need to stop playing for a while and think about it, then the next time I play it seems to be all right," says blind Stevie.

"You play golf?" asks an incredulous Jack.

Stevie says, "Yes, I have been playing for years."

"But I thought you were blind; how can you play golf if you are blind?"

"I get my caddie to stand in the middle of the fairway and he calls to me. I listen for the sound of his voice and play the ball towards him, then when I get to where the ball lands the caddie moves to the green or further down the fairway and again I play the ball towards his voice," explains Stevie.

"But how do you putt?" Nicklaus wondered.

"Well," says Stevie, "I get my caddie to lean down in front of the hole and call to me with his head on the ground and I just play the ball to the sound of his voice."

Nicklaus says, "What is your handicap?"

"Well, I play off scratch," Stevie assures Jack. Nicklaus is at a loss for words and says to Stevie, "We must play a round sometime."

Wonder replies, “Well, people don’t take me seriously so I only play for money, and I never play for less than \$100,000 a hole.”

Nicklaus thinks it over and says, “Okay, I’m up for that. When would you like to play?”

“I don’t care – any night next week works for me.”

2. Blind Spots

We all have our nights, when we cannot see. We all have our blind spots, the parts of life that are simply unseen to us. We have our fields of expertise and can see clearly in those fields, but when it comes to things we know nothing about – especially things we may be subjective and prejudiced about – we can be as blind as a bat during the ninth plague (the plague of darkness) in Egypt.

The question is: How do we overcome our blind spots and not allow them to distort our decisions? How do we learn to see the things that are unseen by us?

And: How do we help others (especially those we love) to overcome their blind spots, especially those that could be detrimental to their lives?

3. Confluence of Events

We will search for the answer in the confluence of three events: today’s celebration of Shabbat, tomorrow’s celebration of Pesach Sheini and Thursday’s celebration of Lag B’Omer.

Pesach Sheini, the “second” Passover, occurs one month after the original Passover. In biblical times, it presented an opportunity to bring the Paschal offering for those who were unable to bring it during the “first” Passover.

Lag B'Omer, the 33rd day of the Counting of the Omer, is an annual festival celebrating the passing of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, also known as the Rashbi, the author of the Zohar, the preeminent book of Jewish mysticism.

Everything in life is by Divine Providence – especially holy things such as the confluence of Pesach Sheini, Lag B'Omer, and our Shabbat. So perhaps our Torah reading can provide us with an insight into what all of these events mean, and how they may serve as an important lesson for our daily, personal lives.

4. Parshat Acharei Mot-Kedoshim

Our Torah reading, a double portion of *Acharei Mot-Kedoshim*, contains many famous aphorisms, one of which we shall place under our microscope.

*You shall not curse a deaf person. You shall not place a stumbling block before a blind person, and you shall fear your God, for I am the Lord.*¹

This verse is very interesting for the inquisitive and curious:

- We should not curse any person, so why does the Torah here single out a deaf person?
- We should not place a stumbling block before any person, so why does the Torah here single out the blind?
- And what does, *and you shall fear your God, for I am the Lord*, have to do with this specific verse?

¹ Leviticus 19:14.

5. Repetitive Repetition?

In addition to all of the just-mentioned questions, this Torah commandment seems to be superfluous. It has already been decreed and commanded, back in the *Parshat Mishpatim*, that someone who digs a pit in public is responsible for damages (including penalties) incurred, if a person (or a person's property) falls into said pit.

From this, it is obvious that we may not place an obstacle before a blind person, so why the repetition? What does our present verse uniquely add?

What we may say is that the Torah is not only coming to prohibit us from hurting or deceiving someone not in the know (i.e. cursing the deaf or tripping the blind), the Torah is coming to teach us something entirely more innovative.

The Torah is coming to teach us not just what is right and wrong, but also the secret to giving good, selfless advice and the secret of true love.

6. The Midrash and the Talmud

In the Talmud, examples are provided for *you shall not place a stumbling block before a blind person*, which make it clear to us that the blind here does not only refer to one who literally lacks eyesight, but to anyone who is blind (that is, susceptible) in a certain area.

For example, the Talmud² says that "one should not extend a glass of wine to a Nazir" – that is, to someone who has taken a vow of abstinence (including abstinence from wine).

A blind person's kryptonite is a stumbling block, and a Nazir's kryptonite is wine. Do not place either in their respective paths.

The Midrash provides more examples:³

² Pesachim 22b.

