

Embracing our Jewish Identity

The case of the *ben sorer u'moreh*, the wayward and rebellious son, is one of the more challenging aspects of Jewish law. Much attention is paid to the idea of killing this adolescent based on future actions, explained and justified by many commentators. Another aspect of this anomalous law is the simple comprehension what exactly is driving the adolescent. Much of the difficulty emerges from the cryptic presentation of the sins (Devarim 20:18-21):

*"If a man has a **wayward** (sorer) and **rebellious** son (moreh), who does not obey his father or his mother, and they chasten him, and [he still] does not listen to them. His father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city, and to the gate of his place. And 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 guzzler." And all the men of his city shall pelt him to death with stones, and he shall die. So shall you clear out the evil from among you, and all Israel will listen and fear."*

To provide at least some context, the Sages explain that the "son" is someone just past the age of *bar-mitzvah*. Thus, the adolescent is obligated in the system of Jewish law (the actual age of liability runs from his birthday to three months later). As well, they fill the chasm left by the vagueness in the written Torah, detailing the specific actions performed that lead to the death of such an individual.

Yet the Ibn Ezra, as he often does, offers his own unique explanation (ibid 18). The term "wayward" refers to the son's unwillingness to observe the positive commandments. The "rebellious" aspect refers to the adolescent's violation of the negative commandments. Eventually, this leads to the "glutton" referred to in the verse. The person is someone who desires all that he can in the world of the instinctual. Ultimately, the individual is an *apikoris*, which the Ibn Ezra understands to mean someone solely and exclusively seeks out satisfaction of the appetitive in this world.

It is fairly clear the Ibn Ezra charts his own course in understanding the sin of the *ben sorer u'moreh*. However, his explanation is quite challenging to comprehend on any simple level. Yes, the individual committing the sins is technically held accountable for violation of the commandments; but, in truth, he has really just entered the world of Jewish law. Are we to understand this person as being someone who has truly come to some type of philosophical epiphany? While he may be an adult in the eyes of Jewish law, it is unlikely someone of that age has the intellectual maturity to develop a sophisticated reproach to the path of Judaism.

We should also ask why the Torah differentiates, as per the Ibn Ezra, between *sorer* and *moreh*. Why is it necessary to explain that the young man both ceases observance to the positive commandments and violates the negative ones? Of course, it certainly demonstrates a terrible

path the individual has chosen. However, one word could have been used to describe a total abandonment of Jewish law.

As noted above, it would be difficult to assume this young individual developed some type of sophisticated philosophical rebuke to Jewish faith. Rather, we are being asked to enter the mindset of a young person at this very moment of transition to Jewish adulthood. Often, an adolescent sees Judaism as a lifestyle in stark contrast to the surrounding world. The demands of Jewish law inevitably bring with them a withdrawal, in many ways, from “normal” behavior.

The Ibn Ezra might be pointing us to a desire of this adolescent to strip himself of his Jewish identity. Many of the positive commandments create an explicit distinction between a Jew and the rest of the world. For example, the uniqueness of the Jew presents itself with commandments such as *tefillin* and *tzitzit*. The negative precepts frequently function as a means of exhibiting control over one’s desires, an approach at odds with a world where lack of inhibition is a value. To eat non-kosher food is a prime instance of being “just like everyone else”. The adolescent has decided to remove, from his perspective, the shackles of his Jewish self, expressed in his lack of adherence to the commandments.

A commentary via a Midrash (Midrash Tena'im *ibid*) buttresses this point. The author of the Midrash explains *sorer* to refer to turning away from the words of his father, while *moreh* is rebelling against the words of his mother. Often, the target of rebellion by an adolescent is the father. Yet this Midrash considers the rebellion here to be focused against his mother.

A possible explanation could be related to the idea of the adolescent attempting to abandon his identity as a Jew. In Judaism, the father is responsible for perpetuating the system of Jewish law to his son. The *ben sorer u'moreh* chooses a different path, expressed in no longer abiding by Jewish law. However, he saves his wrath for this mother. Why he is a Jew is the product of his mother, as per Jewish law. The adolescent wants to wash himself of any vestige of Judaism, and his mother is ultimately the one to “blame” for his status.

The Ibn Ezra, in taking such an approach, presents a very realistic understanding of the mindset of this adolescent. A supreme challenge in Judaism involves our distinguishing ourselves from competing ideologies and cultures, while serving as an example to the world. A child beginning the transition to adulthood, especially in today’s world, is confronted with the appeal of “doing whatever everyone else does” and “doing what I want”. While the *ben sorer u'moreh* is an extreme situation of complete abandonment, this outlook is quite common. The warning drawn out from this sin is the importance of demonstrating to our children the tremendous rewards of following Jewish law. Our Jewish identity should not be one that our children see as an anchor or sacrifice; rather, we should teach our children the enlightened path a Jewish life opens for us, leading them to embrace such a path.