

You shall make the planks/beams of the Mishkan of acacia wood, standing erect. (26:15)

The designation of the *shittim* tree, which is a variety of cedar, for the *Mishkan* dates back to Yaakov *Avinu*, who had cedars planted in Egypt. Prior to his passing, he instructed his sons to take the wood along when they left Egypt. He foresaw that one day they would be used in the *Mishkan*. In another view found in the *Midrash*, these cedars were planted by Avraham *Avinu* when he was in Egypt. Our Patriarch sought to concretize the foundations of our future Sanctuary, which represented to him the anchor of *Klal Yisrael's* moral and religious survival through its many trials and tribulations. While he knew that the edifice would not last forever, he was certain that its spirit of sanctity would prevail over the test of time.

The *Talmud Yoma* 72a and *Succah* 45b focus on what appears to be an extra word in the *pasuk*, *atzei shittim omdim*, “Acacia wood, standing erect.” What is meant by the word *omdim*, standing? *Chazal* offer a number of interpretations. Rabbi Shimon *bar Yochai* posits that an important lesson is to be derived from this word. “Perhaps you will say, *ovad sivram u'bateil sikuyan*, ‘Their promise is gone, and their hope is ruined, never to return.’” Now that we no longer have the *Mishkan* and its later counterpart, the *Bais HaMikdash* – and their beams have been hidden – it all seems to be over. What purpose is there to the beams without a Sanctuary? This is why the Torah writes *omdim*, standing: to inform us that they stand for all eternity. This is similar to *Chazal's* statement in the *Talmud Pesachim* 87b, concerning the letters of the *Luchos*. The Torah writes that Moshe *Rabbeinu* broke the *Luchos* “before your eyes” (*Devarim* 9:17). It was impossible for all of *Klal Yisrael* to have seen Moshe shatter the *Luchos*. *Chazal* say the Tablets were broken, but the letters flew up to Heaven, a phenomenon witnessed by the entire nation.

How are we to understand the concept of the *atzei shittim* standing for all eternity? *Rabbeinu Bachya* explains that the *Mishkan* and, afterwards, the *Bais HaMikdash*, were the **physical** counterparts corresponding to the various **spiritual** forces that exist in Creation. Each of the world's spiritual components found a parallel in some aspect of the *Mishkan's* construction. Thus, the Sanctuary expressed the unity that exists between the physical temporal realm with that of the spiritual/eternal realm. There is one problem with this correspondence. If the physical edifice is destroyed, does this mean that there is no longer a physical representative of the spiritual, which would connote an end to the spiritual dimension it represents? The Torah uses the word “standing” to allay this fear. It teaches us that the spiritual forces which are the life force of the physical, its source of illumination, will continue on – to eternity. Our hope and yearning, which had heretofore been directed toward the Sanctuary, can continue unabated. The light will stay undimmed. Although its physical counterpart may be lost for some time, it will not be abrogated, but will return to its former eminence.

Alternatively, in his *Takanos HaShavim*, *Horav Tzadok HaKohen*, *zl*, *m'Lublin*, elucidates *Chazal's* statement, suggesting it applies to *baalei teshuvah*, penitents, Jews who were raised in

an assimilated environment, who have literally “returned” to their heritage. Rav Tzadok notes that the various components of the Sanctuary represent different group of Jews. The *Kerashim* represent those Jews who have sinned. This is based on *Midrash Tanchumah, Terumah* 9. The *Kerashim* support the notion that even those who have sinned will ultimately repent and assume their rightful portion in *Klal Yisrael*’s destiny. What happens, however, to this destiny once the Sanctuary is destroyed? Lest one think that the loss of the Sanctuary’s beams reflects the disenfranchisement of these sinners from *Klal Yisrael*’s future, “Their promise is gone, and their hope is ruined!” The *pasuk* assures us that these beams remain standing for all eternity. Those who have been estranged from Torah **will eventually return!**

In his *Kol HaTorah*, Horav Elie Munk, zl, applies the *atzei shittim* as a metaphor to *tzaddikim*, the righteous in this world. Chazal teach that there are twenty-four species of cedar, with *shittim* being one of the most precious. The righteous are often compared to cedars and particularly to the cedars of the Sanctuary. In *Sefer Tehillim* 92:13,14, David Ha’melech declares: *Tzaddik ka’tamar yifrach*, “The righteous shall flourish like a palm-tree” – *k’erez ba’Levanon yisgeh*, “Like the cedar in Lebanon will he grow tall”; *Shesulim b’Bais Hashem*, “Planted in the House of Hashem”; *b’chatzros Elokeinu yafrichu*, “They shall flourish in the courtyards of our G-d.” Accordingly, even if the *Bais HaMikdash* will not physically survive, the righteous will nonetheless endure and flourish in each generation. Chazal teach in the *Talmud Shabbos* 33b, “If the Sanctuary falls, the righteous will continue to protect their generation.” They are *omdim*, stand tall and erect for all time.