³ Torat Kohanim (Sifra) 19:34.

- One should not advise one's friend to travel in the morning so as to be attacked by bandits
- One should not advise one's friend to travel in the afternoon so as to get burned and parched by the sun

These two examples are relatively obvious – do not offer misleading advice. If you know a certain road is dangerous, do not suggest that your friend or neighbor travel on it. But then there is a third example.

This third example, quoted by Rashi, is a little more complex. And the fact that Rashi cites this specific example to explain our Torah verse provides us with insight into the teaching imbedded here.⁴

7. Rashi's Teaching

Rashi, the great 11th century Torah commentator, quotes the Midrash to explain that the stumbling block may not be a literal physical block which a blind person may trip over, and the blind person may not be a literal blind person who cannot see, but may also refer to a seeing person's blind spots.

[If you know that] a person is “blind” regarding a matter, you shall not give advice that is improper for him. For instance, do not say to someone, “Sell your field and buy a donkey with the proceeds,” if you plan to cheat him since you yourself will take it from him.

In other words, do not place an obstacle before a blind person means do not take advantage of a person's weaknesses and blind spots.

Every human being is subjective and has shortcomings. A good salesperson, we are led to believe, is someone who discerns a weakness and latches onto it, sometimes being emotionally manipulative, steering a potential customer into a decision that is not solely to his benefit and is often likely to be against his interest.

⁴ See Likkutei Sichot vol. 27, pp. 141-148.

Says the Torah, you shall not place a stumbling block before a blind person – this includes any blind or naïve person, and especially one who doesn't even know that he's being duped. As Rashi continues:

[The Torah states:] *And you shall fear your God*: Why? Because this matter, whether the one providing the advice has good or evil intentions, is not discernible by people, and he can avoid [being blamed by his victim afterwards] by saying, "I meant well!"

Therefore, concerning this, it says, *and you shall fear your God*, for God knows your thoughts! The person you are trying to fool may not be aware, but God is aware. Likewise, concerning anything known to the one who does it, but to which nobody else is privy, the Torah says, *and you shall fear your God*.

In other words: Rashi interprets the literal meaning of the verse as an instruction on how to interact with our fellow human beings. If we are advising someone, our advice must be out of love not self-interest.

8. Love Your Neighbor

Four verses after commanding us not to place obstacles before the blind, the Torah states:

*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*⁵

This suggests that the commandment we have been discussing is not about torts, damages and liabilities. Rather, it was all heading here all along ... because it is really all about loving your neighbor, your friend, your fellow.

And this is why the Torah says specifically not to curse a deaf person and not to trip up a blind person. The Torah is conveying the message that we should not take advantage of anyone's weakness.

⁵ Leviticus 19:18.

Even if your friend or neighbor will gain from your advice, it is wrong to take advantage of his or her blind spot.

And that's why the verse ends off with ...*and you shall fear your God, for I am the Lord*. No one may ever know why you did it, and you can always claim that you only wanted to help, but God will know what's in your heart.

Loving your neighbor is making a deal that is best for him or her, not for you. It is about transcending yourself. And that's why *you shall not place a stumbling block in front of* another person – not because this is a law of torts and damages but because this is a law of loving your neighbor as yourself.

Now it should be clear: This stretch of Torah is not talking about rights and wrongs as much as it's talking about the unifying oneness between you and your fellow human beings.

9. The Lesson For Us Today

If we have expertise – and each and every one of us in this world knows things that others do not, so we are all experts in some areas – then we must use it to help and love others, not to use our expertise to take advantage of others who do not know and may be blind to what we know.

A business deal should not take advantage of other people's weakness, but to help them overcome it; the weaknesses of others should bring out strength in us to help them.

The Torah declaration, *and you shall fear your God* is teaching us that there is a God in the universe Who tells us what the ideal human condition looks like.

It looks like one organism that functions like a human body. On its own, each limb has many, many blind spots: a leg cannot speak, and ear cannot see, a nose cannot hear, an eye cannot taste, a heart cannot think, a brain cannot feel.

Now, imagine if each body part took advantage of the others' shortcomings and blind spots. Such a body would self destruct faster than a *Mission Impossible* brief.

The goal is for each body part to help and complement the other body parts. Where you are blind, I shine; where I am weak, you are strong. I will not place obstacles in your blind path but instead open your eyes to the possibilities.

