

CyberTorah: Stumbling Blocks

Reality Television appeals to both axis of human nature. On the one hand, people watch reality TV to see a hero born. That's part of the appeal of American Idol (what a name!), where the next pop star is waiting to be found as we watch and vote. On the other hand, we also like to see people stumble and fall. Dancing with the Stars is as much about people humiliating themselves on national television as it is about watching people dance beautifully. There is something deeply appealing about watching people hurt themselves and fail.

For this reason, Torah reminds us "You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall fear God, for I am the Lord (Lev 19:14)." It's appealing to insult the deaf, because a deaf person can't hear you. The Talmud in Shevuot 36a explains that coarse language diminishes us as a person. To insult someone who can't even hear is only to give our evil inclination power over us. This is why Maimonides goes ever further. He says that the Torah warns us against insulting the deaf because, when our words get no reaction, we will escalate to physical violence. As we tease and belittle without response, we look for a way to get a response.

In the same fashion, there is something in human nature ready to laugh at the blind person falling over a clearly visible obstacle. We set up this obstacle knowing how superior we are, for we can see the stumbling block. And then to our great humor the blind person stumbles and falls, never knowing how or why.

Slapstick humor and pratfalls point out how ingrained is the human urge to see someone else fall. I took Maytal to see Shrek 3 a few months ago. She hated it and had to go out because all the slapstick humor in the movie made her upset. In the purity of her youth, she only saw people falling and hurting themselves. She didn't get why it was funny. As much as I enjoy slapstick humor, it's possible that Maytal is on to something.

The Talmud in Pesachim understands these prohibitions in a wide manner. Placing a stumbling block before the blind includes tempting someone to do wrong. Many reality TV shows are about putting people into tempting situations and then seeing how they behave. Survivor, for example, twists teamwork into viciousness by creating incentives for people to gang up on one another and then to finally betray their friends to win it all. These shows get great ratings because we love to watch others fall into temptation.

We cannot fix network Television. We can, however, be more thoughtful about our own actions towards others. I like to tease my wife. I can string together a false explanation about something, play her along for a while, and then laugh at her. I used to do this with some regularity. It was appealing on a lot of levels. It was fun to fool her. To watch her mentally trip and fall. And I suspect, if I am honest, some of the appeal was watching her then get angry at me afterward.

At a certain point, Carol told me that I was hurting her feelings. In examining my own behavior, I saw that she was right and stopped. I am similarly aware of resisting the temptation to tease

my kids because I want to affirm them, to help them grow. I fight against the part of myself that wants to watch them stumble and fall.

I see this in marital and pre-marital counseling a great deal. Many couples have a dynamic where one spouse picks on the other. It's funny, after all. But when I give the "picked on" spouse a chance to talk, it turns out they are more hurt than their partner realizes. Its good to laugh together and affirm one another.

We are supposed to be Holy, for God is holy. If we indulge the part of ourselves that wants to insult the deaf and see the blind stumble, we quickly find ourselves damaging our most important relationships. If we are people who tease and trip, we forget to be the people who offer a supporting hand or an affirming comment. Let us strive to be those who affirm with our words and lift up the one who stumbles.

Shabbat Shalom,

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