

“If a man will have a wayward and rebellious son.” (21:18)

The incident of the *ben sorer u'moreh*, wayward and rebellious son, is one of the most serious tragedies related in the Torah. A boy who rejects his parents and everything they have taught him, a boy who rejects everything his parents stand for, truly represents a tragedy of unparalleled proportion. Being a Jewish parent is an awesome responsibility. Parents are the link between the Jewish generations that precede us and those who will follow in the future. Ours is the privilege to maintain the faith of the past, to give meaning and value to the present, and to ensure that there will be a future. Surely the parents of the *ben sorer* tried everything in their quest to raise their son. They were present for him at home and at school – unlike those parents who simply drop off their child at school and expect their responsibilities to their child to be carried out by the school. Although it is true that good schools teach, instruct, guide and even inspire, their mission succeeds only with the support of the parents. Regrettably, there are too many Jewish “orphans” who are dropped off at school, while the parents wait for the finished product.

No, our *ben sorer's* parents cared about him. In fact, they did everything to help him “make it”. Sometimes, however, everything is just not enough! We never stop loving our children regardless of what they do – and we never should. The heartache and agony which a parent sustains when his child rebels is immeasurable – or, at least, it should be. Some parents are stronger than others and continue trying, hoping, long after the average person would have given up. The following letter is about one such parent who was fortunate enough to see his everlasting love make a difference. The son who had “gone off” writes about his transformation and return – all because his father refused to give up on him.

“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 what to do. 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* were something of the 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 as well. 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 thought 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 viewed 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 on 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 there were 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 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 hand 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 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 that 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 were 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.”