

None So Blind

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

“There is none so blind as he who will not see.” That, I think, applies nowadays to very many people. Seeing is not just looking. It also means to understand. And to understand requires one to try to see things from different angles and perspectives. To see another point of view.

Perhaps this is why blindness sometimes lends itself to humor. Charles Dickens put this popular, amusing conundrum into the mouth of Sam Weller “I see, said the blind man to his deaf daughter as he picked up his hammer and saw.”

In ancient times, blindness was a curse and a punishment. But it was also often an inevitable result of old age. Isaac and Jacob went blind in old age. In both cases their blindness was because of old age. But it was not necessarily so. When Moses was old, his eyes not dimmed at all!

The main Hebrew word for a blind person is *iver*. As in “Do not put a stumbling block in front of a blind-man” (Leviticus 19:14). And “Bribery blinds the eyes of wise men” (Deuteronomy 16:19 and 26 other times in the Bible). Metaphors that both act as a warning against taking advantage of another person’s limitations and highlight an ethical fault.

Interestingly the very same Hebrew letters for blind, *Ayin Vav Reysh*, are exactly the same as the Hebrew word for light, *Or*. Does this mean that a blind person has more or less light than anyone else? The Torah says that the first statement of creation was “Let there be light.” But light for us humans depends on the sun and the sun was not created until the fourth day. So, what was light before that? One modern explanation is that it was energy. The Midrash says it was a special form of light saved for the righteous in the next world. And from that comes the idea that light is linked to enlightenment, seeing the truth, to choose the morally or spiritually correct path. That is precisely why blindness is applied to judges who are corrupt and take bribes. They just don’t see it, understand it. Their minds, let alone their eyes, have been “blinded.”

In addition, the Hebrew letters *Ayin, Vav Reysh*, can mean skin. The only clue is context. Skin is interesting because it connects blindness to skin color and thus to racism. It is only skin deep! But it could also imply that blindness might be caused by a skin like growth on, or over the eyes such as a cataract or some other physiological growth that affects one’s sight, like a tumor. Something that does not necessarily happen in or at birth.

Blinding someone has often been used as a punishment or tool of war. Not only was Samson blinded, but so too were captured Kings of Israel by their conquerors. And priests who were deposed during the Maccabee period were blinded to prevent them assuming the positions that required a complete

physical body.

There is another word for "blindness" in Biblical Hebrew, *sanverim*. When the men of Sodom gathered around Lot's house in order to attack his guests, the Torah says that they were stricken with *sanverim* (Gen. 19:11). This word only appears twice more in the Bible. There are not many words I know of that have inspired so many different suggested meanings as *sanverim* and how it differs from *iver*.

Here is a selection of explanations that I garnered from an article that Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein recently published. One is that *sanverim* refers to distorted vision, but not visual blindness. Or that *sanverim* is a contraction of the phrase *sonah ohr* ("he who hates light") and refers to some sort of over-sensitivity to light. Not actual blindness as such. In the Akkadian, the Hebrew word *sanverim* is similar to a word which means "radiant light". A light so strong that it blinds those exposed to it like the Akkadian word for "night-blindness".

Sanverim could be a contraction of the Hebrew word *sneh* (a thorn) and *or*. Which implies that a blind person is as if his eyes were damaged by a thorn. *Sneh* can also be a rock, a stone, a burden weighing on one's eyesight. *Sanverim* could also mean a distorted form of vision when one's vision is refracted through multiple snapshots. Like seeing double, or more! A more modern medical opinion is that *sanverim* is linked to a rare word for *tzinor* ("pipe"), because an eye which cannot function resembles a hollow pipe or tunnel vision. *Sanverim* could refer to confusion, where one can physically see something, but be unable to process what one sees for emotional reasons or a mirage. My favorite is that it might mean hypnosis. The text says the men (or the Angels) stretched out or waved their hands towards the men of Sodom. Which sounds very much like hypnotism. Whatever it was, the Bible wants to tell us that their punishment was the result of their moral corruption. It rendered the men at Lot's house blind because they could not see they were wrong.

In the Aramaic of the Talmud, there is a phrase used for blind person, *sagi nahor* made up of the two words *sagi* (enough or too much) and *nahor* (light). On the face of it, it is a euphemism by saying the exact opposite of reality. This is a device often used in the Talmud. For example, instead of saying that something bad is going to happen to Israel, the Talmud often says bad things will happen "to the enemies of Israel."

But *sagi nahor* sounds as if it is sarcastic. Both the Bible and the Talmud are very strict on matters of offending other people or making them feel bad or inadequate. So, it is unlikely they meant this expression to be cruel. Which is why one could understand this as not being offensive at all. When someone is or becomes blind, other faculties are then developed to compensate. Which may in effect enable a blind person both to sense, navigate and in a way "see" better than normally sighted person. So that the expression is a statement of superior capabilities, rather than deficiency.

There are other words for defective or limited human faculties that also indicate negativity. There is a Biblical word *Atum* which means sealed or

blocked and is used of lips or ears being sealed. But it is not actually used in the Bible of eyes. Only lips or ears. And in Talmud the more common word *Suma* is usually used for blindness. It also means a spot or poison which may also be because either a cataract or poison can affect sight.

In ancient Jewish Law, blindness, along with being deaf and mute were handicaps that prevented people from normal activities whether religious, like praying in public or civil, like sitting in judgment or performing religious obligations. The assumption was that could not understand or act rationally. Of course, we know now that is not the case. Already in the Talmud exceptions were made. R.Yehuda forbade blind people from performing positive commands. But R.Yosi the Blind insisted on performing them nevertheless. Often blind rabbis were scholars and valued because they had to learn everything by heart, and this gave them an edge in a world where books were rare. And there are many stories of blind rabbis showing off their capabilities, even to Persian Emperors. There is a cute story that R.Yosi met a blind man walking at night carrying a lantern and when he asked the man why, he replied that is was for the benefit other ordinary people who could not see in the dark.

Whether it is blindness or deafness we have made great strides helping to ameliorate the lives of those who have been affected. I am still upset at how prejudiced so many societies are. Until recently most societies treated the handicapped as if they were cursed or possessed of evil spirits.

When I was a schoolboy, we used to play soccer against a school called Mary Hare which was for deaf and mute children. Their soccer teams were strong and aggressive. It was always a hard-fought game. But beforehand we were always warned by the referee that the moment he blew his whistle in the game, we had to stop immediately on the spot, because that was the only way our opponents would know the play had officially been paused. It was an important lesson for us all.

I have inordinate respect for those who can overcome such challenges and indeed they should be given special consideration and places in our communities, not made to feel inadequate or less valued. But in truth, what worries me even more about people I encounter nowadays, is that this inability to see another point of view is so widespread and getting more so. Civilized discourse is all but becoming impossible. Folks, as Americans like to say, are so blind (or dumb) they just refuse to see, both literally and figuratively, any other point of view. When that happens, normal human interaction and exchange of ideas becomes severely limited. And this is the root cause of almost all the prejudice, racism and antisemitism that still flourishes like a malignant organism feeding on human brains.