

PARASHAS KI SEITZEI

Tough Love

The mood in the courtroom is somber. The parents wring their hands as they listen to the deliberations. Somewhere their son went wrong. The fine upstanding young man they had expected him to become has never materialized. Instead, he has developed into an incorrigible young ruffian, robbing and stealing to satisfy his gluttonous appetites, a degenerate, anti-social, destructive menace to society. Who knows what havoc he can wreak if given free rein? Therefore, as we read in this week's portion, the Torah decrees that he be put to death before he can do any more damage.

Interestingly, however, the Torah assigns a very important role to the parents in this entire procedure. It is the parents, father and mother together, who must bring their wayward son to the court and denounce him. What can be the purpose of this requirement? Haven't the parents suffered enough? Why add to their anguish and suffering?

Furthermore, the Talmud (Sanhedrin 71a) tells us that there never was an actual case of a wayward son being sentenced to death, nor could there ever be. The conditions prescribed by the Torah are virtually impossible to be met. Why then, wonders the Talmud, did the Torah bother to formulate this set of laws which can never relate to actual practice? "Study the laws," the Talmud replies, "and you will be rewarded."

But the question remains: What is the point? Why require us to study the procedure of dealing with a hypothetical situation that has absolutely no relevance whatsoever to real life?

The commentators explain that although it is virtually impossible for a wayward son to be convicted and executed, these laws nonetheless have tremendous relevance to real life. After all, what caused this young ruffian, this wayward son, to go astray? Quite likely, there was a lack of discipline in his upbringing, a laissez faire attitude on the part of his parents who chose to give unlimited "space" to "express himself." Mistaking permissiveness for love, they unwittingly deprived their child of the structure and conditioning that would make him a productive member of society. Had they reared him with a judicious blend of freedom and discipline, they would have conditioned him to deal with adversity, to be satisfied with what he has, to develop self-control. Instead, they indulged his whims and desires. And what was the result? A wayward son who has become a menace to society.

Therefore, the Torah requires that the parents bring their son to the court and denounce him. They are the ones who failed him, and they must acknowledge their responsibility and thereby set an example for others.

This is what the Talmud was referring to in the statement, "Study the laws, and you will be rewarded." Although the actual execution of a wayward son can never come to pass, there are very important object lessons here for every Jewish parent. By studying these laws, it becomes impressed on our minds that excessive permissiveness deprives our children of the disciplined upbringing they need and crave. If we truly love our children we need to do more than help them achieve instant gratification at all times. We must instill in them the character, the fortitude and the values to see beyond their immediate cravings and desires. In contemporary terms, this is called "tough love," and the Torah resoundingly endorses this concept. Children need to be nurtured with boundless love but also with mature guidance. All this becomes abundantly clear to us if we spend the time studying the laws of the wayward son, and this is a fine reward indeed.

Two little boys were playing in the park, while their mothers sat on a bench nearby. Suddenly, the bigger boy pounced on the smaller one and began to pummel him. The victimized boy's screams brought the mothers running.

The bully's mother squatted down in front of her son. "What happened, my little darling?" she purred. "Something must have upset you terribly to make you react in this way. What was it? What made you so angry?"

"If you really love your son," said the victim's mother, "you would teach him that no matter what upset him there is no excuse for what he did. If you taught him that lesson he would grow up to be a better person."

Undoubtedly, it is often easier to avoid confrontations with our children than to invite their resentment by taking a firm stand. Moreover, the pressures of contemporary society make such demands on our time that it sometimes seems easier just to give in and let the children have their way. But there is a price to pay for the quick fix. If we want our children to know right from wrong, we must take the time and make the effort to establish boundaries they may not overstep. They may rant and rave right now, but someday, they will thank us.