

## **If a man will have a wayward and rebellious son. (21:18)**

Thus, one of the saddest situations in *halachah* begins. Parents attempt to raise a child, hoping that they are doing the "right job." Unfortunately, this boy exhibits behavior for which the death penalty is imposed upon him. While this boy has not done anything yet that would warrant execution, *Chazal* say, "Let him die while he is innocent, and let him not die when he eventually becomes guilty of a capital crime." *Halachah* imposes so many requirements before a boy may be deemed a *ben sorer u'moreh* that it is virtually impossible for it to occur. *Chazal* have, therefore, inferred that the laws of *ben sorer* exist as lessons in child-rearing for parents. Regrettably, the parents who need these lessons the most fail to make the inference.

*Chazal's* statement that the *Torah* delved into the mind of the *ben sorer* and saw his eventual outcome implies a powerful lesson. **Horav Aharon Kotler, zl**, derives from here that evil tendencies which manifest themselves early in a person's life can have a tragic effect over time. They grow with the person until they change the individual into an evil person. These traits must be addressed at the beginning of the young man's life.

The commentators wonder why the *ben sorer's* punishment is more stringent than that of the *rotzeach*, murderer. After all, the reason we execute the *ben sorer* is that his overwhelming lust to satisfy his physical desires will one day drive him to murder someone. If that is the case, his punishment should be equal to that of the murderer, but certainly not more! *Horav* Kotler explains that the *Torah* does not judge the murderer for the act of murder that he has perpetrated. He is not sentenced for individual or multiple murders which he has performed. The *Torah* assesses the *ben sorer* on the basis of what he will turn out to be. He will become a murderer who will commit violent crimes to satisfy his needs. When we judge the person, his nature and character, the punishment is much more severe than when we judge the specific act of violence which he has committed.

Regarding the *ben sorer's* future, we find the *Yerushalmi* in *Sanhedrin 8:7*, states, "Hashem gazed at the 'end' of this rebellious boy. To satisfy his lust, he would steal from people and even murder if anyone stood in his way. Ultimately, he will forget his *Torah* learning." *Chazal* have traced the *ben sorer's* increasingly destructive behavior, beginning with stealing from his parents. He continues his invidious behavior by stealing from others, to murder, -- ultimately to a total severance from his *Torah* learning. The sequence of events leading to his total spiritual extinction seems inconsistent. First, he abuses and steals from people; then he murders to satisfy his needs, and then -- the pinnacle of evil, the nadir of depravity - he forgets his *Torah* learning! This idea begs elucidation.

*Horav* Kotler explains that, indeed, his downfall begins with a simple distancing from *Torah*, a complacent attitude, an inappropriate perspective. His demeanor progresses downward until -- finally -- he forgets his learning. During this transition from bad to worse, the *ben sorer's* behavior also disintegrates. Nothing protects him from downfall, since he has begun to reject the *Torah*. As

long as he had been exposed to *Torah* learning, as long as the *Torah* played a role in his life, hope reigned that "*hamaor shebah machaziro lemutav*," its spiritual light would bring him back to the correct path. Yes, his rejection of *Torah* symbolizes the end of his rope; nothing can protect him from the clutches of the *yetzer hora*, evil inclination. He is destined for doom without hope for recovery.

A person's spiritual status is determined by his *Torah* involvement. Once his dedication to *Torah* wanes, he is vulnerable to moral depravation with no safeguard to rescue him. Is it any wonder that the *ben sorer* has nowhere to go but down?