



SERMON K'DOSHIM:¹
JUST BAFFLING

Student Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 30 April 2022
Finley's bar mitzvah (York)

- 1 When I was a small child, and the time of year for the reading of this passage of Torah rolled around, I would hear the line, “Do not put a stumbling block before the blind,”² and muse to myself: What is a stumbling block? I pictured it as being a particular sort of object, specifically designed for obstructing blind people. I imagined that one could go to Homebase or B&Q or Argos and order stumbling blocks in a variety of sizes and colours.

- 2 Of course, I now know that that's not quite what it is. The commandment not to put a stumbling block before the blind prohibits any behaviour which would harm an unsuspecting fellow human being. The rabbis understood this line in an exceptionally broad way. Giving somebody poor or misleading advice? That's a stumbling block before the blind, because the victim is blind to the truth. Offering a cigarette to someone who's trying to quit smoking? That's a stumbling block before the blind, because the addiction blinds them to the consequences of



their actions. Even lending money without witnesses is considered a stumbling block before the blind, because it might just tempt the debtor into lying about the transaction and trying to keep the money.³

3 I can't help wondering, though, if the Torah's obscurity is itself a stumbling block. The young Gabriel who pictured a luxury leather-effect stumbling block may have been very silly, but even an intelligent and grown-up reader of Finley's Torah portion would struggle to understand precisely what those words mean. The fact that the original text is written in Biblical Hebrew doesn't help, but it's not as if a literal translation helps much either. Chapter after chapter of Torah is cast in abstruse language, referring to concepts which, to us, are antiquated or alien – like harvesting and reaping – and parts of it are, frankly, just plain weird. As ordinary Jews trying to work out what God wants of us, turning to Torah doesn't exactly provide an answer. Unclear law is, perhaps, the most serious stumbling block of all.

4 These thoughts are hardly original. It has always been recognised that the Torah is unclear. When Moses set up the very first system of Jewish law courts, he recognised that some cases would be too complex for the judges, and directed that such cases be brought to him.⁴ In more recent times, rabbis have accepted that some cases are simply insoluble and beyond our comprehension: the great 12th-century authority



Maimonides laid down rules for what to do in situations where nobody could work out what the law was.⁵

5 And these difficulties, which occasionally stumped even a Maimonides, are of course compounded for bar and bat mitzvah students, who have to learn to read Torah in a new, handwritten script off of a piece of cowskin. But didn't Finley rise, splendidly, to the challenge!

6 In fact, though, the Torah's obscurity and lack of clarity can be a gift instead of a burden. It can be an opportunity. At the very least, it provides a myriad of different talking points to suit different students' personality types. Finley has chosen to focus on poverty and society's duty to help those afflicted by it – which is laudable. Another student in another year may have chosen to take their d'var Torah in an entirely different direction.

7 Truth be told, there are no right and wrong answers when it comes to this stuff. Or maybe it's simply impossible to discover what they are. The 16th-century commentator Solomon Luria wrote: "Even if all the heavens were parchment and all the seas ink, still it would not be possible to explain, fully, even one matter of Torah, resolving all questions that arise from it."⁶



8 So, Finley, when I told you to prepare some explanation of this particular corner of the Torah, I set you an impossible task. Yet you rose to it magnificently, you read to us all beautifully, and you gave us an insightful and inspiring reflection on your parashah. Mazel tov!

GKW 29.04.22

¹ Leviticus 19:9-18

² Leviticus 19:14

³ Hershey H Friedman. "Placing a stumbling block before the blind person: an in-depth analysis", *Jewish Law Blog* (2002): <<http://www.jlaw.com/Articles/placingstumbling.html>>

⁴ Exodus 18:26

⁵ Hilchot Mamrim 1:5

⁶ Yam shel Sh'lomo: introduction to Bava Kamma