

Then his father and mother shall grasp him... They shall say... “This son of ours is wayward and rebellious.” (21:19,20)

The *Mishnah* in *Sanhedrin* (71a) states that both parents must be on the same page with regard to their son's behavior – or lack thereof. If the father claims that he is incorrigible and the mother disagrees, or vice versa, the boy is not deemed a *ben sorer u'moreh*. Furthermore, he is executed after being found guilty only if neither parent forgives him. If, however, even after he has been warned and has received *malkos*, lashes, he sins again, if his parents forgive him, he is not put to death. This idea requires elucidation. He is executed because of how he might possibly act down the road, when he is unable to steal from his parents. Just because his parents have decided to forgive him, he will not necessarily alter his errant behavior. He is a *ben sorer u'moreh*, who is a danger to society. As such, he has no place within the parameters of Jewish life. A monster does not change his stripes simply because his parents have forgiven his insidious behavior.

Horav Eliyahu Svei, zl, derives an important principle from here. The concept of *yamus zakai v'al yamus chayav*, “Let him (the *ben sorer u'moreh*) die while he is still innocent, rather than wait until he is guilty of capital offense” and, thus, deserving to die, applies only in such circumstance in which not one person believes in him. If, however, one person who, despite all that the perpetrator has done, still believes in him and asserts that he still harbors hope for him, he is not executed. If one of the parents of the *ben sorer u'moreh* forgives him, this means that one person – albeit his parent – believes that he is not a hopeless case; he can yet alter his life's miserable trajectory. Indeed, the mere fact that someone still believes in him can inspire him to believe in himself and catalyze change.

One of the most difficult subjects to write about is children rebelling against parents. Invariably, this also involves children who tend to move to the left of their parents' beliefs and practices, to the point that they even leave the fold entirely. Obviously, in the short space allotted for a *dvar Torah*, it would be impossible to render proper treatment of the topic. After perusing a number of scholarly and practical articles on the topic, however, I will present to the reading public some of the “rules of engagement.”

First, while parents may not always agree with one another, they must present a unified front, a voiced opinion in which both parents coincide with one another. All children are not the same. Some require greater care and attention than others. The *Kotzker Rebbe, zl*, teaches that nothing is as unequal as the equal treatment of children. Some require a greater expression of love, while others suffice with simply knowing that they are loved.

A child who leaves the fold does not act in a vacuum. Usually a pathology of circumstances and issues catalyze a child's decision to leave the religion which is so important and vital to his parents. He is not out to hurt them. He is acting out because he is deeply pained. With time, he will or will not return. How the parents react during this painful period will greatly impact his future

decisions. I must add that we do not have a one-size-fits-all remedy to this ordeal. Every child requires his own resolution; every parent can only do what he/she is capable of doing – and enduring. Life includes varied forms of pain. This is one of them.

I cite two vignettes which should engender serious contemplation. A young rabbi was sitting in the park learning with his student when an elderly gentleman approached them. He greeted them and immediately began talking about his parents who struggled with their religious observance. They were both from strictly observant homes. As a result, his maternal grandparents were not on the best terms with his parents. When he was five years old, the entire family (uncles, aunts, cousins) conducted the *Seder* at his grandparents' home. When it was time to search for the *afikoman* (which for many kids is the highlight of their *Seder* experience), all of the grandchildren eagerly rose from their seats to look for the hidden *afikoman*. As he rose from his seat, however, his grandfather put his hand on him and made him return to his seat. His grandfather then informed him that since his parents were no longer observant, he would have to sit out this part of the *Seder*. The man telling the story was currently in his early nineties. The pain he experienced that night as an innocent five-year old continued to haunt him to this very day.

The next story has a better ending, because in this instance, the parents were accepting. I must qualify the word "accepting": This does not mean they approved. A rabbi living in *Eretz Yisrael*, who was involved in outreach, was tested, by his own son, who rebelled against his parents' observant lifestyle. The father felt that their son's attitude toward religion would have a negative effect on his siblings. The mother agreed in principle, but was willing to take the chance, since as long as they kept an open door to their son, his actions and negativity would remain in the house – not in the street. One night, the distraught father was returning home from a lecture, when he heard an interview on the radio. The radio host was interviewing a professor who was a secular Jew. Surprisingly, he was the son of a distinguished *talmid chacham*, Torah scholar. The interviewer questioned the professor with regard to his last name, which was Russian Polish: "Why did you not Hebraisize your name like so many other individuals in your field?" "When I left the fold," he said, "my father was very upset with me. We always argued on *Shabbos*, which I refused to observe. We even fought on *Yom Kippur*. He asked me to leave his house. I did. Years have passed during which we had nothing to do with one another. My father is gone, and the only revenge that I can have on him now is that wherever his soul is in Heaven, he knows that his son, who carries his name, eats on *Yom Kippur*."

It is a sad story about a self-loathing son who blamed his failure on his father. Upon hearing the story, the rabbi broke down. He did not want to foster a relationship with his son that would engender such animus. He changed his attitude, and, with extreme patience and love, embraced his son – not his actions. It is the son's letter to the father that I feel we should all take to heart, because it allows us a window into the mind of someone who has become a victim to this spiritual scourge: "Dear father... We are both blind. You do not always see what I do for you, and I do not always see how much you have taught me. There is one primary error on your part with regard to how you view my actions. You think that I took the Tablets (*Luchos/Torah*) and just flung them to

the ground. That is not what happened. They were too heavy (for me), and they just simply dropped from my hands.”

Perhaps the next time we are confronted with such a situation, we might factor in this new insight into comprehending what has taken place.