

# THE WAYWARD SON - WHAT CAN HE TEACH US?

*by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann*

One of the most widely discussed (and perhaps misunderstood) sections of this week's Sidrah is the halacha (law) of the "Ben Sorer u-Moreh," the wayward and rebellious son. I once heard a secular Jew (who was evidently feeling some guilt about his lack of Torah observance) justifying himself by quoting the law of the Ben Sorer u- Moreh, who is put to death because of his rebelliousness. Because he, "does not hearken to the voice of his father and mother, and they discipline him, but he does not hearken to them (21:18)." (I fear that were we to take this description as literally as had this misinformed Jew, most of today's children would fall into this category!) "Imagine!" he wondered. "Put to death because of a little rebelliousness and disobedience!"

While it is beyond the scope of this short dvar Torah to delve into all the halachik intricacies of the Ben Sorer u-Moreh, we must at the very least know that the issues here are far more complicated than they first appear. Firstly, as the Talmud (Sanhedrin 72a) points out, the wayward and rebellious son is put to death not because of what he \*has done\*, but because of what he \*will eventually do\*. His behaviour is such that it is evident that he will with time degenerate into a repulsive person, guilty of the most serious crimes, including murder. "Let him die innocent, and let him not die guilty."

Secondly, so many detailed requirements are derived exegetically from this passage that it is virtually impossible for such a case to ever occur. Indeed, the Talmud (ibid. 71a) states that there never has been and never will be a "qualified" Ben Sorer u-Moreh. So why bother learning about him? Answers the Talmud: "Study (Torah - even its obscure sections), and you will receive reward." This "reward" can be understood simply as the Heavenly reward every Jew will eventually receive for the hours he has invested in limud ha-Torah (Torah study). Perhaps, however, we can interpret that the "reward" also refers to the deep understanding of chinuch (childhood education) which can be gained by thoroughly studying the laws of the wayward son. Hidden beneath the surface, many insightful lessons can be found to aid Jewish parents in ensuring that they do not raise their own "Ben Sorer u-Moreh."

The wayward child is punished because, "he does not hearken to the voice of his father and the voice of his mother." Shlomo haMelech says in Mishlei (22:15), "Carelessness is bound to the heart of the youth - the 'staff of rebuke' will remove it from him." Often parents refrain from rebuking their children, even when they know their child has done something wrong. True, it's wrong to constantly criticize and be negative, but a bit of well placed rebuke is a necessary part of chinuch. Especially, we must remember that part of education is to teach children the laws of derech erez (proper

conduct): to respect their parents, teachers and elders. The Ben Sorer u-Moreh "never heard the voice of his father and mother," rebuking him, and admonishing him for something he did wrong.

The Gemara (ibid.) derives from these words ("he does not hearken to our voice") that if one of the parents were deaf, the son can not become a Ben Sorer u-Moreh. This is difficult to understand: The words "he does not hearken" refer to the son, not the parents.

If, however, explains Mayana shel Torah, the parents turn a "deaf ear" to their own mussar - i.e. they chastise and criticize their son, yet they don't "practice what they preach", then their words will surely fail to make any lasting impression. To make use of the overused yet poignant example; it is comical to see a father interrupting his own shmooze to snap his fingers at his son to "get davening (praying) and stop fooling around."

Rabbi Peysach Krohn tells the story (and this story also applies to last week's dvar Torah on truthfulness) of the girl who, having forgotten to do her homework, comes to her mother just before leaving to school and asks her to sign the homework sheet anyway. "But, sweetheart, I can't do that," protests the mother. "That would be lying."

"Well," says the daughter, "it wouldn't really be lying. I wanted to do the homework, I just forgot. When you sign the sheet, you could have in mind that what you really mean is that I \*wanted\* to do the homework."

"But sweetheart, that's still lying. You didn't do the homework."

"But what about the time we were crossing over the border, and the customs man asked Tatty if we had bought anything, and our trunk was all full of stuff, and Tatty said, 'No.' And you told me that what he really meant is that, 'No, we don't have anything illegal.' Wasn't that also lying..." As the cliché goes, children do as we do, not as we say.

In a similar vein, the Darchei Teshuva explains in Tiferes Banim (I have not seen this inside, and thus cannot give you a page reference), "he does not hearken to the voice of his father and the voice of his mother," i.e. the wayward and rebellious son became this way because he never heard the voice of his father learning Torah. And he never heard the voice of his mother praying or saying Tehillim. When daddy came home from work, all he was interested in was the newspaper and his supper. Mommy preferred spending her spare time hearing the latest gossip rather than praying that her children should grow up to be talmidei chachamim (Torah scholars) and yirei shamayim (fearers of Heaven).

If we want children to grow up with love of the Torah, we must ourselves love the Torah, and show this to them. Imagine if Tatty never sat down to supper before learning at least a few minutes of Torah - what kind of impression would this make on the children! (I heard this example from Rav Yaakov Chanun, an educator from Eretz Yisrael.)

Perhaps it is not entirely by coincidence that the rebellious son is called Ben Sorer u-Moreh. Moreh

means rebellious, but it also means teacher. There is a lot for parents to learn from the never-to-be case of the Ben Sorer u-Moreh. We have just barely scraped the surface. Study, and you will receive reward.

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