

Neither an Amoni or Moavi may enter the congregation of Hashem... because they did not greet you with bread and water... and because he hired Bilaam... to curse you. (23:4,5)

The Amonite and Moavite nations are forever barred from marrying a Jewish woman – regardless of the sincerity and irreproachable nature of his conversion. Why? The Torah gives two reasons for this discrimination: they did not greet our ancestors with bread and water during their difficult journey through the wilderness; they hired Bilaam to curse the Jews. These reasons beg elucidation. If it is due to their lack of *chesed*, kindness, what qualifies other nations for acceptance as converts? Have we not suffered at their hands throughout the millennia? Furthermore, what connection is there between their lack of kindness and their hiring of Bilaam to curse us?

Horav Nissan Alpert, zl, explains that these nations did not only act inappropriately as neighboring nations, but they also failed to act in their own best interests! After the Jewish mother. The father is compared to the Torah, setting the general guidelines of commitment; the mother, however, is equated with the *dayanim*, who carry out and see to it that the people adhere to the Torah. Likewise, the mother is the one who performs the most significant function on which everything depends: namely, the practical training of the child.

The *ben sorer u'moreh* is perverse, obstinate and intransigent. Under normal circumstances, this form of disobedience might be considered maturation, developing into a man, acting out his age. However, *zolel v'sovei*, stubborn, defiant conduct, as evidenced by gluttony and drunkenness, occurring at a time when the boy is *bar-mitzvah* and going through a period of moral awakening, makes it clear that any attempt at character training will only end in failure. His greed and desire for food transcend any moral considerations. This is the worst type of moral degradation. Nothing – absolutely nothing – matters when he wants to satisfy himself. This is the *zolel*. The *sovei* is one to whom drink takes precedence over all else. This boy has no honor, no dignity, no remorse. It is all about “him.”

Rav Hirsch recapitulates the criteria: Willful, perverse disobedience in general, pilfering at home to satisfy his needs; keeping bad company, having no compunctions about destroying the lives of his parents and depriving them of happiness. Perhaps in the contemporary society that surrounds us, we might discover such an evil seed, but he will probably be the product of a dysfunctional family situation. It is always “something.” This is why the *ben sorer u'moreh* never was and never will be. The lessons it imparts, however, are too valuable to ignore.