

An Amomite or Moabite shall not enter the congregation of Hashem... because of the fact that they did not greet you with bread and water... and because he hired against you Bilaam. (23:4,5)

Two reasons are given as to why we may not accept converts from the nations of Ammon and Moav: A) They did not come forward to greet us with bread and water as we journeyed through the wilderness following 210 years of slavery; B) They hired Bilaam, the evil pagan prophet, to curse us. These are two good reasons, which are clearly quite different from one another. The first reason criticizes their lack of etiquette, of human decency. The second reason excoriates them for attempting to destroy one another. They are so distant from one another that they hardly belong in the same *pasuk*.

The *Maggid, zl*, of Dubno was not only a brilliant Torah scholar, but he was also a prolific speaker who captivated his audiences with his incredible knowledge and ability to employ the power of the *mashal*, parable, story, to explain the most difficult passages. He once said that, with regard to any *pasuk* that was presented to him, he was able to ask a question by using a *mashal*, and offer a lucid explanation, also using a *mashal*. The people had difficulty believing this to be true, so they decided to test him. They selected the above *pasuk*, prohibiting an Amoni or Moavi from marrying into the Jewish people, as grounds for the test.

The *Maggid* thought for a moment and began to relate the following story: "A wealthy man arranged for a *shidduch*, matrimonial match, for his daughter. Since the boy lived quite a distance from the *kallah*, bride, it was decided to celebrate the *tannaim*, engagement, in a hall approximately midway between them. The plan was for the girl's mother to arrive later with the delicacies for the celebration. While the father was sitting in conversation with his future son-in-law and family, his own son, who had left with the mother, came running in to the room, disheveled and dirty, "Oy, oy! On our way here we had an accident. The wagon turned over, and all of the food, the fish, the meat and all of the desserts were ruined. The bottles of wine and liquor are smashed and, furthermore, our mother was killed!" Obviously, this boy's mind was seriously challenged, in that he placed greater significance over the lost food and drink than over the tragic death of his mother.

"This same idea applies with regard to our *pasuk*," continued the *maggid*. "First, the Torah recounts Ammon and Moav's lack of decency and then later adds the fact that they hired Bilaam to curse them. Obviously, someone who is bent on killing you is a greater danger than the one who does not greet you bearing gifts."

A great question was given added meaning through the vehicle of the *mashal*, parable. The people looked at the *Maggid*, expecting an answer also with a *mashal*. The *Maggid* did not let them down. "A seemingly well-to-do-farmer visited a *yeshivah* to speak with its *rosh yeshivah*," began the

Maggid. "I would like the *rosh yeshivah* to select his finest student for my daughter. I will, of course, treat the young man like royalty and provide for his every need.

"The *rosh yeshivah* chose one of his 'lions,' an erudite student whose diligence matched his ethical character, indeed, a special young man. The *shidduch* was finalized, and a date was set for the wedding. A few months later, the wedding took place amidst great pomp and joy. Wonderful boy, wonderful girl: who could ask for more? The day after the wedding, the young groom sat down to breakfast at the home of his father-in-law (as was the prevalent custom in those days) and was served a piece of course, black bread with vinegar to use as a dip (to soften the bread). The young man almost choked from the bread. After breakfast, he remained nauseous most of the day from the taste. Lunch and dinner were more of the same. After two weeks of such meals, the delicate young man looked a sad version of his former self. He had deteriorated to skin and bones, and he had no physical strength left. He literally did not have the strength to raise the dreadful slice of bread to his mouth.

"When the father-in-law took note of his prize son-in-law's emaciated appearance, he berated him for not eating. When he saw that his rebuke fell on deaf ears, he hired two ruffians at a substantial rate per hour to stand over his son-in-law and, if necessary, force-feed him. Every time the young man gagged on the bread, they would shove it down his throat. After all, his father-in-law was paying them a pretty penny to watch over him.

"One night, the son-in-law was lucky enough to escape from the village and return to his *yeshivah*. He looked and felt like a wreck. The *rosh yeshivah* fed him and put him to bed. The next day, his father-in-law arrived with his list of complaints. When questioned why he did not feed his son-in-law, his response was, 'I have no money. I did the best I could with whatever I have.' When the *rosh yeshivah* heard this, he raised his voice, '*Mechutzaf!* What audacity you have! You claim that you have no money to feed your son-in-law, yet, you are able to spend a king's ransom in gold to hire two ruffians to force-feed him!'"

This is what the *pasuk* teaches us: "Perhaps you think that Ammon and Moav could not afford to supply you with bread and water. Why, then, were they able to hire Bilaam to curse you?" This is a double standard if there ever was one.