

KI SEITZEI (DEUTERONOMY 21:10-25:18)

I Could KILL That Kid!

2001 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

This week's Torah reading gives us a unique lesson in parenting. What should parents do with a child who drinks too much wine, eats too much meat, and is disrespectful to his parents?

"They will bring him to the elders of the city...and they will say... 'This son of ours is wayward and rebellious. He doesn't listen to us; he is a glutton and a drunk.' All the men of his city will then stone him to death so that you will rid yourself of the evil in your midst." (Deuteronomy, 21:19-21)

How's that for progressive parenting? He eats a little too much, he's a bit of a "party animal," so you take him out and kill him??!!!!

If you find this Mitzvah surprising, if you find it shocking, if you find that this commandment flies in the face of the compassion one has learned to expect from a Torah Jew, wait until you hear the reason! The Talmud (Sanhedrin 72a) tells us that the execution of this young man is a preventive measure. Since he demonstrates such a lack of self-control, he is obviously destined to live a life of crime. No doubt, he will end up in jail, or worse. It would be better for him to die now as an innocent young man than to be convicted later of capital crimes. In other words, it is a pre-emptive strike!

I ask you: DOES THIS MAKE ANY SENSE???

Since when do we punish someone for what he MIGHT someday do? Okay, he's not a great kid, he won't win any Boy Scout merit badges, but doesn't murder as a precautionary measure go a bit too far?!

Calm down. There is no such thing as a "Rebellious Son." It never happened and never will. The Talmud explains that in order for this Mitzvah to be fulfilled, there are specific minute details that must be fulfilled. He has to be a specific age, he has to drink a specific (very large) amount of wine and eat a specific amount of meat. His parents must be identical in height and voice. The explicit requirements for stoning are so far-fetched that it would be literally impossible to find a scenario in which the death sentence would be carried out.

SO WHAT'S THE POINT? Why does the Torah go to the trouble of presenting a Mitzvah that is so convoluted as to be totally inapplicable?

Did you ever wonder why the Torah never tells us whether or not the meat of a unicorn is Kosher? How about whether you can count the Man in the Moon in a *Minyan*? Of course not! The Torah doesn't discuss the laws of unicorns and men in the moon BECAUSE THERE'S NO SUCH THING!!!! So why tell us a law about a child who cannot possibly exist?

The Talmud explains that the purpose of this passage is to give us one rule of the Torah that is 100% theoretical in nature. Not every mitzvah in the Torah is applicable in every situation. Some laws only apply if you are a Kohain, and some only apply if you are not! Some laws apply only in the time of the Temple. The Torah teaches us that there is something to be gained by studying Torah, even when there is no practical application of what you are studying.

People sometimes marvel at the thought of a Kollel student, a man who continues his full-time Yeshiva studies after marriage. What about "*Tachlis*?" they ask. What are his career goals? Does he plan to be a rabbi? Is there some concrete goal, a degree perhaps?

One of the 613 Mitzvahs is the commandment to study Torah. It goes without saying that it is important to learn applicable laws such as what is Kosher, how to write a valid Mezuzah, rules of Shabbos and Mikvah, etc. But it is also important to study Torah "*Lishmah*," for its own sake, simply because it is G-d's way of communicating His Divine wisdom to us. By giving us one Mitzvah that will never be fulfilled, one that is totally conceptual and academic, G-d shows us that Torah study is essential, even in the abstract.

There are many practical concepts that can be learned from this theoretical, non-existent case of the Rebellious Son. One very important lesson that can be gleaned from this "pre-emptive strike" is that bad habits don't develop overnight. A person doesn't wake up one morning, only to discover that he has become an alcoholic. The pattern begins much earlier. If a person does not learn self-discipline at an early age, it does not bode well for the future.

Another thought. The Torah presents the situation of a person with no future; a hopeless case. A person who is so lacking in the most fundamental redeeming values, that his life is, in effect, worthless. Then the Torah goes on to tell us that THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A HOPELESS CASE.

Let us never be quick in judging the innocence or guilt of another human being. It is easy to look at someone else with scorn and disdain. The Torah tells us, "If you think a person has no value and no future, treat him like the Rebellious Son. Take him out and stone him! ... But since there is no such thing as a Rebellious Son, you had better reevaluate the situation." There is no person who is without unique qualities that make him special. Our job is to look for those special qualities in every person. In judging other people, we must always find the positive.

After all, with Rosh Hashanah a few weeks away, that is exactly what we hope G-d will do for us.

TORAH TALKKI SEITZEI (Deuteronomy 21:10-25:18)

Have a great Shabbos.

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