

## For G-d has heeded the cry of the youth as he is, there. (21:17)

Avraham *Avinu* had a son, Yishmael, who deviated from the *derech*, path, which his father had surely encouraged him to follow. Likewise, Yitzchak *Avinu* had a son, Eisav, who paved for himself a path to infamy. Two sons – two *reshaim*, wicked men; yet, Yishmael repented, while Eisav died as he had lived – a *rasha*. One might suggest that Yishmael was made of finer spiritual material, better *middos*, character traits. This is not true. The angel told Hagar that her son would be a *pera adam*, a wild man, similar to a wild donkey-- his hand in everything and everyone's hand against him. Yishmael would be a wild man, a bandit, reviled by everyone. This certainly does not speak well of his character traits. Indeed, the **Chafetz Chaim, zl**, addressed the concept of *pera adam* in association with the Arab riots of the late 1920's. These Arabs were a murderous scourge wreaking evil and brutality on any innocent person who happened to be in their way.

The sage disclosed that he would, indeed, have liked to go to *Eretz Yisrael*, but these people manifested a dual *tzarah*, trouble. He expounded that the angel designated Yishmael as a *pera adam*. The appellation seems to be presented in the wrong sequence. When we describe a person, he might be an *adam savlan*, patient man; *adam ra*, evil man; or *adam kaasan*, angry man; but, in all instances, the word *adam* precedes the epithet. Concerning Yishmael, it is the other way around; *pera*, wild, precedes the *adam*. The *Chafetz Chaim* explained that most people are first an *adam*, human being, and then the appellation follows, describing what kind of human being he is. Yishmael, however, was first a *pera*, wild animal. His humanness followed his savagery. The *pera* was his essence. The *adam* is the nickname. It is secondary to his savage nature.

As such, Yishmael the savage, despite growing up in Avraham's home, worshipped idols, murdered and plundered; he was driven away from home and went on to live in the wilderness as a thief who robbed travelers. Yet, later on in life, he repented.

Yitzchak's son, Eisav, seems to have been a much better-- certainly better behaved-- son. He respected his parents, yet went about his own way, as a hunter, philanderer, murderer, thief and idolater. Eisav took his evil to the grave. He never repented. What was the difference between these two sons who both had brothers that achieved the pinnacle of observance, reaching Patriarchal status? Their lives appear to have been similar. Yet, in death, one repented –and the other remained resolute in his evil.

The *Alter, zl, m'Slabodka*, **Horav Nossan Tzvi Finkel**, addresses this question. His response is compelling and certainly warrants its own discussion. He explains that the difference lies in the parental reaction to his son's evil. Avraham sent Yishmael away, despite the pain that this action incurred. Eisav continued to live at home, until that time that he chose to leave. At times, we must demonstrate that certain activities are unacceptable. It will hurt. It will appear to be cruel. It is what we might refer to as tough love. For the sake of the child, the parents have to make a painful

decision. Yishmael finally came to terms with his iniquitous behavior, understanding that his father had done what was best for him, and, eventually, he repented.

Eisav had it all. He lived like the *rasha* that he was, yet remained home, seemingly not receiving any consequences or chastisement for his behavior. He probably thought that he had gotten away with it. Why, then, should he repent? After all, what did he do wrong? If he could pull the proverbial wool over his father's eyes, why could he not do the same to everyone else? Repenting is only for those who are weak at heart.

We elaborate on this concept of tough love, an idea that has been popularized by the secular world. As pointed out by Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski, however, the concept of tough love heralds back to *ben sorer u'morer*, wayward and rebellious son, whose parents literally turn him into *bais din*, Jewish court, for punishment. As a practicing psychiatrist, Dr. Twerski states that the only way that a person who is plagued by an addiction will eventually be cured is through tough love. The parents, at times, must act as if they are insensitive and uncaring – when, in truth, they are tearing themselves apart.

Hashem is all merciful. Yet, in the Torah, He advocates that the parents of the wayward and rebellious son take their child to court, which, likely, means having him executed. Hashem knows that the punishment is merciful in comparison to the alternative.

While the concept of applying tough love must be tailored to every case individually, at times it is necessary, but it should be carried out only under the advice of a competent, experienced professional. Every child is different; every situation is different. This is not a “one size fits all” cure. It is to be used only in extreme situations which call for such radical “therapy”.

We are living during a period in which we see good boys and girls from wonderful G-d-fearing homes wandering off the path of observance. There is no longer such a phenomenon of a stereotypical family which has among its offspring a child whose sense of security has plunged so low that he or she must do “something else” to garner attention, to cry out from the pain they suffer. It can happen – and does happen – in the finest and the best families, that adolescents and teenagers, often in genuine distress, act out-- or act on-- their miseries. They feel a lack of acceptance in their community, their *shul*, their school, so they go elsewhere – where they feel secure. This is neither the place, nor the forum, for addressing the multifold issues involved. This is a job for the professionals far more qualified than I. While on the subject of Eisav and Yishmael and the concept of tough love, however, I reminded myself of a story I wrote a number of years ago, which has lost neither its impact nor its timeliness.

Parents never cease loving their child, despite the immeasurable heartache and agony they experience when the child rebels. Some parents are stronger than others; thus, they continue trying, hoping, long after the average person would have given up. The following letter was penned by someone who “made it back.” It is a son's tribute to a father who suffered the agony, made a

tough decision, and was fortunate enough to see that his everlasting love made a difference. The father refused to give up on his own son – even though, for all intents and purposes, the casual spectator looking through a myopic lens might not have thought so.

