

"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)

The *halachos* which apply to the *ben sorer u'moreh*, the wayward and rebellious son, are difficult to grasp. Indeed, *Chazal* comment that the unusual demands made by *halacha* basically prevent this phenomenon from occurring. Nonetheless, many important lessons in education and parenting may be derived from it. Let us focus on a few of these lessons.

We are taught that the *ben sorer u'moreh* does not "just happen". A definite pathology is the precursor of such a child's problem. It all starts with his parents, even before he is born. The laws of *ben sorer u'moreh* are juxtaposed to the laws of *y'fas to'ar*, the woman who has totally captivated the Jewish warrior through her physical attractiveness, so that he becomes obsessed with marrying her. Recognizing the overpowering influence of man's environment and understanding human weakness -- especially in matters of the heart -- the *Torah* provides a specific dispensation in this instance. Certain contingencies must be met, however. Although the *Torah* sympathizes with man's human failings, it nevertheless points to the devastating consequences of a marriage founded in desire and nurtured by passion.

A home built in deference to the *yetzer hara*, evil inclination, a home where vain attractions reign, cannot be a stable one. What type of children can one expect to rear if physical beauty replaces sanctity, if emotions and temptation triumph over conscience and intellect? Such a home will eventually be torn apart. The father and mother will no longer speak in the "same voice." Harmony and unity will be nonexistent. Is it any wonder that a rebellious son who disregards his parents' authority is the result of such an environment? Finally, the parents agree on one thought, "*Our son is a ben sorer u'moreh.*" Parents must realize that to exert positive influence on children they must present an ideal picture of perfect harmony which reflects their deep respect and admiration for one another.

Another fascinating criteria must be met before the sentence of death can be passed on the this boy. *Chazal* teach us that the parents must declare that they have never neglected any aspect of their son's upbringing, that they did everything possible to be perfect role models for him. They must be able to declare in all sincerity that their son is a "bad seed." They must honestly attribute his errant behavior to some instinctive flaw in his emotional makeup, thereby removing the onus of guilt from themselves. To such parents, *Horav S.R. Hirsch, z.l.*, responds in his inimitable way, "Which father or mother could truly get up and -- in all clear conscience -- declare, 'I did everything possible to help my child. I am in no way responsible for his present state.' To make such a statement is the antithesis of parenthood. To disclaim all responsibility is to avoid reality. Obviously it is more difficult to contend with some children than others, but which parent has the right to say, 'We did everything'? Parents may be frustrated, but when they "give up," it does not prove that they have done everything possible."

Horav Hirsch derives a profound and valuable lesson for Jewish family life from this law. The manner in which parents cope with their children's impropriety is probably the single most critical factor in a child's effective upbringing. When parents are confronted with a difficult situation regarding their child, they should first examine themselves. They should examine whether the blame is their's or a reflection of a deficiency on the part of their child. Are they prepared to assert that they had no part, be it intentional or not, in their child's misbehavior ? By absolving themselves of responsibility, they risk a tragic consequence -- the loss of their child. Conversely, by accepting the blame, they will not only be able to reach a positive solution to the problem, but they will also nurture a unique relationship with their child. This bond will be built upon mutual respect and admiration, rather than fear and intimidation. Parents must remember one critical point: Deferring responsibility will not rehabilitate their child!