

"When you go forth in battle against your enemies.... and you see amongst the captives a woman of goodly form... If a man has two wives... If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son ." (21:10,11,15,18)

There are a number of difficulties which confront us when we attempt to interpret the sequences and rationale of these *pesukim*. *Rashi* explains the juxtaposition of *pesukim* in the following manner: The Jewish soldier is permitted to marry the *ye'fas to'ar*, beautiful captive. This is a concession to human nature as opposed to the *yetzer hora*, evil inclination. In His infinite wisdom, Hashem saw that man, weak from the tension of war, would succumb to his base desires and marry this woman even illicitly. Consequently, He permitted marriage to her. Such a relationship, however, can not and will not bode well for the partners. After the external facade and allure wears off, the husband will eventually hate this "beautiful" captive. Ultimately, this "contrived" union will produce a *ben sorer u'moreh*, a stubborn and rebellious son.

This explanation is enigmatic in several ways. First, are we speaking about soldiers whose base desires govern their every endeavor? These are Jewish soldiers who would leave the battle front if they were concerned about concealed sins, such as speaking during putting on *tefillin*. These soldiers were *tzaddikim*, righteous Jews! How could they be ensnared by the *yetzer hora* to succumb to the blandishments of a gentile captive?

Second, the actual laws governing the *ben sorer u'moreh* present a major difficulty. The *ben sorer u'moreh* is put to death while yet a boy because his present actions will ultimately lead to disaster for himself and those around him. Predicting his treacherous destiny, the *Torah* sentences the *ben sorer u'moreh* to death, so that he dies while he is still innocent.

This severe punishment seems inconsistent with a precedent set by the *Torah* in regard to Yishmael. As he lay sick in the desert, dying of thirst, the angels complained that the man whose descendants would one day attempt to kill Avraham's descendants by thirst should not be permitted to live. Hashem responded that Yishmael was to be judged *oa tuv ratc*, "*as he is there*." Today, Yishmael was an innocent child who was thirsty; tomorrow is not the current concern. Is the *ben sorer u'moreh* to be treated differently than Yishmael? How is his behavior distinguished from that of Yishmael?

Horav Eliyahu Shlesinger, Shlita, asserts that the *ben sorer u'moreh's* aversion to listening and accepting guidance from anyone precludes his drive to perform *teshuvah*, repentance. He cites the *pesukim* which deal with *ben sorer*. These words constantly reiterate the *ben sorer's* refusal to listen to his parents and elders. Listening is a special quality which catalyzes us to *teshuvah*. Indeed, one who "listens" demonstrates an inclination to repent, which, in turn, offers hope for his complete "return."

Although Yishmael's destiny was similar to that of a *ben sorer u'moreh's*, his attitude at the time was different. There was hope for him, since he had not yet indicated any resistance to "listening." Indeed, Yishmael did repent in his later years. He even permitted Yitzchak to precede him at Avraham's funeral. In contrast, by his every action the *ben sorer u'moreh* demonstrates an unusual unwillingness to need anyone's guidance.

This is the reason that even a *tzaddik* can experience a spiritual downfall during times of tense stress. War is fraught with danger and anxiety. People tend to lose control of their "normal" faculties and react in idiosyncratic ways. At such a time, it is difficult to concentrate upon even the most simple spiritual message or advice. An individual who is protected against temptation under normal circumstances may "lose it" during such timorous moments. Even the great *tzaddik*, whom one would not expect to lust after such a woman, can have a spiritual collapse.

The key to achievement, the crucial determinant for spiritual security, is the ability to "listen" and the awareness that there are moments when "listening" is difficult. Especially at such times, one must muster up all his strength just for one simple thing - to listen to Hashem's message.