

Do not perform the practice of the land of Egypt in which you dwelled; and do not perform the practice of the land of Canaan to which I bring you. (18:3)

Canaan and Egypt were the two most morally depraved lands in the world. Furthermore, both the area in which the Jewish People lived in Egypt and the area in which they were destined to settle in Canaan were the worst parts of these degenerate countries. The influence of these decadent cultures can be overwhelming. Thus, the Torah warns us to be alert to the dangers which lure the unknowing into an abyss of decadence and immorality. The **Ksav Sofer** distinguishes between the evil perpetrated by the Egyptians and the degeneracy which was the way of life in Canaan.

The Egyptians were a cruel people. With utmost brutality they slaughtered Jewish children for their blood. They had no qualms about substituting Jewish infants to take the place of bricks. The Egyptian represented cruelty at its nadir. The *Canaanim* were not as evil. Perhaps they did not murder babies, but they were morally degenerate. *Chazal* (*Bava Metzia* 83b) say that when we notice someone who is an unusual *mechutza*, audacious, it is an indication that his pedigree is flawed and that he is a *mamzer*, illegitimate child, the product of an immoral union. This teaches us that moral degeneracy produces *chutzpah*, temerity, brazenness, and cruelty.

This is the Torah's message: Do not perform the practice of the Egyptians. Do not act cruelly as did the Egyptians. How does one prevent the cruelty "gene" from becoming a part of his family's DNA? Do not act immorally like the *Canaanim*. Immorality begets audacity which is the basis for cruelty.

This Torah thought is especially insightful in contemporary times, when society's moral compass has made an about-face and is hurdling south on a collision course. Morality must be defined by a Higher Authority, a Supreme Being, not given to the allures and temptations of a society in which decadence reigns supreme and degeneracy is as common as "apple pie." Morality determines what is right and what is wrong, what is appropriate and what is improper. As noted, however, a compass denotes direction; a moral compass is an indication of the direction to which morality must point. In contemporary society we are being bombarded and influenced by individuals whose compass has changed direction. Today, people act immorally and do so with impunity. Immorality begets *chutzpah*, and *chutzpah* is the godfather of cruelty. In a generation where *arayos* – immorality and forbidden relationships – have become the norm and are acceptable, and, by some, even championed, is there any question why there is so much unusual brutality, acts of cruelty that had been unheard of since the dark ages? It is Canaan all over again – and it will beget another Mitzrayim.

How does one protect himself from the temptations of the outside world? What does one do to overcome the fearsome power of the *yetzer hora*, evil inclination? Torah study – and more Torah study. Nothing else gives one the strength and the ability to deal with the wiles of the *yetzer hora*.

Incidentally, one should never think that he has succeeded, because this, in itself, can be the greatest mistake and ultimate downfall. The following episode underscores this idea.

The *Yehudi HaKadosh m'Peshischa* was a *chasid*, follower of the *Chozeh, zl, m'Lublin*. This all came to an abrupt end one day when another distinguished follower of the *Chozeh*, an individual whom the *Chozeh* held in high esteem, slandered the *Yehudi*. The *Chozeh*, for some reason, accepted this *chasid's* unkind remarks concerning the *Yehudi*, and, in response, severed his relationship with the *Yehudi*. No explaining could mitigate the slander. The damage was done, and it seemed irreparable. The *Chozeh* refused to accept the *Yehudi* into his court.

The **Kotzker Rebbe, zl**, who was a disciple of the *Peshischa*, remarked that one can marvel at the power of the *yetzer hora*, who had invested sixty years of building up that slanderous *chasid*, to the point that he became unquestionably believed by the holy *Chozeh*. Imagine all of the man's *mitzvos*, good deeds, prayers and Torah study – all sponsored by the *yetzer hora* for one purpose – to use him as a vehicle to catalyze *machlokes*, controversy, between two holy people. He maintained the pristine nature of that *chasid's* reputation, so that he could make him appear as the paragon of virtue and ethicality. All this was to destroy a relationship between two giants of Torah.

Horav Yechezkel Levinstein, zl, echoes these sentiments. The venerable *Mashgiach* posits that, if someone presents a deficient *middah*, character defect, even at an advanced age – a *middah* which had heretofore never surfaced from this person – it has been with him throughout his entire life. It just never has had the opportunity to rear its ugly head – until now.

Bad *middos* are innate. A person is born with them and, unless he fights to expunge them, they will fester and germinate until one day they end their dormancy with a vicious appearance. That moment is not an aberration of one's otherwise fine *middos* and upstanding virtues. On the contrary, it is an indication of his innate hostility, *middos raos*, deficient character traits, that had never been extirpated from within him.