

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Ki Teitzei (Devarim 21:10–25:19)
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Ki Teitzei – Lessons from the wayward and rebellious son

This week's Parsha of Ki Teitzei contains the strange case of the wayward and rebellious son ('Ben Sorer U'moreh'). The Torah instructs us to execute such a child before they can commit worse sins.

“If a man has a wayward and rebellious son who does not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother and they discipline him but he still does not listen to them, his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city and to the gate of his place. They shall say to the elders of his city: ‘This son of ours is wayward and rebellious, he does not obey us, he is a glutton and a drunkard’. And all the men of his city shall pelt him to death with stones and he shall die. You shall remove the evil from your midst. All of Israel will listen and fear.” (Devarim 21:18-21)

Why would parents voluntarily take their son to his death?! And why is it appropriate to punish a child with the death penalty when they are barely old enough to know right from wrong? Let's explore.

The Gemara¹ lists numerous conditions that must be met before a boy can be classified as a ben sorer umoreh. For example, the boy must steal money from his father and use it to buy a certain quantity of meat and a certain quantity of Italian wine. He has to consume the meat and wine in one sitting and in a certain location. The father and mother must have a similar appearance to each other, with a similar height and a similar voice. Both parents have to agree to have the boy declared a ben sorer umoreh. Then they have to voluntarily grab the son and take him to the judges so that he can be killed.

In fact, the Gemara states that there never was a ben sorer umoreh and there never will be one in the future!² This is puzzling. If such a case never happened and will never happen, then why is it included in the Torah? The Gemara explains: the Torah includes this case specifically so that we can learn the passage and receive reward for doing so. This passage is part of Hashem's Torah and therefore it is intrinsically valuable and worthy of our time and effort. Just like any other passage of the Torah, studying these words fulfils the mitzva of Torah study.

In addition, there are many important and practical lessons that we can learn from studying this strange case. Let's examine some of those lessons³:

Teaching children while they are young

The ben sorer umoreh has started life on the wrong track. This negative start will lead him to commit further sins. The Torah predicts that he will only get worse with time and therefore he should be put to death now, before his behaviour deteriorates further. This teaches us the importance of teaching and disciplining children correctly while they are young and their minds are fresh and receptive. The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot teaches us:

“Elisha ben Avuya said: One who studies Torah as a child, to what can he be likened? – to ink written on fresh paper. And one who studies Torah as an old man, to what can he be likened? – to ink written on smudged paper.” (Avot 4:25)

Of course, this doesn't exempt older people from learning Torah as well!

¹ Chapter 8 of masechet Sanhedrin.

² Sanhedrin 71a. A dissenting opinion is also given: “R' Yonatan said I saw a [ben sorer umoreh] and I sat on his grave”.

³ The first two ideas come from Rav Zev Leff.

The correct balance between spiritual and physical wellbeing

The Torah actually prescribes the death penalty to the ben sorer umoreh as an act of kindness. Such a child, with all these specific characteristics would otherwise inevitably grow up to commit many sins of a much worse nature. Thus, the Torah kindly wants to prevent them suffering tremendously in a spiritual sense. In order to save the child's neshama, the Torah cuts short his physical life. This provides a powerful lesson in the fundamental and supreme importance of our neshamot over our guf (body).

Tempering our physical desires

The ben sorer umoreh is guilty of giving in to his physical desires for meat and wine. This teaches the dangers of giving in to our physical desires too much. In a physical sense this can lead to an unhealthy diet and bad habits. And in a spiritual sense, it diminishes our ability to focus on serving Hashem rather than serving ourselves. If we get used to serving our own needs all of the time, we can become self-absorbed and egotistical. A healthier spiritual outlook is to focus on others. It is true that Hashem created us with physical needs that need to be appeased, and we must acknowledge where we are holding. But we need to reach the right balance. We should strive to maximise our spiritual pleasure of serving Hashem with simcha and reduce the focus on servicing our bodily desires.

Avoiding the slippery slope

The ben sorer umoreh has committed the relatively benign sin of consuming food in a gluttonous manner. However, from this, the Torah predicts that he will eventually suffer a spiritual decline. This child will grow up to commit many more sins of a much worse nature. This teaches us the insidious nature of the yetzer hara and the importance of avoiding the slippery slope. A small breach can often lead to a much larger misdemeanour. The yetzer hara is wily. For example, he may start by convincing us to walk past a non-kosher restaurant, since there is no sin in just having a look. Then he encourages us to just enjoy the smell, because surely there is no harm in that. Then he may encourage us to step inside to have a closer look. Before we know it, we find ourselves sitting at the table and eating treif! Being aware of this phenomenon can help us to stay strong and avoid the temptation at the outset. This is the main underlying reason why the Rabbanim often enact boundaries and fences around the commandments of the Torah.

The same voice

One of the criteria that must be satisfied before a child can be a ben sorer umoreh is that the parents have the same appearance and voice. If the parents are not of 'one voice' then the child cannot be held responsible for his misbehaviour. We may learn from this the importance of presenting a united front to our children. Children need a unified message from their parents or they may become confused. A husband and wife can often hold different views and inevitably will disagree with each other at times. As Rabbi Yaacov Lieder⁴ likes to say: "If my wife and I agree on everything then there is one too many of us!" However, Rabbi Lieder also teaches that it is important for parents to resolve their differences out of sight of the children, and to present a unified message in their presence.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to obtain the right balance between our physical and spiritual wellbeing. It's important to eat healthy, exercise and get enough sleep. It is also important to learn Torah, perform mitzvot and develop a meaningful relationship with Hashem.
2. Though our physical body is important and we sometimes need to satisfy its cravings, we should do so with the mindset of 'pacifying' it in order that our spiritual side can grow.
3. Be aware of the dangers of human nature, the yetzer hara and the slippery slope. The Rabbis have placed fences around the Torah for a good reason – they understood human nature! So too, we can be aware of our own areas of weakness and try to implement our own fences to protect ourselves.

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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⁴ Author of "14 kids and no theories".