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STUMBLING BLOCKS BEFORE CHILDREN

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We often find ourselves captivated when reading the Torah portion Kedoshim. The word *kedoshim* (קדושים), “holy,” is followed in the text by *tihyu* (תהיה), “you shall be”—saying in sum, “You shall be holy.” (Leviticus 19:2) This reading defines for Am Yisrael (the Jewish people) much of what is required of us to be holy, that is, to be separated and dedicated to the special purpose of serving God, not as individuals but as a *community*.

There is a *pasuk* (verse) in Kedoshim—“You shall not curse (the) deaf and put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am Adonai” (Leviticus 19:14)—that is especially relevant to the life of every congregational community, particularly the matter of stumbling blocks.

Our Torah commentator Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, 1040-1105) tells us that the *mitzvah* (commandment) applies not only to the deaf, but to every person. (Exodus 22:27) The verse, then, is not aimed narrowly at those who are deaf or blind, but at anyone who is unaware or blind in a particular situation. The *mitzvah* obligates us to be responsible, demonstrating our ability to respond, by not placing someone on a course that is criminal, immoral, or simply dangerous, or by ignoring that they are on such a course.

There are endless examples of placing or leaving in place a stumbling block before the blind. A traditional example is lending money without witnesses (Baba Metziah 75b), because potentially it sets the borrower on a course of temptation to deny that the loan was made. Other examples might include offering a recovering alcoholic a drink, encouraging a couple to marry when we believe that the marriage will only be to the benefit of one of the partners, or accepting the role of expert when we’re deficient in knowledge or skill.

The basic idea is that we are not to create or allow the continued existence of a situation in which another person is “tempted” by a weakness or blindness, for example a character flaw, disabil-

ity, or disease, which prevents that person from correctly perceiving the facts of a situation.

This *mitzvah* teaches us that we can cause harm to another indirectly, even though our own hands are, so to speak, not dirty.

What is the reach of our responsibility?

One of our most highly respected modern Biblical commentators, Nehama Leibowitz, says: “. . . The Torah teaches us that even by sitting at home doing nothing, by complete passivity and divorce from society, one cannot shake off responsibility for what is transpiring in the world at large, for the iniquity, violence, and evil there. By not protesting, ‘not marking the graves’ and danger spots, you have become responsible for any harm arising therefrom, and have violated the prohibition: Thou shalt not put a stumbling block before the blind. . . .”

Where are the stumbling blocks in the lives of the young men and women—presumably most of them the beloved children of their parents—who take so many innocent lives directly and indirectly through drug-dealing and use, and gang warfare in our cities?

Like thousands of other children, their outward behavior is troubling. That in itself is far from certain evidence, however, that any individual child is going to commit murder.

But we are left with the question: Where are the stumbling blocks in their lives?

We suggest two possibilities: First, their “calls for help” are not heard. As the middle-class mother of one murdered young person said, “Our children are telling us things and we are not hearing them.” Second, the means to commit murder are not kept from their hands. This same mother also noted, “The children in these cases all have guns. These wouldn’t be [murders] if they involved just knives or baseball bats.”

Who’s responsible for placing these stumbling blocks? Who should be held accountable, morally and legally?

Parents, school officials, the legislature, and the media are responsible and should be accountable. It's an easy answer because we're all adept at finger-pointing. But if we want to blame the handiest targets, parents and school officials, exculpating ourselves, what do we say when they respond, "This child can buy a gun or drugs on any street corner or learn to make bombs on the Internet"?

As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said: "Few are guilty, but all are responsible." The point, in Pogo's inimitable words, is that, "We have met the enemy and he is us." It's a truism that parents alone cannot raise healthy children in the absence of wholesome, supportive community.

All of this raises a very difficult question: Is there a remedy for this violence committed by children, mostly against other children—and, if so, what's to be our part in it?

If we're inclined to avoid this question, we should remember that suburban communities are not been free of gang activity and the drug involvement that accounts for so much of the violence that's associated with gangs in urban areas. Moreover, many of our own children are frightened even now, feeling there's nowhere that's safe for them. Sadly, since they don't want to look weak in our eyes, they mostly keep their fears to themselves.

If there is to be a solution, we must reject the defeatist idea that everything is beyond our control and that we, personally, are not responsible for the drug dealing and use, and the violence done by children, simply because they're not our own children—at least, not yet. Moreover, we should understand that complex problems don't lend themselves to "silver-bullet solutions," but require a "shotgun strategy"—not one single remedy but many people working together in myriad ways as a community.

The concluding words of our *pasuk* read, ". . . But you shall fear your God: I am Adonai," which

tells us that even if the person before whom we have put or left a stumbling block is unaware of what we have done or failed to do, because he or she is blind, figuratively or literally, *God* is aware of our actions or failure to act.

But what does it mean that God knows? And why should we care that God knows, especially if we gain practical advantages in the here and now?

God may be thought of as the highest standard of goodness in a community—that is, what we call God is in some ways what we believe to be *our* most treasured and sought-after values and behavior in life, the ideals we hope will serve as models for social life.

So, yes, from this naturalistic perspective, God knows, because our ideals reflect as well as guide our lives. When our ideals are degraded, when as a practical matter we worship physique, position, prestige, power, and possessions over spirituality, family, and community, what goes around comes around—to us and, ultimately, to our children.

When the phrase "You shall fear your God" is used, as it is in the verse we are considering here, the Sages explain that the matter is "entrusted to the conscience of the individual." In effect, the *mitzvah* not to put a stumbling block before the blind cannot be enforced by "any earthly court," because only the individual knows if the action or failure to act was done in bad faith or not.

So if we refuse to take any responsibility as a community for the drug-dealing and use, and the violence done by children against other children—if the ideal represented by *our* God is no higher than that—then God forbid, as a community we may yet experience what so many cities already have.

God, help us to act together in Your image, and soon, since it may only be a matter of time.

And together we say, Amen.

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