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Parshat Ki Tetzei

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GUIDING WITHOUT BREAKING: LESSONS FOR THE NEW SCHOOL YEAR

WRITTEN BY RABBI SHAY TAHAN

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As the school year begins, we are once again reminded of the importance of educating our children in the proper way. Education is not only about sending them to the right yeshivot and pointing them toward the right path. It requires a strategy, with much thought and planning, along with constant follow-up to adjust and guide them as needed. It is no coincidence that our parasha falls at the beginning of the school year and highlights several of these very ideas. Let us analyze what the Torah teaches and learn how to internalize its lessons.

The parasha speaks of the *ben sorer u'moreh*, meaning a wayward and rebellious son who refuses to listen to the guidance of his parents. The Torah describes how, despite being admonished and disciplined, he persists in a path of gluttony, defiance, and disregard for authority. Chazal explain that the Torah is not merely speaking about one child's behavior, but about the dangerous trajectory that unchecked habits and small missteps can create if not addressed early. The obvious lesson is that parents and educators must intervene early, before bad traits become ingrained, guiding children firmly yet lovingly so they can grow into upright individuals. But there is a much deeper message here that requires some observation to uncover.

The Torah describes the case of the *ben sorer u'moreh*: a child who steals small amounts from his parents in order to buy a bit of meat and wine. At the very first signs of such behavior, the parents taunt him and punish him harshly. Yet this approach brings no results—if anything, it pushes the child further into rebellion. With no choice, the Torah concludes that such a child may have no future.

But how can it be that the Torah seems to “give up” on a child? Wouldn't the correct message be that we should never give up, and always keep striving to guide our children toward improvement? The answer is surprising. The Torah does not place the primary blame on the child, as we might assume, but rather on

the parents.

The Torah analyzes the parents' reaction: instead of showing patience, understanding, or constructive guidance, they immediately punish the child—even for something as small as stealing a few coins to buy a hamburger and a bit of wine. Perhaps the proper reaction should have been different: to overlook a minor misstep, to sit down for a calm conversation, to acknowledge his desires, and to gently redirect him. For example, they might have offered him something else to enjoy, while explaining why drinking alcohol is harmful. But the parents in the story did none of this. They responded only with criticism and punishment.

As a result, the child comes to feel guilty, worthless, and unsupported. When a child believes that his parents are not on his side, the natural outcome is rebellion. What may have begun as simple curiosity

or youthful mischief turns into outright defiance. And unless the parents change their approach—shifting from punishment to guidance—the child may never recover.

This is true not only for parents but also for rabbis and teachers in school. When the environment is overly strict, children often do not react positively. Parents must know their child's nature and needs—while they would not want to place him in a yeshiva with weak guidelines, on the other hand, they should also avoid placing him in an atmosphere that is too rigid. If, during the year, they see that the school's approach is overly strict and the child is not responding well, they should immediately raise the concern with the administration. If there is no improvement, they must seriously consider changing schools for the benefit of their child.

It could be that this is the meaning of the pasuk that emphasizes, “*aino shome'a b'kol aviv u'v'kol imo, vayisru oto v'lo yishma aleihem*”—“he does not listen to the voice of his father and the voice of his mother, and they discipline him, but he does not listen to



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them" (Devarim 21:18). Why does the pasuk repeat that he does not listen to his parents twice? The Torah is teaching that the parents keep relying on the same failing methods of education. They should have realized that if the child did not listen the first time, simply applying more force the second time would not work either. Moreover, even if the child would comply under pressure, that would not be considered true *chinuch*—education—but mere training, no different than training an animal. Such an approach only leads to a child who outwardly obeys when forced but drifts away the moment he grows strong enough to resist his parents' control.

The reason he does not listen is because all he hears is constant criticism. When a person is always blamed, he eventually stops listening. The child is simply reacting like any normal human being; at a young age he does not yet have the maturity to rise above such negativity. But the Torah expects the parents to act with responsibility, to guide the situation in a proper and constructive way. And if the parents themselves do not know how, then they must seek guidance from those who do — whether from rabbis, mentors, or professional advisors.

