

## Introduction

### Part 6

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#### A Spiritual Stumbling Block

What does it mean to have a stumbling block or to be a stumbling block to others? The origin of this metaphor is found in the prohibition to not put a stumbling block before the blind in *Vayikra / Leviticus 19:14* (יָד לֹא-תִקַּל לְחַרֵּשׁ וְלִפְנֵי עֵוֵר לֹא תִתֵּן מְכֻשָׁל וְיִרְאֵת מְאַלְהֵיָהּ) (אַנִּי יְהוָה:). We find this command in the midst of a series of laws regulating the treatment of others, where it states “*Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the LORD.*” In the Hebrew Bible, the term for “*stumbling block*” is the word *mikšōl* (מְכֻשׁוֹל). In the Septuagint (Greek translation), מְכֻשׁוֹל is translated into the Koine Greek as *skandalon* (σκανδαλον), a word which occurs only in Hellenistic literature. This Greek word is used in the sense of “*snare for an enemy; cause of moral stumbling.*” We find references in the Tanakh to stumbling block in the following verses.

#### ***Vayikra / Leviticus 19:14***

*You shall not curse a deaf man, nor place a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall revere your God; I am the Lord.*

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***Isaiah 57:14***

*And it will be said, "Build up, build up, prepare the way, Remove every obstacle out of the way of My people."*

***Malachi 2:7-8***

*For the lips of a priest should preserve knowledge, and men should seek instruction from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. But as for you, you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble by the instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi," says the Lord of hosts.*

The usage of the Greek word skandalon resembles the Septuagint usage. This word occurs 15 times in the New Testament in 12 unique verses. These passages are the following: *Matthew 13:41, Matthew 16:23, Matthew 18:7 (3 times), Luke 17:1, Romans 9:33, Romans 11:9, Romans 14:13, Romans 16:17, 1 Corinthians 1:23, Galatians 5:11, 1 Peter 2:8, 1 John 2:10, and Revelation 2:14.* Let's look at a few of these references.

**New Testament**

***Matthew 16:23***

*But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's."*

***Matthew 23:13***

*"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.*

***Luke 11:52***

*Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key*

*of knowledge; you yourselves did not enter, and you hindered those who were entering.”*

***Romans 14:13***

*Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way.*

***1 Corinthians 1:23***

*but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness,*

***1 Corinthians 8:9***

*But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.*

***1 John 2:10***

*The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him.*

***Revelation 2:14***

*But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality.*

Note how the NT usage is to cause one to stumble before God, to sin against Him, to disobey His Word according to the Torah. Paul speaks of the significance of not causing another person to stumble, especially in matters of faith, one may have greater or lesser amount of faith, meaning that one who walks according to the Spirit wants to obey all of God’s Word while others have not quite come to this point in their life and relationship with God. The noun skandalon has a derived verb, skandalizo which means to literally “to trip somebody up” or, idiomatically, “to cause someone to sin.” This verb appears 29 times in 27 verses in the New Testament. It becomes apparent how

significant this concept of having or being a stumbling block is in the minds of the Apostles.

In Judaism, Lifnei Iver (לְפָנֵי עֵוֶר) “*Before the Blind*” is a prohibition against misleading people by use of a “*stumbling block*.” The origin comes from the commandment, וְלִפְנֵי עֵוֶר לֹא תִתֵּן מְכֻשָּׁל, “Before the blind, do not put a stumbling block.” (*Vayikra / Leviticus 19:14*) There are a large number of verses in the Torah that deal with causing injury to others, whether they are blind or not. This is why the rabbis in the Talmud gave more meaning to לְפָנֵי עֵוֶר as the “*blind*” are metaphorically applied to persons who are unaware, unsuspecting, ignorant, or morally blind, etc. This command speaks to the moral obligation to not take advantage of someone or tempt someone to do wrong. For example, the principle of לְפָנֵי עֵוֶר prohibits one from giving bad advice to someone. This situation could be such that one does not advise another to sell his property, field, home, etc to buy a donkey, when the true intention is to buy the property, field, or home himself. This could be related to any business situation. This is known as concealing the ulterior motive of his advice and doing such a thing violates the principle of לְפָנֵי עֵוֶר. (see Midrash Sifra, Vayikra / Leviticus 19:14) The Midrash provides a reason why the verse ends with a warning to fear God. It is because only God knows the true motive of the advice giver. This single command relates to many applications in life, such as not setting prohibited food in front of one who has taken the vow of a nazirite. Or, entrusting animals to a shepherd who we know will allow the animals to graze on someone else property. Or, the potential of causing harm in any way to others, such as selling idols, building places of worship for pagans, selling bad food, selling sick animals without the others knowledge, selling wild animals that are used to kill people for sport, or doing anything that would strengthen the hand of sinners and evil people.

