

LOOKING DOWN THE ROAD

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

In this week's reading, Rashi, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, tells us to what extent the Torah demands an elevated standard of conduct. He warns us that even if we follow the letter of the law, but try to push the envelope — doing what we can get away with rather than what is truly correct — it will not work out well.

Our reading begins with the law of a soldier who is attracted to a beautiful captive among the conquered. The law required that he not act like those in other armies. He could not touch her. Rather, he could bring her home to eventually become his wife.

Yet even then, she was first required to dress in a plain fashion, and not do her hair or nails. There was a time when women would dress attractively and wear makeup in order to draw a soldier to her. Instead, the captive woman wore simple clothes and mourned her separation from her parents — for a month. The Torah required that he see her at her worst — and only then was he permitted to marry her if he still wishes to.

Yet Rashi goes further, noting the connection between the early parts of our reading. After the laws of the captive woman, the reading proceeds to laws of inheritance between the children of a favored vs. disfavored wife. And then, following that, we have the laws of a rebellious child who refuses to listen to his parents. What, indeed, is the link between these disparate laws?

Rashi answers: taking a captive as a wife leads to marriage with an unfavored, even hated spouse. This is not someone he will love and wish to be with for the rest of his life; he will tire of her. And this will lead in turn to him having a rebellious son.

This is not a guarantee. The Sages argue about whether the law of a rebellious son was ever implemented. Some say that it simply never happened that a son and his parents acted precisely as described, in order to implement this law. There is, to my knowledge, no similar argument about the law of the captured woman, implying that it did in fact occur.

Rather, Rashi is teaching us something that we can apply to many other areas of law, even today when we do not have a Jewish army, take captives during war, marry them, or practice polygamy (which the Sages forbade long before modern law, because only a person with the purest of conduct and motivations can do that correctly).

Rashi is telling us that following "the letter of the law" without its spirit is not enough. We must look

down the road and ask, are my actions leading me in the right direction? Am I headed towards more holy and godly conduct, or, Heaven forbid, in the opposite direction? This is true even when following the minimum standards set in the law.

This is what our Sages described as being "degraded with the Torah's permission." It is not enough to follow the very basics of the law, one must pursue a higher and more holy standard, and always ensure we are going in the right direction. And when better to correct our course, than with the approach of the Days of Judgment?