



**GEULAS YISRAEL**

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**RAM YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**MAGGID SHIUR ALL PARSHA AND ALL DAF, OU.ORG**

# Ki Teitzei: Am Yisrael as a Ben Sorer U'Moreh

The story of the *ben sorer u'moreh* is vivid and unsettling. A wayward youth buys meat and wine, indulging in small excesses, only to be punished harshly and sentenced to death. Chazal note the stark contrast between his minor actions and the severity of his punishment. They explain that the Torah is not exacting retribution for his current crime, but judges him *al sheim sofo*—for the trajectory of his life as it is likely to unfold. It is deemed preferable to end this potentially criminal path before it fully manifests.

The story seems so harsh that Chazal say it likely never occurred. The halachic

requirements for prosecuting a *ben sorer u'moreh* were so exacting that cases were almost never brought to court. Though the halachot exist, they were rarely applied in practice. The *ben sorer u'moreh* section functions less as history and more as a moral lesson. It teaches about parental responsibility and the challenges of adolescent rebellion, showing how destructive tendencies sometimes must be addressed early, before they escalate into graver misdeeds.

The image of a *ben sorer u'moreh* was so evocative that Yirmiyahu chose it to describe Jewish disloyalty. Most Nevi'im employ a different metaphor—an unfaithful wife—to depict Israel's betrayal of Hashem and His covenant. Hoshea (Perek 1 and Perek 4) and Yechezkel (Perek 16 and Perek 23) compare us to an unfaithful woman. Even Yirmiyahu adopts this powerful and painful image to convey religious and moral failure. Yet in one striking pasuk in Perek 5, Yirmiyahu chooses the metaphor of a *ben sorer u'moreh* to characterize Jewish rebellion:

(כג) וְלָעַם הַזֶּה הָיָה לֵב סוֹרֵר וּמוֹרָה סָרוּ וַיִּלְכְּנוּ

"But this people has a stubborn and rebellious heart; they have turned aside and gone."

By casting our rebellions in the image of a *ben sorer u'moreh*, Yirmiyahu offers a nuanced perspective on our relationship with Hashem during moments of faltering. We are depicted not as an unfaithful woman, but as a *ben sorer u'moreh*: a people struggling to grow, assert independence, and find our path



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while remaining bound to Hashem.

### THE RARE DOUBLE REBELLION

The actual *ben sorer u'moreh* is described as one who rebels against both mother and father, and both parents must bring the child to Beit Din. Halachically, if the mother is not alive, the child cannot be classified as a *ben sorer u'moreh*—one of the many parameters regulating the law's application. In Eichah Rabbah, Petichta 24, the Midrash extends this idea to Jewish history: for Israel to be called a *ben sorer u'moreh*, the nation must rebel against both Father and Mother. Extending the metaphor, the Midrash portrays Hashem as our Father and the Torah as our Mother. Only by turning away from both Hashem and Torah can a people be considered a *ben sorer u'moreh*.

During the First Mikdash, we behaved like a *ben sorer u'moreh*, abandoning both our Father and Mother. We violated fundamental mitzvot, and our moral hypocrisy hollowed out our relationship with Hashem. In that era, we were indeed worthy of the severe title of a *ben sorer u'moreh*.

Throughout much of Jewish history, however, we did not warrant that nefarious title. At times we have strayed from our Father—Hashem—or from our Mother—the Torah—but rarely from both. Sometimes we have meticulously observed Torah law, yet our broader moral behavior, cultural assimilation, or historical commitments strained our relationship with Hashem. At other times, we have faltered in halachic practice while maintaining a steadfast connection to our Father through faith and belief, even if not fully expressed in strict adherence to halacha.

We are considered a *ben sorer u'moreh*, truly rebellious, only when both Torah and

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Hashem are forsaken. Despite the trials and changes of Jewish history, we have rarely warranted such a designation. Ironically, by castigating his generation as behaving like a *ben sorer u'moreh*, Yirmiyahu was reminding future generations not to self-indict. It takes more than weakened halachic observance or a strained relationship with Hashem to be a *ben sorer u'moreh*. True rebellion requires turning away from both Father and Mother—and in our history, that double rebellion has been exceedingly rare.

### TESTING BOUNDARIES AND INDEPENDENCE

The image of a *ben sorer u'moreh* introduces a second layer of nuance to the story of Jewish religious weakness. An unfaithful woman is driven by one of two forces. In some cases, her actions stem from lust and passion; in others, from a failure of loyalty, a lack of commitment, or sheer fickleness. Both are serious moral failings, and by comparing the Jewish people to an unfaithful wife, our Nevi'im cast Israel's betrayals in starkly severe terms.

