

Neither an Amoni nor a Moavi may enter the congregation of Hashem... because they did not greet you with bread and water... and because he hired Bilaam ben Beor. (23:4,5)

Even if an Amoni or Moavi converts to Judaism, he/she is still forever barred from marrying a Jewish woman. Our bloodlines may not become tainted by the males of these two nations. The Torah states two reasons, both of which, on the surface, seem not to fit the punishment. They did not greet us with bread and water when we traveled through the wilderness and came close to their land. While this may manifest a lack of *mentchlichkeit*, it is only a moral flaw. Should a deficiency in moral stature demand such punishment? Furthermore, we believe that, over time, if a person works on himself, he can alter his moral trajectory. When someone who descends from Ammon or Moav decides to convert sincerely, we would think that he had not been the average morally-flawed gentile. He certainly has chosen to raise himself from the muck that characterized these nations.

If their lack of *chesed*, kindness, disqualifies them, perhaps we should revisit all of the other pagan nations whose character is not much different, and, quite possibly, worse, and ask why they, too, were not included in the do not marry list. Indeed, some of these nations have hounded us throughout the millennia; yet, if they convert, we may accept them. Furthermore, where does Bilaam fit into the equation? True, hiring him to curse the Jews was reprehensible, but does such a repugnant act warrant the punishment of eternal disqualification from their converts marrying into the Jewish faith? The Torah appears to maintain that refusing to give bread and water – a lack of *chesed* – and hiring Bilaam – an act of intense hatred – go hand-in-hand to disallow Ammon and Moav from marrying a Jewish woman.

Horav Nissin Alpert, zl, addresses the first reason: of a lack of kindness to a nation that was weary and weak from travel. He feels that nullifying their marrying into the Jewish faith is not a consequence of their not being nice and friendly. It was not as if they did not act in the interests of the Jewish people; they did not act in their own best interests. After having heard about *Klal Yisrael's* miraculous relationship with Hashem, the entire world shook with fear of crossing this fledgling nation. Logic dictates that, if Ammon and Moav would have had a kernel of common sense, they, too, would have shuddered from instigating a negative relationship with the Jews. They would have had to be unhinged to provoke us. Yet, they could care less.

Furthermore, they could have “made nice” and nurtured a positive relationship with the Jews simply because they were “family.” As descendants of Lot, our Patriarch Avraham’s nephew, they would have received preferential treatment. They had proteksia; why did they shun it?

Rav Alpert suggests that it was about venomous hatred – a hatred so intense that they were prepared to sacrifice their own well-being rather than show favor to the Jewish People. They would rather perish than form a bond with the Jewish People! They rewrote the book on anti-Semitism. The incident with the bread and water (which they refused to share with us) underscores their

malevolent, irrational animus towards us. It was not their lack of *middos tovos*, refined character traits – but rather, their harsh feelings towards us.

The *Rosh Yeshivah* attempts to say something in their favor. They were men of principle. If they believed in something – regardless of its perverse nature – they would not be swayed. If they hated Jews, nothing would convince or influence them to recant – even if it meant acting against their own self-interest. We do it for *mitzvos*. Imagine offering someone a hundred-thousand dollars to skip putting on *Tefillin* – he would laugh in your face. We are prepared to give up our lives for certain *mitzvos*. Surely, we will not renege a *mitzvah* for money. This is principle. Where were Ammon and Moav's principles? Perhaps it was in refusing to be perceived as hypocrites. If we hate someone – we will not alter our feelings. We are consistent in our hatred and not given to change. This was Ammon and Moav. Perhaps, if this would be the case, the prohibition against their marrying Jewish women should be relaxed once they convert. One does not convert to a nation/religion that he hates. Such a person has risen above the contradictions that characterize his life.

The answer is: They hired Bilaam to curse us. In addition to their lack of human decency – supposedly founded in their intense hatred and an illogical commitment not to be a hypocrite – they added one more demerit to their character; they hired Bilaam to curse us. What does this demonstrate? How does hiring Bilaam change their allegiance to principle?

Chazal (Bamidbar Rabbah 19) teach that Moav was not the first nation to seek Bilaam's services. Apparently, Sichon, the Emori King, wanted Bilaam to do his thing against none other than Moav. There must have been bad feelings in Moav towards Bilaam, the man hired to curse them. As such, one would least expect Bilaam to be Moav's prophet of choice to curse the Jews. Nonetheless, their hatred for Bilaam did not prevent them from swallowing their pride (and hatred) to hire Bilaam, the one who cursed their own nation, to do their bidding against the Jewish People.

Moav hated Bilaam, but they hated the Jewish nation even more. Thus, they were prepared to negotiate with a man whom they loathed, to conceal their true feelings and make nice, just so long that he effectively cursed the Jews. They were quite capable and willing to be hypocrites as long as it advanced their perverted agenda. Indeed, the most effective way of unifying people with disparate goals and objectives, and even enemies, is to present them with a common enemy, which, in this case was (and sadly throughout history, has often been) the Jews.

This is why they will never be accepted into our people. It was not about bread and water, but rather about the intense hatred they harbored within their souls. Such hatred cannot be expunged. It is a part of the fabric of the psyche of Ammon and Moav.