

Shabbat Shalom, everyone.

I want to wish a *tzeischem l'shalom* to Eva and Josh Gonsler and family, who are making *aliya* this Monday. We wish them much success and happiness! May they go *me'chayil el chayil*, from strength to strength. We will certainly miss them, as they have been an important part of the shul for so long, and we all look forward to joining them in the Holy Land!

Thank you to the *drasha* sponsors, Dr. Allen Bennett and Rabbi Mordechai and Hadassah Bennett and family, who are sponsoring “*with appreciation to Rabbi Marwick for all the good he does.*” Thank you very much to the Bennett family for all the good they do for our shul and community. May they see much continued *nachas* from their entire family and be rewarded for their support of the shul with *bracha*, *hatzlacha*, and good health.

The chaos in Afghanistan is deeply disturbing and disappointing on many levels. Our thoughts and *tefillos* are with the Americans stuck there, the Afghans who, unfortunately, will now have to live under Taliban rule, and our brave soldiers who dedicated their lives over the past 20 years to the hope of helping build a better future for the people of Afghanistan. There are many lessons to be learned, and hopefully some soul searching and careful analysis will yield those results. May Hashem bring peace to the world.

As we get closer to the *Yamim Noraim*, and we are thinking about *teshuva* and the ability to change, I would like to speak today about a *mitzva* in Parshas Ki Seitzei that at face value seems quite disturbing-- the topic of the *ben sorer u'moreh*.

דברים פרק כא: (יח) כי יהיה לאיש בן סורר ומורה איננו שמע בקול אביו ובקול אמו ויסרו אתו ולא ישמע אליהם.

This Parsha describes an adolescent boy who is out of control. He indulges in too much meat, wine and possibly other intoxicating beverages, and he completely ignores his parents. At the end of the day, he is a rebellious teenager. He may be more extreme than most, but unfortunately, not as uncommon as we would hope...

What is the Torah's answer? It's not therapy, not parenting advice, not behavior modification or military academy; **but, instead, to kill the child.** Such an issue is certainly a vexing problem, but isn't this an extreme solution?

(ט) ותפשו בו אביו ואמו והוציאו אתו אל זקני עירו ואל שער מקמו:

(כ) ואמרו אל זקני עירו בננו זה סורר ומרה איננו שמע בקולנו זולל וסבא:

(כא) ורגמהו כל אנשי עירו באבנים ומת ובערת הרע מקרבך וכל ישראל ישמעו ויראו: ס

19. *his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the public place of his community.*

20. *They shall say to the elders of his town, "This son of ours is disloyal and defiant; he does not heed us. He is a glutton and a drunkard."*

21. *Thereupon the men of his town shall stone him to death. Thus, you will sweep out evil from your midst: all Israel will hear and be afraid.*

The **Mishna in Sanhedrin** explains the rationale:

בן סורר ומורה נידון על שם סופו, ימות זכאי ואל ימות חייב. שמיתתן של רשעים הנאה להן והנאה לעולם,

He's on the road to ruin and will likely end up committing a serious crime. Therefore, it's better that he be stopped now, before he self-destructs and brings others down with him.

What a troubling response to a most serious problem! Is that the Torah's answer to challenges--to assume the worst? To throw up our hands and give up immediately? And to hear this message in Elul of all months—how does this fit with the message of *teshuva*? "עד יום מותו תחכה לו אם ישוב מיד תקבלו" During the *Yomim Noraim*, we will declare in our *tefillos* that anyone can repent—until his dying day!

We will read about Yishmael and the principle of being judged *באשר הוא שם*, on the basis of our current condition.

What is the message and deeper meaning behind the Torah's answer to the wayward son?

I believe that to truly understand the message--we **must** read the written law together with the oral law. The Gemara in **Sanhedrin 71** brings the famous opinion that a *ben sorer u'moreh* never happened and will never happen. *בן סורר ומורה לא היה ולא יהיה ולמה נכתב בתורה אלא דרוש וקבל שכר*. The technical requirements are so intricate and cumbersome that such a result can never happen.

According to this viewpoint, the Torah's account of the *ben sorer u'moreh* is not intended as a practical lesson for how to deal with children, sin, or addiction. Practically speaking, the **real** message of *ben sorer u'moreh* is just the opposite of how it seems on the surface. There is never a case where we are permitted to give up on anyone...period. A case does not exist where we are allowed to give up on the wayward pre-teen because of his potential to commit serious crimes--and not even give him a chance, not wait for teshuva.

We never have the right to consider anyone as having reached the point of no return---such that **we** decide that he is beyond redemption, beyond rehabilitation. We must hope and believe and assume that there is always the potential for him to take ownership of his situation, and, as arduous and difficult as it may be, to reclaim his life.

So, this leaves us with a different question... Why teach about the *ben sorer u'moreh* at all? If it can never happen, why mention this wayward son and this approach?

כלי יקר: ואולי טעמו של דבר לפי שבן סורר ומורה לא היה ולא יהיה ולא נכתבה הפרשה כי אם כדי שישמעו הבנים ויראו ולא יעשו כדבר הזה, ומה שאמר וכל ישראל ישמעו היינו שישמעו פרשה זו ומשפט הכתוב בה ויראו הבנים מלמרות עיני כבודם של אב ואם. ולכך לא נאמר ולא יזידון עוד, כי לשון עוד מורה על דבר הנעשה כבר שלא יהיה נעשה עוד וזה אינו שהרי בן סורר ומורה לא היה דברים מעולם ולא נכתבה פרשה זו כי אם להפיל אימתה ופחד על הבנים:

The **Kli Yakar** explains that the story of *ben sorer u'moreh* is meant to get the attention of the children when they are in their rebellious stages of life, to scare them not to let themselves approach that "point of no return." But what does that mean? If it can never happen, what is its message?