Another idea we learn here is that the requirement for a *ben sorer umoreh* is that the parents must speak with one voice and even appear similar. Chazal therefore say the case can never truly happen. Two questions arise: why not, and if it cannot happen, why did the Torah teach it at all?

The lesson is clear: the downfall of the *ben sorer umoreh* is rooted

in parents who are not united in their guidance. When parents speak with one voice, the child gains clarity and knows what is expected, making it far easier for him to follow. The Torah teaches that if the parents were aligned, the failures seen in their child would not occur—and that is the powerful message the Torah seeks to convey.

This extends beyond the home—parents must also align themselves with the child's teachers, *rabbanim*, and *roshei yeshiva*. Respecting the school's guidelines reinforces one consistent message. For example, if a yeshiva forbids phones, parents should not provide their child with one and then instruct him to hide it. That only teaches the child that rules can be broken as long as you avoid being caught. This mirrors the mistake of the *ben sorer umoreh*, who tried to steal without being detected, and when caught, he rebelled.

At the same time, boundaries must be set with wisdom. If expectations are too high or rigid, the child may feel forced into secrecy. In the story of the *ben sorer umoreh*, had the parents fostered a more open relationship, allowing the child to feel comfortable asking them for money, the entire dynamic might have shifted. If he knew he could approach them honestly, it would have removed the sting of temptation and reduced his drive to sneak, steal, and rebel.

Let us conclude with a heartfelt tefillah that all our children merit a successful year of Torah learning, growing in *middot tovot* and strengthening their *yirat Shamayim*.

ELUL; I AM TO MY BELOVED, AND MY BELOVED IS MINE.

The month of Elul is characterized by the pasuk from Shir HaShirim: "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine." But is this verse only symbolic because its initials spell "Elul," or is there a deeper meaning intended?

Rabbi Leib Mintzberg (Ben Melech, Shir HaShirim, essay four) explained how the relationship between us and the Creator is expressed in the Torah mainly in three forms: servant, son, and spouse, each essentially different from the other. Let us attempt to clarify each one.

Master and servant:

The servant-master relationship is such that the master commands, and the servant fulfills without emotion and without understanding. His entire essence is to do what the master has commanded and no more. Thus, the Sages described the

servant as lazy, since all his actions are solely for his master's sake, and he gains nothing for himself. In the Gemara (Kiddushin 49b) it is said: "Ten measures of sleep descended to the world; nine were taken by servants, and one by the rest of the world." This is because the servant has no pleasure or benefit from his work. Moreover, the servant has no desire to know why the master commanded what he commanded—his only wish is to do what is imposed upon him and then rest. His overall feeling is fear of the master, lest he punish him. Therefore, the servant feels no joy when his master is pleased, only relief that he has not been punished.

Father and son:

Unlike the servant, the son desires to bring joy to his father. This comes from the fact that while the servant's essence is to serve the master, in the father-son relationship it is the father who serves the son from birth until he matures, and only when the son grows independent does he have the opportunity to return joy to his father. In truth, the father seeks nothing from the son; his true satisfaction is in seeing his son succeed and follow the good path. That is, whereas the servant's deeds serve the master's benefit, the father desires that the son should benefit himself, and in that the father rejoices.

From this, a great love is born between father and son, as their souls are bound together. The son senses that his father's intention is his good, and therefore he seeks to give him joy in whatever way he

can. Moreover, the son also desires to resemble his father, to learn his ways, and to understand why his father acts as he does and why he commands him in certain matters.

Husband and wife:

This relationship is fundamentally different from the previous two. It is a union in which the couple become one, as the Sages said: "A man's wife is as his own body," and as the pasuk states: "Bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh," and: "Therefore a man shall cling to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." Ramban explained: "The woman was bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh, and he clung to her.... and since this was the case with Adam, this



ELUL; I AM TO MY BELOVED, AND MY BELOVED IS MINE.

nature was implanted in his offspring—that the men among them should cling to their wives, leaving father and mother and seeing their wives as closer to them than their parents.”