The eternal nature of *Klal Yisrael* is due to our never forsaking the Torah, which is *nitzchi*, eternal. Through exile and tribulation, through pogroms, Inquisition, the Holocaust, we have never renounced the Torah. Consequently, it has never abandoned us. Many stories abound which underscore this idea. One, which is specifically meaningful, recently came to my attention. In his *Living the Parshah*, Rabbi Shimon Finkelman relates a poignant story which captures it all:

The city of Gateshead, England, can best be described as quaint. Small in size, it is primarily an industrial town. Its physical appearance has little about which to boast. Its spiritual dimension is an entirely different story. Gateshead is home to an excellent *yeshivah*, world-renowned *kollel*, *Bais Yaakov* and seminary. The *yeshivah* has produced a number of famous Torah leaders. Indeed, the *Mashgiach* of *Beth Medrash Govohah*, Horav Matisyahu Solomon, *Shlita*, himself studied in *Gateshead Yeshivah* and later became its *Mashgiach*. He described the austere conditions under which he and his friends grew in Torah.

The *yeshivah* building was actually a converted house, with two adjoining rooms serving as the *bais ha’medrash*. Space was at a premium, with students sitting shoulder to shoulder around a long table. It was so crowded that their *Gemorah*’s overlapped. Yet, these conditions did not diminish anyone’s ability to succeed in Torah learning. On the contrary, it was due to the mere fact that the students were devoted to learning – even under such conditions – that they excelled to such a high degree.

One day, an American journalist touring England visited the town of Wallsend, a tourist attraction not far from Gateshead. This man was born to Jewish parents, but Torah observance was quite foreign to him. He was aware of some of the more well-known Jewish traditions, but this was the extent of his Jewish orientation and affiliation.

Wallsend's tourist attraction was an ancient pile of rubble covered by green moss. Apparently, this pile was all that remained of a wall built by the Roman Emperor Hadrian when he conquered England and built a wall to keep the Scottish army from entering his newly-acquired territory. This pile of rubble was the "tribute" to Hadrian's triumph. Hence, the name Wallsend.

The journalist was occupied with photographing the stones and recording their history, as if it were something of great import. Suddenly, he remembered that that day was the anniversary of his father's passing. *Yahrtzeit* means a lot to a Jew. For some estranged Jews, it is all they have, all that binds them to *Yiddishkeit*. Though he was not observant, the journalist annually made a special effort to recite *Kaddish* for his father's soul.

He asked around for the location of a synagogue that might have a *minyan* during the week. He was told that in the town of Gateshead, some ten miles away, was a *yeshivah* which had a *minyan* thrice daily.

He drove over to the *Gateshead Yeshivah* and entered the little house that served as their campus. The scene which he beheld blew his mind. He was awed by the sight before his eyes – in the cramped quarters which served as their *bais ha'medrash*, young men were studying Torah. They were arguing passionately, as each one examined the *Talmud* closely and expounded upon his interpretation. As the journalist stood there in awe, he heard one student shout at his study partner, "But Rabbi Akiva disagrees!"

When the journalist heard the name of the fabled *Tanna*, the illustrious Rabbi Akiva, he was taken aback. Somewhat versed in Jewish history, he recognized the name of the *Tanna*, as one of the most distinguished disseminators of the Oral Law. As a result of defying the decree of the Roman Emperor Hadrian not to teach Torah, Rabbi Akiva had been brutally tortured and murdered. It was the same Hadrian who had built what became a pile of rubble.

When the journalist returned to America, he wrote a revealing article about his travels. In it, he observed that nothing was left of the mighty Hadrian – conqueror, ruler, leader of great armies – nothing but a pile of stone and rubble, covered with moss. On the other hand, the teachings of Rabbi Akiva, the man who defied Hadrian and was the victim of his brutality – the individual who was a thorn in the emperor's side, whom the wicked ruler sought to obliterate – are still being reviewed over and over, almost 2,000 years after his death.

This is the meaning of *atzei shittim omdim*. The Jewish People and their Torah stand forever.