To understand this, we must focus on a statement of Rabbi Yonasan. In the same Gemara that states that it can never happen, Rabbi Yonasan says that he sat on the grave of a *ben sorer u'moreh*.  
אמר רבי יונתן: אני ראיתיו, וישבתי על קברו

This seems odd. Is this a debate about "*metzius*," historical accounts? If Rabbi Yonasan actually sat on the grave of a *ben sorer u'moreh*, why does the Gemara not refute its original interpretation that a *ben sorer u'moreh* cannot happen?

The **Chasam Sofer** explains that Rabbi Yonasan is saying that he agrees that a *ben sorer u'moreh* can never be executed; he agrees that the punishment can never take place. The Torah makes *ben sorer u'moreh* an impossibility to ensure that one is never killed for potential sins. Although, a person is on a destructive path, there is always hope; the option of *teshuva* is never removed.

But Rabbi Yonasan was struggling to understand the Torah's intention in presenting the story of a *ben sorer u'moreh*, even though it can never come true. Rabbi Yonasan's answer is that *ben sorer u'moreh* **does** exist, in hindsight. That is why Rabbi Yonasan says he sat on the grave of a *ben sorer u'moreh*. Looking back at a tragic life, we can see that there **was** a point where the person had lost control of his life. There **was** a point where he simply stopped actively making choices, stopped being in control of his life. And the Torah is teaching that if one chooses to give up control over his life, **at that point it would have been in everyone's best interest to be stopped**.

*Ben sorer u'moreh* teaches that it is possible for us to place ourselves in a pit that it is very difficult to climb out of. Chazal teach us in *Avos* that every good choice makes it easier to make another good choice, and every poor choice makes it easier to make another poor choice.

משנה מסכת אבות פרק ד משנה ב: בן עזאי אומר הוי רץ למצוה קלה כבחמורה ובורה מן העבירה שמצוה גוררת מצוה ועבירה גוררת עבירה ששכר מצוה ושכר עבירה עבירה:

**Rav Dessler** explains this Mishna based on another statement of Chazal. They note that when someone makes a poor decision a few times, it becomes permitted in his eyes.

קונטרס הבחירה מכתב מאליהו להר' דסלר (ה"א עמ' 115-113)

וכן להיפך, הבחירות הרעות מגרשות היצה"ט ממקומו, וכשוסיף לעשות מן הרע ההוא יעשנו בלי בחירה, כי אין עוד אחיזה ליצה"ט במקום ההוא, וזהו אז"ל "עבירה גוררת עבירה" וכן "כיון שעבר אדם עבירה ושנה בה הותרה לו" . . .

He writes that with every bad choice, one pushes the good inclination a little further away until eventually the bad choice become second nature, and he violates without even thinking about it because his conscience is dead.

Erich Fromm, in his work, *Heart of Man* (page 135) elaborates further: “Our capacity to choose changes constantly with our practical life. The longer we continue to the make wrong decisions, the more our hearts harden...A classic example of this phenomenon is the biblical story of Pharaoh’s reaction to the demand to let the Hebrews go. . . This process of the hardening of the heart is the central issue in Pharaoh’s conduct. The longer he refuses to choose the right, the harder his heart becomes...his heart became ever harder until there was no longer any freedom of choice left him.. . If man becomes indifferent to life there is no longer any hope that he can choose good. Then indeed, his heart will have so hardened that his life will be ended...”

Life is about choices. The minute we stop making choices, that is when life ends. But until the last breath we take, if we are still choosing, we can still pull ourselves out of the trajectory we have created; we can always change our lives.

That was what inspired Rabbi Yehudah haNasi, when he saw Elazar ben Dordaya repent on his last day on this earth, after a lifetime of sinning. Upon hearing a *bas kol* declare that Elazar ben Dordaya had earned his *olam ha-ba*, the great Tanna, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, was very emotional and while crying exclaimed “one can earn his place in the world to come in one moment...”

בכה רבי ואמר: יש קונה עולמו בכמה שנים, ויש קונה עולמו בשעה אחת

And imagine if someone had given up on him the day before he did *teshuva*.

**Rabbi Norman Lamm** in a *Shabbos Shuva* lecture delivered in 1967 [The Jewish Center]

What we are saying in effect is that man is not determined, that he is not always and clearly predictable... [In truth] we can never be certain of every individual or every people. For man, unlike a machine, has freedom of will, and he is full of novelty and surprise. Thus, he may rise as high as an angel or sink as low as a devil. It is good to remember this whenever we pass judgment on people: always make it tentative and provisional, never categorical...

The lesson of the *ben sorer u'moreh* is the power of choices--that we can never give up on anyone, not only in judging others, but in judging ourselves. We must remember that there is always room for *teshuva*. We can always change. The *ben sorer u'moreh* provides a powerful lesson for the month of Elul—about choices, decisions, and the power of *teshuva*. May we take this lesson and inspiration to heart...and never give up on ourselves or others...and our ability to make our lives better...to take control of our lives...as long as we are here on this earth. Wishing everyone a *k'siva v'chasima tova*, a year of growth and happiness, and may we all be *zoche* to see the day when the Glory of God will be restored with a rebuilt *Beis Hamikdash...bimhera vi-yamenu...amen*.