“Until a few years ago, I did not take anything seriously. I was not like the rest of my class. Having graduated from *yeshivah* high school, I was undecided about what to do next. I was neither interested in continuing my Jewish education, nor was I ready to begin college right away. I thought I would just drift around for a while and then get a job.

“My parents were obviously not very pleased with my decision, but, at that point, what my parents wanted did not carry much weight in my life. Regrettably, during this time, I fell in with a group of like-minded fellows who were not Orthodox. At first, I figured that they would not influence me, but I was dead wrong. It did not take long before I became like them: no interest in Judaism. *Shabbos* and *kashrus* became relics of my past. Indeed, my entire life became a haze: no direction, no meaning, no value.

“My parents were devastated. While they did not expect me to become a rabbi, they certainly did not expect this. As well as having destroyed my life, I was on the way to destroying my family. It got to the point that, due to the adverse influence I was having on my younger siblings, my father asked me to leave the house. When I moved out, I said some cruel and vicious things to my father. I can remember him standing silently by the door, with my mother crying at his side.

“Looking back, I realize that what I saw in them as a weakness was actually incredible strength of character. A year went by, and I had no contact with anyone in my family. I missed them very much, but I was afraid that, if I contacted them, it would be perceived as a weakness on my part.

“One morning, I was shocked to find my father standing outside the door to my apartment building. He looked at me with tired, worn eyes and asked if we could talk. I was stubborn and obnoxious. I only nodded. We walked to a corner coffee shop, where we sat down to talk. My father opened up. He said that everyone missed me and that, despite my absence, I had been in their hearts and minds every moment that I was gone. I saw the hurt in his eyes, eyes that had long ago stopped crying – because he had no more tears. He told me how my mother agonized over what had happened, blaming herself for not having been there for me. Why did he come? He came because he had one last request: no lecture; just one last favor. He wanted me to drive with him to Monsey, New York, to recite *Tehillim* at the grave of a certain *tzaddik*. I looked at him incredulously, and then he began to cry. Bitter tears streamed down his face, as he asked me to please grant him this one request. As far removed as I was from *Yiddishkeit*, I was still moved by his request.

“I told my father that that particular day was impossible, because I had plans to go with my friends to Atlantic City that night. I would go with him another time. He reached across the table and took my hands in his, looking at me with his tear-streaked, sad face. He said nothing – just stared and wept. I felt my own eyes begin to water, and – rather than have him see me cry – I just agreed to

meet him later on that day.

“I made the necessary apologies to my friends. Atlantic City would have to wait. Later on that day, I drove with my father up to the cemetery in Monsey. We did not talk much during the trip. I remember getting out of the car with my father and walking over to one of the graves. He placed some rocks on top of the grave and gave me a *Tehillim*. Anybody who walked by would have seen a bizarre sight: my father – standing there in his long black frock, a black hat perched on his head; and me – with my leather bomber jacket and jeans. We did not stay long. Ten minutes is all it took, and soon we were on our way back. We talked as much on the return trip as on the way in – very little.

“My father dropped me off and walked me to my apartment building. I will never forget the words he told me that day. He said, regardless of what had occurred between us, and no matter what might happen in the future, I was always going to be his son, and he would always love me. I was emotionally moved by his words, but I did not manifest the spiritual inspiration that he hoped would occur that day. I shook my head at his words, and we parted company.

“The next morning I woke up to some shocking news. On their return trip from Atlantic City, my friends had been involved in a head-on collision with a tractor-trailer rig. They did not survive the accident. Had I not gone with my father that day, I would have been in that car.

“As I write this letter, I am overwhelmed with emotion. I made a *Bris* for my *bechor*, firstborn, today. My father was *sandek*, and, as he held my son on his lap, our eyes met, and we smiled. It was as if we had finally reached the end of a long arduous journey.

“We have never talked about that trip to the cemetery; nor did I ever tell my father about my friends’ untimely death. I just walked into their home that evening and was welcomed with open arms. No questions asked, no accusations, no answers. I just know that, sitting here late at night with my son in my arms, I will try to be the father to him that my father was to me.”

Returning to our original question, we may suggest another difference between Eisav and Yishmael. Shlomo *Hamelech* says (*Mishlei* 19:25), “When you smite the scorner, the naïve one will become prudent.” There is a *leitz*, scorner, whom the *Midrash (Rabbah Shemos 27:6)* says refers to Amalek; and a *pesi*, imprudent one, whose sin is different, and thus, does not require the same punishment. Why is Amalek referred to as a *leitz*? He is the archetype of evil; a *rasha* – not a *leitz*.

**Horav Yitzchak Hutner, zl**, explains that a *leitz* is someone who looks for a weakness in any edifice/organization/endeavor of importance with the express goal of demolishing the entire structure. Amalek, who “coincidentally” was Eisav’s grandson, sought to undermine the miracles Hashem wrought for us, to transform that which was significant and compelling into something inconsequential. *Maharal* explains that Amalek personifies a nation that takes reality and divests it of its distinction, converting it into nihilism, casting it to oblivion.

Amalek inherited the denigration gene from his grandfather, Eisav. The very significance of a person meant nothing to him. His persona pompously gave him the platform from which to expound and put down anyone and everything. He did not necessarily act sinfully. He first transformed his desired activity into something “good.” So, why should he repent?

Yishmael, on the other hand, was a *pesi*, an imprudent son, who acted without thinking; albeit acting out his evil fantasies, he did not live for the express purpose of committing evil for evil’s sake. He had his desires which he sought to satisfy. If, in the course of carrying them out, he broke the law and someone was hurt – too bad. He did not care – but, unlike Eisav, he did not plan it this way. He was simply imprudent – a *pesi*. At the right time, in the proper venue, he would repent.