Since they are considered one, when one does something for the other, it is not truly for the other but for themselves—or more precisely, for their unity. This relationship is not merely about understanding what the other wants, but about feeling the other’s desire and making it your own. Such a relationship is built more on emotion than on intellect, unlike the servant who acts because “this is what I must do,” or the son who acts because “this is the right thing to do.” Rather, here in spouses’ relationship it is “this is what I want to do.” As the Sages said: “Who is a worthy wife? She who does her husband’s will.” This does not mean she has no will of her own, but rather that each spouse acts for the sake of the partnership, making all their desires serve this union. Such a relationship frees the act from a sense of duty and transforms it into an act of longing and love. Whoever wishes to learn about this type of love should study Shir HaShirim, and its intention will become clear.

The lesson:

Since there are multiple dimensions to our relationship with the Creator, we find different approaches to divine service, usually aligned with each person’s spiritual nature. All are beloved and all are desirable by Hashem.

For example, Rabbi Mintzberg explained that the Brisk yeshiva emphasized serving primarily in the manner of the servant, who carries out exactly what the Master commanded without questions or investigations as to why. They ask less “why” (the reasons for mitzvot) and more “what” (what and how must be done). Yet this Brisk approach is not like the lazy servant mentioned above, but rather like a devoted and faithful servant, as it says of Moshe Rabbeinu (Devarim 34:5): “And Moshe, the servant of Hashem”. The pleasure to the Creator, as Rashi explains (Num. 28:8) on “a fire-offering, a pleasing aroma to Hashem,” is: “a satisfaction before Me that I said and My will was done.”

In contrast, the Chazon Ish served Hashem as a son, as is evident from his writings, in which he labored to explain everything in ways accessible to the heart’s understanding, just as a son seeks to understand his father’s ways. This approach emphasizes refining one’s character and performing mitzvot to improve oneself, for Hashem gains nothing from mitzvot, only joy in seeing His children become better, as it is said (Bereishit Rabbah 44:1): “The commandments were given only to refine people.”

There is also the third way, the relationship of husband and wife, the path of the Baal Shem Tov, who taught to serve Hashem with the awareness that “Hashem and Israel are one.” Just as the wife does not act for herself like a son does, nor only for the other like the servant do, but from a deep desire to do her husband’s will—

thereby strengthening their bond—so too in divine service. For example, when a wife prepares breakfast for her husband, it is not like the servant, who does so because it is his duty, nor like the son, who does so to improve himself and please his father. Rather, she prepares it as part of their connection. When her husband enjoys the meal, she herself feels satisfaction, which in turn strengthens the bond between them. Similarly, in serving the Creator, some perform mitzvot because it feels good and uplifting, for this connects them to their Creator. Their only desire is to bring pleasure to Him.

For instance, in prayer one may pray as a servant, fulfilling the commandment of prayer: “And you shall serve Hashem,” which the Sages interpreted: “What is service of the heart? This is prayer.” Thus one may stand in prayer intending to fulfill his Master’s command. Since this is done more out of obligation than desire, the focus often wears thin over time, and the person may just wish to finish quickly and move on. Another may pray as a son, requesting his needs from his father, knowing it is his father’s will that he ask. The Sages taught that Hashem longs for our prayers. Ramban even ruled that Torah law requires prayer only in times of trouble, like a son turning to his father for rescue. Yet sometimes people, having all they need, lack heartfelt motivation to pray.

But there is also the third way—one stands in prayer seeking to bond with the Creator, with the sole aim of strengthening the love between them and pouring out one’s heart. Such prayer is not an act of compulsion, nor primarily a request for needs, but wholly an act of love and emotion.

