

JThought: ‘Heading for a Fall?’

Picture the scene: A blind man called Brian tentatively walks along, continually tapping his long white stick to detect approaching objects. He turns his head from side to side, straining every one of his available senses to aid his walk. Suddenly, a man dressed in a red tracksuit and sunglasses darts a metre in front of Brian and places a big concrete block directly in his path. The menace swerves to the side and rubs his hands with glee, cackling as he watches Brian stumble and painfully fall down.

Hard to imagine such a blatantly cruel scene? Unrealistic image to paint?

On a literal level, perhaps so. Yet the Torah mandates us not to place a stumbling block in front of the blind. Why is this obviously humane point spelled out for us? Surely we would never perform such a heartless act?

The answer is found in the verse’s non-literal interpretation.

Every time we knowingly offer damaging advice to a friend, we are no worse than the menace, gleefully placing a stumbling block in front of someone who is blind to its consequence. Every time we persuade a sibling to take a humiliating route towards a goal, we are causing them to blindly bash their knees over concrete. Every time we consciously tempt an upright neighbour to join a less-than-holy endeavour, we are secretly experiencing the vindictive satisfaction that the menace displayed.

Yes, it’s hard to see ourselves concertedly tripping a helplessly blind person. Sadly, it is less hard to see ourselves subtly guiding a fellow human towards self-damage, be it on a practical or moral level.

There are several motivations that might lead us to don an analogous red tracksuit and sunglasses and enjoy causing those around us to falter.

We may simply enjoy the feeling of power that offering harmful advice can give.

We may have an ulterior motive of revenge; to pay someone back for a past misdeed by watching them fail.

We may want company on our own road to a morally deficient goal.

Or perhaps we wish to secure our superior position in contrast to someone else’s fall.

Clearly, in order to rise above these motivations, we need to look inward and identify our own agenda. We can then work towards setting it aside and giving honest and beneficial advice.

This attention to looking inward is found in the juxtaposed Torah instruction: ‘Do not curse a deaf person’. A harder commandment to understand, since the deaf person, unlike the blind one who actually falls, will never know about or suffer from the curses spoken! What harm will the words actually do?

There is a profound insight here. The Torah’s instructions to care for others all contain an underlying objective. And that is to refine OURSELVES. The deaf man may not suffer since he can’t hear my mocking words, but my own character will become increasingly twisted with every vicious act that I do. Similarly, the advice-seeker may not guess that my counsel was purposely faulty, but my integrity will diminish by committing the offence.

If we focus on elevating our own selves, we will naturally lose the urge to see a friend stumble. In this way we will prevent both of us from heading for a fall.