#### **MISHNA AVODA ZARA 16A**

מתנ"י אין מוכרין להם דובין ואריות וכל דבר שיש בו  
נזק לרבים אין בונין עמהם בסילקי גרדום איצטדייא  
ובימה אבל בונין עמהם  
בימוסיות ובית מרחצאות הגיע לכיפה שמעמידין בה

*One may not sell bears, or lions, or any item that can cause injury to the public, to gentiles. One may not build with them a basilica, a tribunal [gardom], a stadium [itztadeyya], or a platform. But one may build with them small platforms [bimmusiot] and bath-houses. Even in this case, once he reaches the arched chamber in the bath where the gentiles put up objects of idol worship, it is prohibited to build it.*

People who do these things and those things that are related are said to have violated the command of לִפְנֵי עֵוֶר. This simple verse on לִפְנֵי עֵוֶר prohibiting the placement of stumbling blocks before the blind is in fact a very concise way of constraining many important issues related to ethics and morality. It is a very important aspect to consider the weak and not take advantage of them. This command is a principle that is demanded of persons, individuals, and communities, society, to do everything possible to protect the weak, the vulnerable, and the helpless. This is one of the reasons why the FDA (Food and Drug administration) was created in the USA to protect the public from people who would deceive the public when selling food, drugs, or consumable items. (Perform a search on why the FDA was created will illustrate this principle of לִפְנֵי עֵוֶר.)

The idea of putting a stumbling block before others is a significant problem. Paul speaks of this stumbling block to the Romans by comparing two forms of righteousness, one that is by faith, and one that is without faith.

**Romans 9:22-33**

*9:22 What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? 9:23 And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, 9:24 even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also*

*from among Gentiles. 9:25 As He says also in Hosea, 'I will call those who were not My people, 'My people,' And her who was not beloved, 'beloved.' 9:26 'And it shall be that in the place where it was said to them, 'you are not My people,' There they shall be called sons of the living God.' 9:27 Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, 'Though the number of the sons of Israel be like the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that will be saved; 9:28 for the Lord will execute His word on the earth, thoroughly and quickly.' 9:29 And just as Isaiah foretold, 'Unless the Lord of Sabaoth had left to us a posterity, We would have become like Sodom, and would have resembled Gomorrah.' 9:30 What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; 9:31 but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. 9:32 Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone, 9:33 just as it is written, 'Behold, I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, And he who believes in Him will not be disappointed.'* (NASB)

Paul writes in a way explaining how the Lord God is working to show His glory in both the Jew and the non-Jew and is contrasting the difference between two forms of righteousness (i) by faith, and (ii) without faith. In *Romans 9:31-33* Paul goes on to explain that the stumbling stone that is before Israel, is not the Torah, but is related to this misunderstanding on righteousness, that obeying God's Word must be coupled to faith with the right intention. As we saw previously from the Tanakh, the people at various times were simply going through the motions in relation to obedience to the mitzvot (commands of God). When we take the time to study these things, we begin to see the weightiness of the principle of לִפְנֵי עוֹר. This is related to the early church fathers who spoke such anti-Semitic rhetoric against the Jewish people and the Torah. Paul showed his grief over

Israel in relation to the Lord God dwelling in the heart to empower one to overcome sin, and obey the commands, as opposed to the one who tries to keep the commands of God without the help of God's indwelling Spirit. This begs the question, "*Could it be that the Torah is not the 'stumbling stone' as it is depicted by those who took Paul's words and spun them into an anti-Torah rhetoric?*"

In *Romans 9:33* Paul writes "*just as it is written, 'Behold, I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, And he who believes in Him will not be disappointed (ashamed).'*" Paul speaks of Yeshua and faith in him as being a stumbling block. This is connected to Yeshua saying in *John 14* that believing in him the Father in heaven will send His Holy Spirit as the helper to dwell in us. Paul admitted that the Torah was holy and good and just. (*Romans 7:12*) In these passages from the book of Romans, Paul is reasoning out what we are told in the Tanakh concerning the commands of God. The stumbling block that is being spoken of is not the Torah, it is related to whether one submits to the righteousness of God or to our own form of righteousness. Paul wrote in *Romans 10* that Moshe wrote of the righteousness that is in the midst of the Torah, a righteousness that is by faith. Just as in Peter wrote according to *2 Peter 3:16* saying, "*He (Paul) writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.*" We continue to see this very thing today in the anti-Torah theologies being taught in the Church. What Paul is teaching in the book of Romans is not about the doing away with the Law of God (*Romans 10:4*), he is calling God's people to repentance, just as we see again and again in the prophets (from the Tanakh) and Yeshua Himself calling God's people to repentance. The word repent literally means to turn in a different direction. This call to repentance is coupled to the mercy / grace of God who patiently waits for us to seek His help to overcome sin in our lives. This is what Paul meant when he wrote in *Ephesians 2:1* which states "*And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins.*" The word "*dead*" in this passage is the same word used when Lazarus (*John 11*) is described as being dead. A dead person can't do anything on their own. It is in this way that we reason

of ourselves that we cannot do anything of ourselves without God's help, even coming to faith in the Messiah! Paul wrote in *Romans 10:9* saying, "*That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.*" He also wrote in *I Corinthians 1:23-24* saying, "*But we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*" These things teach us that Yeshua will either be a stepping stone into heaven or a stumbling stone into hell. No one can be neutral about Yeshua the Messiah! Either you will be lifted up in Him, or you will fall because of Him. You cannot walk around or ignore Him. Either you're saved by Him or you're judged by Him. These are what the Scriptures say, that every person who lives will one day encounter Yeshua, it is inevitable! He is unavoidable and inescapable! One may ignore these things in this life, but one day we will all be faced with what we did with the message that we are being given here from the Scriptures.