

If a man will have a wayward and rebellious son, who does not listen to the voice of his father and the voice of his mother. (21:18)

In the *Talmud Sanhedrin* 71a, *Chazal* teach, “There never was, nor will there ever be, such a thing as a *ben sorer u’moreh*, ‘wayward and rebellious son’. Why, then, do we have this law? So that you may inquire into it and receive reward (by your inquiry).” Our sages give us the comforting assurance that the *ben sorer u’moreh* is not a reality in our history. Never have we had— nor will we ever have— to deal with a child whose rebellious behavior meets all of the criteria of the law which classifies him utterly beyond redemption. Execution is the only solution to this evil seed. The law was given to us primarily as an academic challenge designed to promote study, so that we will thereby gain the knowledge necessary to be better parents and educators.

A detailed study of the law and its required criteria teach us that one primary premise must be in effect for the laws of *ben sorer* to be carried out. In order for the wayward son to incur the death penalty, not only must his actions reflect total brutality and lustfulness, but there also can be no reason to think for even a moment that his parents have in some way reneged their responsibility as parents. Only if, as far as human judgment can determine, the parents have completed their obligation to the fullest extent, and no other set of parents could have succeeded, can the judges rule that this boy’s continued inclusion in human society cannot possibly succeed. If they see that continued life only means deterioration of life and soul, death may be viewed as actually saving his soul.

The boy’s education began by following his parents’ example. They demonstrated to him by their personal conduct that a Jew can joyfully subordinate himself to the will of Hashem. They have shown him how a life of conviction and observance banishes all that is sordid and ignoble in life. The genuine Jew who practices what he learns and preaches, to whom observance is not a rote execution of something he must do but a passionate commitment willfully carried out, sets a fine example of early educational guidance for his child. This is how and where it begins: at home.

The early childhood home education established the foundation for a follow-up education in an institution which reflected Torah ideals, and in which the parents respected and bolstered the work carried out by wholly devoted *rebbeim* – devoted to the Torah, the school and the child. This boy’s entire upbringing was focused on preparing him for a lifetime of service to the Almighty. A home in which parents have fulfilled their duty *vis-à-vis* their son, supported his teachers in an institution whose faculty represent and reflect the paragon of morals and ethics, cannot produce a son whose character is so gross and brutal that there can be no redemption for him other than cutting his mortal life short. Such a home, such an education, will not produce such depravity.

Let us focus on the parental complaint upon presenting their son before *bais din*, the judicial court, which will decide his future. They say, “Our son is wayward and rebellious; he does not listen to

our voices; he is a glutton and a drunkard.” Translated in modern-day terminology: “Our son is disobedient; he ignores our directive; he is lustful and out of control.” **Horav S. R. Hirsch, zl**, views these grievances as the Torah’s definition of symptomatic incorrigibility. The boy who fits this description is intractable and, sadly, unredeemable.

Rav Hirsch explains that *sorer* implies a persistent straying from the Torah path which he was raised to follow. *Moreh* is related to *morah/horaah*, teaching, implying a self-willed personality, whereby he not only does not follow what he is supposed to do, but he, in fact, does precisely the opposite – what he should not do. *Rav Hirsch* cites the *Sifri* that says: *Moreh – she’moreh l’atzmo derech acheres*, in open opposition, virtually as a matter of principle. The *Sifri* continues: *Sorer al divrei aviv, u’morah al divrei imo; sorer al divrei Torah, u’moreh al divrei dayanim*. “The boy responds to his father with *sorer* – passive disobedience, ignoring what his father asks him to do, or in modern-day parlance, ‘He couldn’t care less what his father tells him to do.’ Concerning his mother’s wishes, he reacts with open defiance. Similarly, he quietly ignores the Torah’s commands, disregarding its laws, being heedless of its statutes. Torah observance means nothing to him. He could not care less. With regard to the Torah’s spokesmen, the spiritual leaders who disseminate and guide the nation, he confronts them with contempt, impugning the integrity of their leadership, perverting their every word.”

Interestingly, we see the discrepant roles of father and mother. The father is compared to the Torah, setting the general guidelines of commitment; the mother, however, is equated with the *dayanim*, who carry out and see to it that the people adhere to the Torah. Likewise, the mother is the one who performs the most significant function on which everything depends: namely, the practical training of the child.

The *ben sorer u’moreh* is perverse, obstinate and intransigent. Under normal circumstances, this form of disobedience might be considered maturation, developing into a man, acting out his age. However, *zolel v’sovei*, stubborn, defiant conduct, as evidenced by gluttony and drunkenness, occurring at a time when the boy is *bar-mitzvah* and going through a period of moral awakening, makes it clear that any attempt at character training will only end in failure. His greed and desire for food transcend any moral considerations. This is the worst type of moral degradation. Nothing – absolutely nothing – matters when he wants to satisfy himself. This is the *zolel*. The *sovei* is one to whom drink takes precedence over all else. This boy has no honor, no dignity, no remorse. It is all about “him.”

Rav Hirsch recapitulates the criteria: Willful, perverse disobedience in general, pilfering at home to satisfy his needs; keeping bad company, having no compunctions about destroying the lives of his parents and depriving them of happiness. Perhaps in the contemporary society that surrounds us, we might discover such an evil seed, but he will probably be the product of a dysfunctional family situation. It is always “something.” This is why the *ben sorer u’moreh* never was and never will be. The lessons it imparts, however, are too valuable to ignore.