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## REBELLIOUS OR INDIVIDUALIST: WHEN THE APPLE FALLS FAR FROM THE TREE [An Interview]<sup>1</sup>

[Excerpts from the article:]

In "My Son's Different Path," a fascinating article published recently by Aish Hatorah, Heather Desilva tells of her experience as a secular mother whose son has chosen to become *frum*. Describing the dilemma she grappled with as her son began moving towards Yiddishkeit, Mrs. Desilva writes: "I didn't know if I should panic, fight, or applaud." Ultimately, the author chose to support her son's decision, and as he gradually became more religious, she says, "I stood aside and watched him blossom."

Most *Ami* readers would probably nod their heads in approval--as did I--of Mrs. Desilva's encouraging, supportive attitude towards her son's *teshuvah* process. But as a *frum* mother whose children are all under the age of eight, the story made me wonder: what's supposed to happen when the tables are turned? What if a child is making choices that don't necessarily point towards spiritual growth? I once heard a story about a young *bochur*—the proverbial "black sheep"—who began wearing patterned white shirts instead of the non-patterned white shirts worn by all the men in his family. The father, distraught over what he saw as an act of rebellion, quickly put an end to his son's brand new, patterned shirts with a pair of scissors, but this certainly didn't strike me as the wisest possible solution. So what *would* be a wise solution? If a child veers off onto a path that differs from that of his parents, how supportive should they be? What does the parent's responsibility consist of? And how can we tell the difference between a rebellious child and one who is simply different from the rest of his family?

Ultimately, the question becomes: what is a *frum* parent to do when the apple falls far from the tree?

I asked four different well-known and well-regarded parenting authorities for their opinions on the subject.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ami-Living Magazine* - July 6, 2011, pp. 28-35 by Dina Schreiber.

Dr. Benzion Sorotzkin, Psy.D. is a clinical psychologist who specializes in the treatment of depression, anxiety, and perfectionism in teens and young adults. Asked to define the difference between rebellion and "finding a different path in life," Dr. Sorotzkin, replied: "Generally, if there is a positive relationship between the child and parents, the child will follow the parents' lifestyle. Parents should take an honest look at the relationship. If the parent-child relationship is good, it is unlikely that he is on the slippery slope towards going off the *derech*, and more likely just wants to stake out his own groove in your vicinity, but won't go too far. However, if the relationship is poor, this is a sign of the beginning of his decline. Even if a child from a *litvish* family chooses to become *chassidish*, this is usually symptomatic of some deficiency in the parent-child relationship." He cited the bold claim made by the well-known *mechanech* in Bnei Brak, Rav Mordechai Huminer (*sefer Chinuch Malchuti*): "I have never seen a child who was off the *derech*, who had a reasonably good relationship with his parents!" .

Dr. Sorotzkin remarked that "we shouldn't expect our children to be clones of ourselves." "For example," he said, "I've seen parents becoming frantic because they think their child is too materialistic. Their overreaction can create a problem that is far more deleterious than the original issue. If you overreact, the problem escalates. The solution isn't to crack the whip. The solution is to improve the relationship!" .

Dr. Sorotzkin has seen it happen in many modern Orthodox families that a child who has been sent to Israel for a year, will ask to stay and learn for another year. "If the parents react with anger and great disappointment, they'll drive the child away. Don't rashly reject your child's request without giving due consideration to the impact on your overall relationship with him." .

"In the same vein," Dr. Sorotzkin continued, "a child who chooses an externally less *frum* path than his family's shouldn't be overly pressured. A lifestyle choice that differs from the family's doesn't usually start off dramatically with a big bang. Let's say a child from a *yeshivish* household starts wearing a blue shirt, instead of white. If parents embrace this, they won't cause the child to dis-identify even more with them, or what's worse, drive him away. Usually the child just wants to be his own person, and it's not worth arguing about." Dr. Sorotzkin quotes Rav Matisyahu Solomon, who said: "There is no such thing as drop-outs, only push outs!" .

Dr. Sorotzkin told me, "Parents need to pick their battles. You don't win the war by fighting every single battle that comes up. The way you react to minor differences will determine whether or not more serious divergences from the family path come about in future. Years ago, someone I know had a child who was very bright, as well as musically inclined. In this *yeshivish* family, though, he wasn't encouraged to develop his musical gifts. When the child wanted music lessons, the parents forbade it, believing that it would detract from the child's learning. I warned them that this was a mistake. Stopping the child from giving expression to this emotional pull would likely cause damage. By the time this child was a teenager, he had dropped out of yeshiva and was on the brink of abandoning Yiddishkeit. At this point, the parents were ready to agree to his initial request, but it was too late. Music lessons weren't even on the table anymore. These parents were finally agreeing to taking that one step, but they were two steps behind the child. Years later, the father asked me, "Why does my son think that because he wants music in his life, he can't be *frum*?" I was shocked by the question, and responded, "It was you who created this dichotomy for him!" .

