

If a man will have a wayward and rebellious son... they shall say to the elders of the city, “This son of ours is wayward and rebellious; he does not listen to our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard.” (21:18,20)

The *ben sorer u'moreh*, wayward and rebellious son, has to be one of Jewish society's greatest tragedies. A child so evil that his parents bring him to *bais din*, rabbinical court, where, upon confirmation of his nefarious acts of gluttony and derogation of his parents, he will be executed, is unusual and tragic. His actions indicate a complete lack of restraint necessary to lead an observant and holy life. While this concept is quite difficult for anyone not steeped in Torah to understand, let alone accept, it is primarily due to their not being steeped in Torah that grasping the true egregiousness of this evil and – yes – the positive aspect of the punishment is so difficult. *Yamus zakai v'al yamus chayav*, “Let him die while he is still innocent, and let him not die when he is guilty (of capital crimes).” The world that concerns us as believing Jews is that of the spirit, *Olam Habba*. This way, as a result of his *teshuvah*, repentance, and accompanying punishment, he is still able to enter into the eternal world. Furthermore, based upon the *halachic* criteria required to establish one as a *ben sorer u'moreh*, it is virtually impossible for such a case to ever occur. Thus, *Chazal* posit that the Torah wrote the case for the purpose of serving as an educational guide for parents, a sort of parenting primer, on how to imbue their children with Torah values.

Is there anything worse than a *ben sorer u'moreh*? Could there be a worse situation than a child who demonstrates such disrespect that his parents are no longer sure that society is safe from him? Can one even begin to imagine the torment and agony of parents who must take their son to a *bais din*, knowing fully well the consequences of a guilty verdict issued against their son?

I think that the answer is: yes. There is a worse scenario than the one that the Torah presents. When the parents present their child before *bais din*, they declare: *B'neinu zeh*, “This son of ours is wayward and rebellious.” The word *b'neinu*, our son, makes a powerful point. They still identify with the child as *b'neinu*, “our son.” There is no question that what they are going through is beyond tragic, and no parent should ever have to suffer so, but, at least they still consider him to be their son. Yes, there is worse than *ben sorer u'moreh*: when the parents refuse to say *b'neinu zeh*, “our son”; when they no longer identify with their child; when he is an aberration who just happens to share their last name. “He is not ours. We wrote him off a long time ago”: that tragedy is worse.

I know that I am treading on sacred ground, and perhaps, years ago, I would have shied away from writing on this subject, but...

Sadly, some people may not feel the sense of instinctual unconditional love that a parent should have for a child. They simply do not have the nurturing instinct that is part and parcel of the parenting institution. Parenting is not a part-time vocation. It is a lifelong responsibility which some

people simply cannot handle. Others may be great parents when they have a perfect child. When they are challenged by: a discipline problem; feelings of envy for everything they did not have and their child has; an inability to cope; negated personal tenets; their own lack of success in life underscored by spoiled children – some parents sadly lose their ability to love.

For the most part, the parent that neglects a child is a person who was never taught to love. A child who was not loved does not know how to love. This is a reality that we must accept. People who have suffered abuse, lack of love, resentment, denigration as a child are unable to show love as an adult. Rather than focus on the negatives, which I will leave to the professionals who, lamentably, are very busy, I will cite instances of positive parenting.

A child remembers his parents' love. A child never forgets his parents' lack of love. Yes, we have excuses: "I am busy"; "I have to work two jobs to make ends meet"; "I am exhausted"; "I go to *shul* to *daven* – not to be a policeman". "My father was no different with me." The list goes on, but children remember everything. Even the *ben sorer u'moreh* is acutely aware that his parents said, "*Bneinu zeh.*" Some children remember on their own; others require a subtle reminder. No one wants to have their parents' sacrifices and love thrown in to their faces on a constant basis. When sincere love is instinctually administered, it is remembered. When it is thrown in one's face, it is resented.

There is a well-known story concerning the life of *Horav Yaakov David Willowsky, zl*, who lived in Tzfas, after first being *Rav* in Slutzk, Poland. One year, on his father's *yahrtzeit*, *Rav Willowsky* came to *shul* early, walked over to his *shtender*, lectern, stood there for a few moments and began to weep. While a parent's *yahrtzeit* is an emotional time, his father had passed away over a half a century earlier at the age of eighty (which at that time was considered quite old). A close friend pointed this out to him, somewhat surprised by this public display of emotion.

The *Ridbaz* (as he was popularly known) explained with the following story. "When I was young, my father arranged for me to be availed the services of the finest private tutor. A solid Torah education was the most important thing to my parents. It was not cheap; in fact, at the rate of one ruble per month, it was quite expensive, especially given the fact that my parents were poor.

"My father earned a living by making brick furnaces. One winter, there was a shortage of bricks, thereby impeding my father's ability to pay the tutor. After three months passed without payment, the tutor sent home a note: 'Unless payment is received on Sunday, Yaakov David should not bother coming.' My parents were, of course, devastated. My learning meant the world to them. When my father heard that a wealthy man sought a brick furnace for his soon-to-be-married son, and money was no object, my father jumped at the opportunity. Since he had no bricks, he sat down with my mother to discuss the options and, after some discussion, they decided to take apart our furnace and deliver it brick by brick to the wealthy man. My father received six rubles for his troubles – and I returned to the tutor, my learning uninterrupted!

“That winter was bitterly cold, and we all froze and shivered. This was their way of teaching me the importance of Torah learning and how much one must be willing to sacrifice for it.

“I can never forget that cold frigid winter. I can also never forget my parents’ boundless love for me and for Torah. They did everything, so that their precious child could grow up to be a *talmid chacham*, Torah scholar. Today, on my father’s *yahrtzeit*, I stopped for a moment to pause and reflect on their love. How can I not weep?”

Children remember. So does a *talmid*, student.

Horav Yaakov Yitzchak Ruderman, zl, Rosh Yeshivah of Ner Israel, was a close *talmid* of the *Alter* of Slabodka, *Horav Nosson Tzvi Finkel, zl*. The *rosh yeshivah* took special interest in the young *illui*, who was tender in years, but brilliant in mind. He saw in him the future Torah leader that he would become. *Rav Ruderman* would often recall the extreme fatherly love exhibited to him as a young student by the venerable *mussar* and Torah personality, who was responsible for molding the lives of many of the of the twentieth century Torah giants. The following incident played over in *Rav Ruderman’s* mind as a testament to his revered *rebbe’s* love.

“I was explaining a *chiddush*, novel, innovative *Talmudic* interpretation, to the *rosh yeshivah*. He was peppering me with questions in an attempt to establish the integrity of my *chiddush*. I defended my position. (It was an elevated moment of *rischa d’Oraisa*, passion/heat of studying Torah.) In the midst of our exchange, *Rav Leizer Yudel (Horav Eliezer Yehudah Finkel, zl, son of the Alter and future Mirrer Rosh Yeshivah)* entered the *bais medrash* doorway. The *Alter* had not seen his son in seven years, yet he hardly looked at him, as we continued our spirited conversation. Once we concluded, the *Alter* greeted his son warmly and lovingly.

“I followed them out the door, as the *Rebbetzin* approached the *Alter* and asked, ‘Why did you ignore our Yudel?’

“‘I was in the midst of speaking in learning with Yaakov Yitzchak,’ he replied.

“‘But Leizer Yudel is your son!’ she protested.

“‘So, too, is Yaakov Yitzchak my son,’ he replied.

“He said this to the *Rebbetzin*, not far from my ears. I knew that he meant what he said. He was such a teacher, such a *rebbe*. With such a *rebbe*, could there have been any question with regard to accepting his authority?”