This is not to minimize the importance of any form of divine service—all are precious. Nevertheless, it is clear that the way in which a person feels truly bonded to the Creator is the most secure path, as Rashi already taught (Deut. 6:5): “Perform His words out of love. One who serves out of love is not comparable to one who serves out of fear. He who serves his master out of fear—when the burden is too heavy, he leaves him and goes.”

Now let us return to the work of Elul. In which of these three modes does its light shine? The hint seems clear: Elul follows the month of Av, as the name Av means a father, teaches that in Av we must strengthen our relationship with the Creator as a son to a father. Immediately afterward comes Elul, in which we must serve with love, as a husband and wife.

The ultimate bond of love with the Creator is not born of fear or even duty, but of oneness—when our will and His will become inseparable. This is the calling of Elul: to rise above mere obligation or even the longing of a child, and to enter the embrace of love, where every mitzvah and every prayer becomes an act of closeness. This is the essence of *Ani leDodi veDodi li*—I turn to my Beloved, and in Elul I discover that my Beloved is already with me.

BACK FROM VACATION:

Do I Say Hagomel?

Hagomel is a special blessing in Jewish tradition that expresses gratitude to Hashem for delivering a person safely through a perilous situation or journey.

The Four Classic Cases

There are four specific situations in which one must recite the Hagomel blessing:

1. Traveling by sea – upon returning safely to dry land.
2. Traveling through the desert – when safely reaching an

BACK FROM VACATION:

inhabited area.

3. Recovery from a serious illness.
4. Release from imprisonment

Hagomel for Journeys by Road

The bracha upon returning from a road journey is not explicitly listed in these four categories. This raises the question: can one recite a blessing for an event that Chazal did not formally institute?

Ashkenazi practice: Hagomel is said only when danger is comparable to desert travel (wild animals, robbers). Ordinary road travel is not considered dangerous enough (שולחן ערוך סימן) (שיט ס"ז).

- Sephardi practice: Many rule that every road journey entails danger and therefore say Hagomel regularly.
- Nuanced views: Some Sephardi poskim (אור לציון) e.g., hold that modern roads are generally safe, making Hagomel unnecessary unless the road is especially deserted or hazardous. Others (e.g., חזו"ע) argue that modern risks such as car accidents justify continuing the practice.

Length of Travel

A minimum travel time of 72 minutes is required for Hagomel. Shorter trips are not deemed dangerous enough. This can be counted as:

- One continuous trip, or
- The total of the outbound and return journeys (אור לציון; חזו"ע).

Dangerous Roads

Even Ashkenazim agree that when traveling through genuinely dangerous areas (e.g., Arab villages or hostile neighborhoods), Hagomel should be said—even if the trip is shorter than 72 minutes (אור לציון ח"ב עמוד קלט).

Boat Rides & Swimming

- Chacham Ovadia (שסג) (חזו"ע ברבות עמ' שסג): Swimming in oceans/lakes requires Hagomel, even with lifeguards, and even for a very short time, since drowning risks remain.

- Other opinions (הגרש"ז אורבער, הגר"ד יוסף): Swimming alone does not warrant Hagomel unless there was actual danger (e.g., near-drowning) or a serious boat ride.
- Traveling on bridges or tunnels under water is compared to paved roads—no Hagomel (שבט הלוי ח"ט סימן עב).



Flights

Opinions differ about flights:

- Strict view: Chazal did not institute Hagomel for flights; modern aviation is safe.
- Lenient view: Flights over water are like sea voyages and do require Hagomel הר"מ (שטרנבוך).
- Other arguments: Being in the air itself constitutes danger (הליכות שלמה); (אגרות משה).
- Common practice: Many communities recite Hagomel after any flight.

Hagomel in the Shul

- Recited during Torah reading, in front of a minyan. Preferably, two men should be talmidei chachamim, but this is not an absolute requirement (שולחן ערוך סימן ריט ס"ג).
- Women: Some poskim exempt, but many Sephardi and some Ashkenazi communities allow women to recite Hagomel. Alternative custom: A husband recites Hagomel for himself, and his wife listens with intent to fulfill her obligation through him.

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