By contrast, a *ben sorer u'moreh* is driven by very different forces. As a young boy grows into a man, he naturally begins to form his own identity and assert his independence. This process of developing autonomy

is essential to growing up. Yet it also makes submission to authority—whether social norms, parental guidance, or communal expectations—more challenging. He disobeys his parents and consumes meat and wine in ways deemed socially inappropriate, not out of lust or indulgence, but because he cannot be constrained by external forces that limit his independence. He is not disloyal, nor driven by appetite or sensuality; he is exploring the boundaries of his selfhood and testing the limits of autonomy inherent in human growth.

The literal term *sorer u'moreh* captures this dynamic. *Sorer* means to veer—he seeks his own path in life, diverging from the routes laid out for him. *Moreh*, according to Rashi, indicates that he does not heed external moral guidance but instead evaluates ethical

decisions for himself. In other words, he is discovering independence, forging his own way, and developing his moral conscience. While his actions may sometimes take questionable forms, the underlying drive is a natural part of this stage of growth.

### COURAGE AND SUBMISSION

By framing Jewish rebellion as a *ben sorer u'moreh* rather than an unfaithful wife, Yirmiyahu softens the portrayal of our nation's betrayals. As we settled Israel, we sought to define our own identity. In the desert, we were entirely dependent on heavenly bread and desert-sprung water. Entering the Land of Israel, we pursued a national identity of our own. The conditions were harsh, and it required immense strength and determination to confront the militant peoples of the Land.

In this context, fully accepting *malchut shamayim*, heaven, while building our inner fortitude and communal strength was no simple task. Essentially, we were adolescents seeking to understand ourselves, learning to navigate independence while submitting to divine authority. The image of a *ben sorer u'moreh*, though a severe rebuke, allows Yirmiyahu to frame our failures in a more nuanced and compassionate way: we were not irredeemably unfaithful, but struggling with the natural and universal challenge of forming a strong identity while embracing the sovereignty of heaven.

In many ways, this narrative is resurfacing in the modern State of Israel. To settle and defend the Land requires steadfast will and resolute courage. The original generation demonstrated their bravery by draining swamps, repelling attacks, and enduring the arduous early stages of Israeli history.

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Our generation, too, is proving its inner faith and strength. Yet under such conditions, fully submitting to external authority is not always simple. Strong, self-sufficient people naturally find it more difficult to accept outside control. Israel demands strength, and not everyone is able to balance the fortitude required to thrive in the Land with the capacity to embrace the full codes of Torah and halacha. Sometimes we are not unfaithful or disloyal—we are simply a nation growing up under harsh conditions, striving to balance inner strength and independence with submission to Torah and divine authority. Framing the Jewish experience in terms of a *ben sorer u'moreh* allows us to view our struggles and our relationship with Hashem in a more measured and compassionate light.

### THE CHILD REMAINS

Finally, the image of a *ben sorer u'moreh* reminds us that even in our rebellion, we remain Hashem's children. Parshat Ki Teitzei also describes the consequences of an unfaithful wife: she is sent away from her husband. In fact, the parsha immediately preceding *ben sorer u'moreh* deals with a man who has two wives, and implies that at some stage the less beloved wife will be discharged from the household. One might expect a similar fate for the wayward son: that he, too, should be sent away, cast out like an unfaithful wife. Yet this is not an option. A child is always a child. The fates of parents and children are inextricably linked.

As the Torah writes, “וְתִפְּשׁוּ בֶן אֲבִיו וְאִמּוֹ”—though this refers literally to bringing him to Beit Din, it carries a metaphorical resonance: parents must hold on to him firmly. He is not sent away. Even if the case were to reach Beit Din, parents would rarely, if ever, agree to

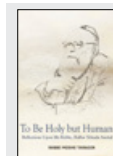
sacrifice their child over moral failings. The requirement for parents to bring their child to Beit Din ensures that the *ben sorer u'moreh* remains, rendering the story ultimately a cautionary tale rather than a historical reality.

The Gemara in Kiddushin (36a) cites Rabbi Meir:

רבי מאיר אומר: בין כך ובין כך אתם קרוים בנים, שנאמר: בנים סכלים המה, ואומר: בנים לא אמן בם, ואומר: זרע מרעים בנים משחיתים, ואומר: והיה במקום אשר יאמר להם לא עמי אתם יאמר להם בני אל חי.

*"Rabbi Meir says: In either case, you are still called children, as it is written: 'They are foolish children [but still children].'"*

By referring to us as a *ben sorer u'moreh*, Yirmiyahu offers a deeply compassionate perspective on Jewish failure. Though the image may sound harsh and castigating, it pulses with Ahavat Yisrael: no matter how far we stray or how rebellious we behave, a child can never be severed from the parent. Even in our failings, our bond with Hashem—as our Father—remains unbroken. ■



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