This is what the Torah is teaching us: To be holy is not to be a good salesperson and hone in on another's weakness; it is not to take advantage of a blind spot. To be holy is to transcend our own needs, stand in awe of God, and place another's vision before our own perception of success.

This is *Kedoshim* – this is holiness.

10. Healing The Blind (Story)

At the turn of the century, in the year 1900, a Jew named Ozer Razin journeyed from Riga, Latvia, to Jerusalem, bringing with him his young son Shmuel. Shmuel was a child who possessed great spiritual ambition and Reb Ozer was convinced that his potential could best be fulfilled by his spending the years of his youth in the rarefied atmosphere of the Holy City where his uncle, Reb Yedidiah Grodner, resided.

Reb Yedidiah and his wife grew deeply attached to the boy. They enrolled him at the Eitz Chaim Yeshiva, from which blossomed forth many of the great Torah personalities of the generation. In addition, Reb Yedidiah studied with Shmuel privately for an hour a day and also hired a tutor to sharpen the boy's learning skills.

In one of his letters home, Shmuel wrote:

“I have now completed *Mesilat Yesharim* [the classic ethical work by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato] for the first time, and I feel as if I have been transformed into a different person. When Uncle Yedidiah learns *Mesilat Yesharim* with me, tears stream down his cheeks.

He told me that many of the Jews here in the Old City are 'living *Mesilat Yescharims*.' My dream is to be like them."

Two years after Shmuel's arrival in Jerusalem, tragedy struck. He became afflicted with a mysterious eye disease which caused his eyesight to grow steadily weaker as time passed. Doctors could not identify the cause of the illness and were at a loss to prescribe medication. They predicted that, at the present rate of deterioration, it would not be long before young Shmuel was completely blind.

His uncle and aunt were overcome with anguish. They hurried in vain from doctor to doctor hoping to find a cure. They prayed and distributed charity as a source of merit for Shmuel's recovery.

As time passed and the situation worsened, Reb Yedidiah took to rising at midnight and remaining awake for the remainder of the night praying tearfully. At dawn, he would make his way to the Western Wall and continue to pray that his nephew, who had shown such promise, be granted his full eyesight once again.

One winter evening, the dreaded moment arrived. As Shmuel sat learning with his private tutor, Reb David Leibel, he was suddenly plunged into darkness. He had become totally blind.

Amazingly, Shmuel retained his composure at that tragic moment. After telling his tutor what had happened, he said, "Please say the words slowly from now on, and I will repeat them after you, word by word."

Meanwhile, Shmuel's aunt ran from the house and summoned the neighbors. One of them brought to the house Professor Sukmeinski, a renowned ophthalmologist who had been sent to Jerusalem by Baron Rothschild to help curb the rash of eye-related ailments which were plaguing the city's residents.

After examining Shmuel, the Professor Sukmeinski ruled out surgery and declared that there was yet a very slim chance that the boy's eyesight would return. There was nothing left to do but pray.

Days passed with no improvement. At night, Reb Yedidiah and his wife would listen as Shmuel would recite the bedtime *Shema* and then utter his own prayer: "Master of the Universe, is it for earthy pleasures or

treats that I am asking? All I desire is that my eyes be illuminated by the light of Your holy Torah. Please, Merciful God, heal my eyes so that I may once again see the written word and study it without impediment.”

Two weeks passed with no change in Shmuel’s condition. Reb Yedidyah felt that his nephew was in desperate need of a change of routine, so he arranged for the boy to spend some time at the home of Reb Shimon Hausman in Hebron.

Reb Shimon was a highly regarded communal activist, a kindhearted man who never tired of serving his brethren. His heart melted with compassion upon hearing of Shmuel’s plight. He readily agreed to take the boy under his charge for an unlimited amount of time.

In those days, the city of Hebron was led by two towering Torah personalities. Reb Shimon Menasheh Chaikan, a renowned Kabbalist, was the city’s Ashkenazic rabbi, while its Sephardic community was led by Rav Chaim Chizkiyahu Medini, also known as Sdei Chemed, after an important encyclopedic work he authored.

A close relationship existed between these two pure and holy scholars, and it was known that they met together somewhere in the city each night. Exactly where and what they did was a secret known to no one but themselves, although it was said that, at midnight, the two prayed together at a holy site, possibly the Tomb of the Patriarchs, for the abolishment of harsh decrees.

