

Ki Tetze 1 – August 20, 2010

My oldest daughter Levana was going to leave for her junior year abroad in Italy the next day. She wanted to say goodbye to one of her closest friends, so she asked if she could borrow my new car. “Yes, I replied, but come back at a reasonable hour.” Later that night – and it was at a reasonable hour – she called me crying hysterically. “Dad, I’ve done something terrible. I backed your new car into Drew’s gate and made a hole in the fender.” I was about to lose it totally but then I remembered she was leaving for Italy for over a year. Was the last memory I wanted to give her for an entire year one of an enraged father?

This Shabbat, the Torah reading of Ki Tetze share the famous case of the rebellious child, the child who does not listen to either his father or his mother. The legal case is known as the Ben Sorer uMoreh. Of course, any of us who has raised teenage children know that they can be rebellious. However, I don’t think many of us would resort to the solution provided in the Torah. The rebellious child is brought before the elders of the community – and stoned to death. Some of us might think that way for a moment, but we certainly wouldn’t care it out.

The rabbis did not want the case of the Rebellious Child to become the legal norm for Judaism. So, they interpreted it out of existence. The Hebrew word for voice – kol – is in the singular. The rabbis understood that both father and mother must speak with one voice in reprimanding their child. Since, a father and a mother cannot speak with one voice, the rabbis ruled the Rebellious Son to be non-existent.

I think we learn something else from the case of the Rebellious Child. Our rabbis teach us that a mother and a father will not respond with the same voice. They will have different insights, different perspectives, and different responses to the rearing of their children. I think it is important – especially when raising teenagers – to listen to those different voices of how we should respond. The immediate response, the one we find in the written Torah, of strong punitive measures may not always be the appropriate one. There are ways to transform the most difficult encounters with our children into learning experiences. One of the Hassidic masters gave this advice to a parent of a rebellious son, “Just love him more.” There is a delicate balance between discipline and love that is the difficult art of parenting – especially when it comes to raising teenagers. Sometimes, strong discipline is not the appropriate response – at other times, it may very well be when our young people are endangering their lives.

The most important word that we wish to transmit to the next generation is the Jewish legal term “chova” - which is literally translated as duty or obligation. Judaism defines itself as a system of personal responsibility. This is the meaning of mitzvah and the term bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah. This is the difference between a child and an adult. A child is not responsible for his or her actions. An adult is accountable. The process of raising our children is to teach them how to be responsible for their behaviors. The traditional words of the parent at the bar mitzvah were originally, “Praise G-d for releasing from the responsibility of my child.” Obviously, that release does not happen on one day. It is a process that evolves over time. Judaism teaches us that being an adult is the freedom to make responsible choices.

Children have been rebellious from time immemorial and will continue to be – that is the process of becoming independent. However, it is our task as parents to even make those most difficult times,

times of growth and maturation.