
PARASHAT KI TEITZEI

Who You Can Become

Reflections on Parashat Ki Teitzei

מי כעמך ישראל

Mi Ka'amcha Yisroel · Rabbi Michael Kaplan

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Parashat Ki Teitzei introduces us to one of the most difficult and perplexing laws in the entire Torah: the ben sorer u'moreh, the wayward and rebellious son. The Torah describes a young boy whose behavior has deteriorated to such an extraordinary degree that his parents bring him before the elders of the city and declare, "Moreinu — this is our son. He is wayward and rebellious, and he simply doesn't listen to our voice."

The consequences described by the Torah are almost impossible to comprehend. Indeed, the Gemara in Sanhedrin teaches that the conditions required for a child to actually become a ben sorer u'moreh are so precise and so difficult to satisfy that, according to one opinion, it never happened — and it could never happen.

So why does the Torah teach us this law at all? There are many profound answers, but one insight points to a remarkable detail in the parents' own words: they say he doesn't listen to *eineinu* — our voice, in the singular, not "our voices." Before we can make the ultimate judgment about this particular child, his parents must themselves have been united in the way they raised him. Their values had to be consistent; their home had to speak with a single, unified voice. Because if the child received conflicting messages — if outside influences contributed to what he became — then no matter how troubling his behavior may presently appear, the Torah does not allow us to conclude that the problem lies within the essence of the child himself.

Hidden inside this difficult mitzvah is an extraordinary lesson about the way we look at another human being. There is a difference between a person's behavior and a person's essence. A person can do something wrong without being wrong. A person can lose his way without being lost. And perhaps most importantly: what you see in someone today may tell you very little about who that person can become tomorrow.

There is a remarkable story that brings this idea to life.

Many years ago, a young rebbi was teaching in a school in New Jersey when the mother of one of his students approached him with a broken heart. Her older son, Moshe, was a teenager who had left yeshiva. He was breaking every boundary and, frankly, answerable to no one. His parents had tried everything they knew; every door they tried had closed. The mother pleaded with this young rebbi: "Please, I beg you — speak to my son. Maybe, somehow, you can reach him."

He agreed, though he had never worked with a troubled teenager before and had no special training. With no strategy to fall back on, he wondered to himself: what could I possibly say to this boy?

He remembered a story from the Gemara. Rebbi Elazar, the son of Rebbi Shimon bar Yochai, had a son named Yosi who had strayed terribly. Rebbi took the young man and placed him under the guidance of Rabbi Shimon ben Yosi. Yosi had no interest in learning; every day he simply wanted to leave. But Rabbi Shimon kept telling him: "Yosi — if you learn, you will become a rebbi, and people will call you Rebbi." Again and again he spoke to him, not about the person Yosi appeared to be, but about the person he could ultimately become. Eventually, Yosi changed. He devoted himself to Torah and ultimately became a great man.

The young rebbi decided: that would be his approach with Moshe. When they met, instead of lecturing the boy or reminding him of everything he was doing wrong, he looked at this struggling teenager and told him: "Moshe — one day you're going to be a rosh yeshiva. You are going to learn, and you will grow, and one day people are going to come to learn Torah in your yeshiva."

He went home and designed a special letterhead. Across the top, in careful print, it read: "Rosh Yeshiva Moshe." Imagine that boy holding the paper. Everyone else was looking at what Moshe was doing wrong — and this man was showing Moshe what he could become.

And slowly — you guessed it — the boy began to turn. Moshe began moving forward. He began

coming closer again. And then, as happens in life, the two of them lost touch. Years passed. The rebbi often wondered what had become of that boy. Had he remained connected? Had he built a Jewish home? He simply didn't know. But life went on.

Thirty-two years later, this same man was looking for work. He had spent years in the tourism industry, but the work had dried up, and he decided it was time to return to the world of chinuch. He heard that a local yeshiva for baalei teshuva was looking for someone with his kind of experience, and he arranged an interview with the rosh yeshiva. He walked into the office. A dignified man sat behind the desk, and they began to speak. The rosh yeshiva asked about his background, his experience with young people — and suddenly the memories came flooding back. He stared at the man across from him. The rosh yeshiva stared back. Of course they recognized one another.

It was Moshe — the teenager who had left yeshiva, the boy everyone was terrified would be lost, the young man who had once been handed a piece of imaginary letterhead bearing the words “Rosh Yeshiva.” Thirty-two years later, he was sitting behind the desk of a real yeshiva, as its rosh yeshiva.

Moshe looked at his former rebbi and said something unforgettable:

“You were the only one who saw a future for me.”

Thirty-two years earlier, many people could see a troubled teenager. One man saw a rosh yeshiva.

Perhaps that is one of the profound messages hidden inside the ben sorer u'moreh. The Torah is warning us: don't confuse what a person is doing with who that person is. We all know someone who's struggling — sometimes it's a child, a spouse, a friend, and sometimes it's the person looking back at us in the mirror. We look at our failures and our mistakes, the promises we made and didn't keep, and slowly, without realizing it, we stop saying “I did something wrong” and begin believing “there's something wrong with me.” But those are not the same thing. Our failures may describe moments in our lives; they do not define the essence of our neshama.

Perhaps that is why this message reaches us now, as we move closer to Elul. Teshuva is possible precisely because yesterday does not define

tomorrow. Hashem knows what we've done — but He also knows something we sometimes forget: He knows clearly who we can still become.

So perhaps this week, look at someone differently. Look beyond their behavior, beyond their mistakes, beyond the moment. And if someone you love has forgotten who they can become, maybe you can remember for them — because sometimes all it takes to change a person's life is one person who can look at a struggling teenager and already see the rosh yeshiva sitting behind the desk.

Shabbat Shalom

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