One day, Reb Shimon Hausman was struck by an idea. Perhaps, if he would go with Shmuel in the darkness of night and meet these two great men, they would bestow their blessing so that the child’s eyesight would be restored. The thought of implementing this plan filled Reb Shimon with dread, for to confront them during their nightly meeting might be overstepping the bounds of propriety and could possibly invoke their indignation. But he was willing to take the risk for Shmuel’s sake.

Night after night, Reb Shimon, his hand firmly clenching that of Shmuel, took to walking near the homes of the two rabbis. Finally, one night, the door swung open and the two emerged.

Reb Shimon Hausman approached and, trembling with fear, placed the boy squarely between the two *tzaddikim*. He then disappeared into the darkness without offering a word of explanation.

His actions were, indeed, correct, for to them, no explanation was necessary. The *tzaddikim* immediately sensed the child's predicament. Reb Shimon Menashe grasped Shmuel's right hand, the Sdei Chemed his left, and the three began to walk together in the darkness.

Shmuel related the details of his woeful tale. When he had finished, the Sdei Chemed asked him, "What were the last words that you learned before the moment when you could no longer see?"

"I was studying the Talmud, Tractate *Chulin*, page 36a," the boy replied; "and the last words that I read were 'Upon whom are we to rely? Come let us rely upon the words of Rabbi Shimon.'"

"That is your solution!" the two *tzaddikim* exclaimed. "You must go to Meron to the tomb of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, upon whose merit you can surely rely! Go there and pray that in his merit, God should heal you."

The next morning, Shmuel came back home to his uncle in Jerusalem and soon after, Reb Yedidiah and his nephew set out by donkey for Meron.

The trip in those days, over rugged terrain, was a difficult one for anyone, even more so for a middle-aged man leading a young blind boy. But nothing could prevent them from reaching their destination. They arrived at the tomb of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and entered the Beit Midrash at the site, with the intention of not leaving the area until their prayers were answered.

Day after day, the two remained there, their every waking moment dedicated either to heartfelt prayer or intensive study. On the fifth day, as they prepared to recite the Book of Psalms with Shmuel repeating the words after Reb Yedidiah, the boy suddenly exclaimed, "Uncle - I can see the outline of your body! I can see the outline of the objects near you!" Indeed, his eyesight had begun to return.

They remained there a total of thirteen days, until Shmuel's eyesight was fully restored. On that day, the two held hands in an ecstatic dance, as they sang the Lag B'Omer song of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai's praises which concludes with:

Torato magen lanu, hee meirat eineinu, hu yamleetz tov alienu, adoneinu Bar Yochai - "May His Torah shield us, it is the light of our eyes, he will intercede for good on our behalf - our master, Bar Yochai."⁶

11. Clear Vision (Conclusion)

As I mentioned, coming Thursday is Lag B'Omer, the celebration of Rabbi Simon Bar Yochai's life.

The word *Zohar*, the title of the seminal Kabbalistic work he authored, literally means "splendor/brilliance/luminance."

The Zohar opens one's eyes, eyes that were once blind to certain depths of life, and illuminates the splendor of divine possibilities.

Pesach Sheini, the Second Passover which we celebrate tomorrow, offers us a second chance once our eyes are opened.

Often in life, when the time of redemption arrives, we are completely blind, our eyes closed to the possibilities of freedom. But we need not despair. There is a Pesach Sheini, a "makeup date," when the hopes of freedom and redemption shine once again for those who (for whatever reason) missed it the first time around. It informs us that "nothing is ever lost. There is always a second chance."

As the Rashbi teaches us, we are here to brighten up the world with divine light. And as Pesach Sheini teaches us, it's never too late to change our ways and we can always achieve what we have to achieve.

⁶ From Yerushalayim shel Maalah (The Heavenly City) by Menachem Gerlitz, as published in Lag B'Omer by Rabbi Shimon Finkelman (Mesorah Publications) and adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles.

Each body part is limited and blind to certain things on its own; but together it is one complete body. Every one of us – every Jew – is a “limb” in the Jewish community body. Every person on earth is a “limb” in the global community. Each one has its unique strengths that it contributes to the others, and each one has its “blind spots” which are complemented by the others.

In honor of Rabbi Shimon may we all unite as one people, helping us transcend our blind spots and turning them into spots of pure luminance and luminescence.

United as one, may we merit to the Final Redemption immediately in our days, so that there never again there be the need for “Second Passovers” for all of Israel.

Shabbat Shalom!