Dr. Sorotzkin also shared with me a story about parents who asked a senior rosh yeshiva if they should permit their son to attend a more modern yeshiva, as per the boy's request. The rosh yeshiva, after evaluating all the relevant information, replied: "It is better for your son to feel that he belongs somewhere in Klal Yisroel, than to feel he belongs nowhere in Klal Yisroel" [i.e., if the child is forced to attend a yeshiva that he feels is too *yeshivish* for him, he certainly won't identify with the ideology of that yeshiva. He also won't have the opportunity to identify with the more modern yeshiva which he wants to attend, so he'll end up feeling that he's not part of *klal Yisroel*]. Dr. Sorotzkin cited the statement in the *Shulchan Aruch* that if a father wants his child to attend one yeshiva, but the child desires to learn in another, it is not mandated by *kibbud av* to defer to the father. The reason for this, said Dr. Sorotzkin, "is not that we don't assume the father knows better. Rather, that's simply not a relevant issue. If the son doesn't want to learn there, he won't be successful. The father can try to convince his child, but can't force him to go where he doesn't want to go."

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For me, though, a large question still remained unanswered, and in my mind, it led directly to the larger, most momentous questions. Why is it that some children choose to deviate from their parent's path? Are we parents supposed to allow our children to decide everything? Don't they need our guidance?

Dr. Sorotzkin replied: "A father once told me that his son had asked him for a Nintendo Wii, because the neighbor's kids had one. The father was sympathetic to the son's wish but emphatically did not want to bring a video game system into his home. In the end, he gently explained to his son why he didn't want one in the house, and bought the child an expensive bike to soften the blow. This was a good move. We must be sensitive to the possible downside of saying no, and make a sensible decision with that reality in mind."

Dr. Sorotzkin emphasized that it is important to know your child well, and to gauge how he will react if you deny him a choice. "The bigger picture is what's important here. There are positives and negatives on both sides of the equation. A mother once called to ask me about her seventeen-year-old daughter who wanted to spend Shabbos with a group of friends that the mother didn't approve of. She said, "Should I let?" When I replied that she should allow it, the mother said, "Aren't you concerned about the influence these friends will have on my daughter?" to which I replied, "Of course I'm concerned about that, but I'm equally concerned about what will happen if you say no."

To be honest, I wasn't entirely satisfied with Dr. Sorotzkin's response. "My friends and I weren't raised that way," I told him. "We were often told, 'In our house, we'll fill in the blank.'"

"The purpose of *chinuch*," said Dr. Sorotzkin, "is for the future. Telling a child what he must do when under your roof will lead to short-term gain, but if he follows the rules just because he is in your house, what happens when he leaves your house?" [See Rav Wolbe's *sefer* "Planting and Building in *Chinuch*" where he emphasizes that need for parents to look at

the long-term impact of their actions and to not be seduced by the short-term, apparent gains of harsh discipline.]

“So where do we draw the line?” I inquired.

“The term ‘drawing the line’ implies that you are on different sides of the fence, that you are contesting different interests. There should be no line, because the parents and child should be on the same side.”

I questioned this idea further. “But isn’t that being too permissive?”

His answer struck me powerfully.

I often challenge my colleagues, many of whom have years of experience, with the following question: “When was the last time you saw a person whose serious emotional problems were caused by overly lenient parents?” No one seems to recall such cases. It’s when a parent is heavy-handed that resentment builds, and the parent-child relationship deteriorates. This relationship is the most vital component in the transmission of our *mesorah*.

Rav Matisyahu Solomon used to say that it isn’t good to buy elaborate toys for children, as this detracts from the development of the child’s imagination. But once, after lecturing about this very concept extensively for 40 minutes, Rav Matisyahu frankly asserted: “If, however, the child’s friends have it, and he requests it, too, you may need to buy it.” This underscores how essential it is for parents to consider all aspects of a situation before deciding if to say yes or no. When parents say no to a child’s adoption of a different *derech*, when in reality they should say yes, this can lead to serious conflict. Oftentimes, farther along down the road, parents are forced to concede, at which point it is the child who is now in control. Parental control over their children – especially when they are older – is an illusion. We don’t want our children to test that illusion!

Dr. Sorotzkin told me the story of a prominent *mechanech* of an earlier generation who was very outspoken in his yeshiva against going to college, and came to one of the *gedolei hador* with a question: “My son wants to go to college. How can I allow it? I speak against going to college all the time.” After evaluating all aspects of the situation, the *godol* replied that the *mechanech* should allow his son to go to college, and if his current position didn’t permit such an option, then he should get a different job. The story ends with the son going to college for a while but then deciding to go back to learning. This story happened many years ago, and the *mechanech’s* son is still learning fulltime. Dr. Sorotzkin suggested that perhaps this son went back to learning “because his parents let him be himself.”

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In the Ami Living July 13, 2011, issue the following letter appeared:

It is with great pain and regret that I read your article “Rebellious or Individualist.” It brought back horrific memories of when I was growing up and my brother was in constant battle with my father. How I wish my father would have read your article! Perhaps it would have opened his eyes to realize that there is a difference between a child who is curious and a child

who acts out ó that a child who is different from you or has different interests is not necessarily bad.

My father was a very rigid man who thought that whatever he believed was absolute ó and anything not related to Torah learning was heresy.

This was especially difficult for my brother. He was a very curious boy and had tremendous interest in anything related to airplanes. But my father thought that reading up on the topic was *bitul* Torah. My brother would sneak to the library to get books about airplanes and when my father would find them he would confiscate them and beat my brother. I still need to shut out the sound of their yells as they warred about this issue. Today, my brother is no longer *frum* and does not have any relationship with our father. And this all began because of a young boy's interest in airplanes.

I truly believe that had my father allowed my brother to pursue his interest in this subject, my brother would still be a *frum* Jew today.

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