

A LAND THAT GROWS IMMORALITY

by Rabbi Ben Tzion Shafier

"Yisrael settled in Shittim and the people began to act promiscuously with the daughters of Moav." — Bamidbar 25:1

Balak, the king of Moav, saw the supernatural success the Jews experienced when they left Mitzrayim, and he feared that his people would be destroyed. He hired the gentile prophet, Bila'am, to curse the Jews. HASHEM thwarted Bila'am's efforts, and against his will, he blessed the Jewish people. Recognizing that he couldn't curse them, he gave Balak an alternate strategy: "Their God hates promiscuity. Entrap the men in sin, and God will destroy them." Balak sent the message out to the Moabite women, and thus began one of the lowest descents in our history. In the end, 24,000 Jewish men were involved in sin and were killed by plague.

When setting the backdrop for these events, the Torah mentions that the Jewish people camped in Shittim. This fact seems to be irrelevant. What difference does it make where they stopped? Rabbeinu Bachaye explains that the city of Shittim was pivotal in these events, and it was only because the Jewish people were encamped in that area that the entire debacle unfolded. He explains that in Shittim, there was a stream of water that caused people to act immorally. This stream fed Sodom, and that was why people there became so depraved. The Torah mentions Shittim to let us know that it was because of that particular location that the Jews fell to that low level. The area was infused with a negative force.

This concept is very difficult to understand. How can a stream of water cause immorality? How can one place be more depraved than another simply because of physical attributes like a stream?

The best way to understand this is to focus on almost an opposite phenomenon.

A legend in our times

In the annals of recent Jewish history, one of the shining stars was a man named R' Meir Schuster. He became a one-man *kiruv* dynamo and is credited for tens of thousands of Jews returning to Torah. At his funeral, R' Noach Weinberg, *zt"l*, himself an icon in the *ba'al teshuvah* movement, said, "I am jealous of R' Meir's *olam ha-ba*."

But those who knew him as a young man in yeshivah said they never would have expected it of him. He was a humble, soft-spoken, and shy person. He was not particularly charismatic, nor was he a great speaker.

R' Schuster's ascent to the level of legend began in 1968 when he was a young *kollel* student who had just moved to Israel. He and his friend Chaim Kass went to daven at the *Kosel*, and they noticed many people there who had no connection to Judaism. Nevertheless, these people were visibly moved simply by being there. The thought struck them both: "Why can't someone connect with all these Jews whose *neshamos* are lit up by the *Kosel*?" But sadly, there was nothing in place to help them explore what they were missing.

All of that changed when they noticed a young man wearing a backpack, leaning against the *Kosel*, and crying. Chaim walked over to him and asked if he would be interested in learning more about Judaism. The young man responded that he would. For the next two weeks, R' Meir Schuster and R' Chaim kept returning to the *Kosel* to try to interest more people in exploring Judaism. By nature, R' Schuster is particularly quiet and reserved, an introvert not naturally given to conversation, and so R' Chaim initially did the talking. Within a couple of weeks, however, R' Schuster began to take the lead. And for the next forty years, R' Meir Schuster was at the *Kosel*, inviting young men and women to experience a Shabbos and explore their heritage. He became known as the "Man of the Wall." And, today, thousands and thousands of *ba'alei teshuvah* credit their return to him.

Capturing the moment

But what was his secret? How did a shy, unassuming man accomplish so much? Certainly his sincerity and burning love for every Jew propelled him. But it was the time and the place that made it happen. Standing in Yerushalayim, the holiest city in the world, and there at its epicenter, the place of the Beis HaMikdash, a Jewish heart is aglow. The aura is pervasive and powerful. Rabbi Schuster tapped into that experience and guided people to further explore its wonder. What he did was gargantuan, but it was the *Kosel* that moved them.

A stream that causes immorality

This seems to be the answer to Rabbenu Bachaye. "The land of Shittim caused immorality" is literal. There was a pull to depravity in that place. HASHEM created many forces in this world; some function on a physical plane, and some on a different plane. If you electrify a piece of iron, it exerts an electromagnetic pull — a force so powerful that it can lift a full-sized SUV. So, too, HASHEM created forces that affect the spiritual world. Yerushalayim is infused with holiness; there is a presence in the air. When a person walks the streets, his soul lights up, and the pull toward *ruchniyus* is palpable. But just as HASHEM created specific places that effuse *kedushah*, He also created places that give off the opposite effect. There are places on this planet that exert a potent force that pulls a person to vice. It strengthens the hold of the body over the *neshamah*, and a person is drawn to do that which is sinful — not for the pleasure alone, but for the immorality of the action.

San Francisco

This concept is applicable to us, as even today, there are cities that are notorious for depravity. While we may be tempted to explain it based on sociological factors and circumstances, there is often a deeper, underlying cause. As part of keeping everything in this world in balance, HASHEM chooses some areas to be receptacles of impurity.

By being aware of different spiritual forces, and by becoming more sensitive to these pulls, we can tap into the dynamics that will propel our spiritual growth. May HASHEM speedily redeem us, and may we all live again in the most holy of all lands, our birthright, Eretz Yisrael.

Rabbi Shafier is the founder of the Shmuz.com – The Shmuz is an engaging, motivating shiur that deals with real life issues.

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