

A MOABITE SHALL NOT ENTER

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

At first glance, the book of Ruth appears to disregard the Torah law that does not allow Moabites to enter into the Jewish people. The Torah prohibits marriage to Moabites but Ruth is not only welcomed but is an ancestor of King David, and through him the Messiah. In this lesson we will focus on this prohibition and its relevance to our book.

Deuteronomy 23 states:

A bastard must not enter God's marriage group. Even after the tenth generation, he may not enter God's marriage group. An Ammonite or Moabite may not enter God's marriage group. They may never enter God's marriage group, even after the tenth generation. This is because they did not greet you with bread and water when you were on the way out of Egypt, and also because they hired Balaam son of Beor from Pethor in Aram Naharaim to curse you. Do not despise the Edomite, since he is your brother. Do not despise the Egyptian, since you were an immigrant in his land. [Therefore,] children born to [members of these nations] in the third generation [after becoming proselytes] may enter God's marriage group.

The Talmud in Kesuvos 7a tells us that Boaz gathered the ten elders in order to publicize an ancient law that has fallen into disuse. This Sinaitic ordinance explained that only a male Moabite or Ammonite cannot join the Congregation of Hashem but females are permitted to join. Yevamos 77b suggests that the verses themselves modify the prohibition. "... because they did not greet you with bread and water when you were on the way out of Egypt, and also because they hired Balaam son of Beor from Pethor in Aram Naharaim to curse you". The statement of a reason for the law indicates that only the males are prohibited. After all, "it is the way of the men to greet with bread and water" and it is the way of the men and not the women to engage in hostile action or to wage war. What the Oral Law does is explain that in this one case the stated reason for the Law can determine its application, a matter otherwise of Tannaitic dispute (Bava Metsia 115a). We usually follow the view that the stated purpose of a law does not determine its details of application but in this one case the Oral Law teaches us otherwise.

There are several indication from the Tanach itself that this Sinaitic Law operated from the earliest times. There is the case of Rehoboam, whom Na'amah, the Amonitess, bore to Solomon and who ruled over the kingdom of Judea after him. There are also several verses from Ezra that when read carefully suggest that the returnees from the Babylonian exile also understood this prohibition in this way (Matteh Dan of R. David Nieto 1:24- 28, this work will soon be published with my translation and

commentary in English by the Yashar Press).

What deeper factor makes this law an exception? Why are only male but not female Moabites prohibited? The Maharal in Netsach Isroel, Ch. 32 offers a profound explanation which I present here in a somewhat simplified fashion. He begins by pointing out that all nations stem from a union of a man and a woman and both of these ancestors contribute equally to physical and spiritual characteristics of the emerging people. In the language of Aristotelian philosophy, the man gives forth the form and the woman provides the matter. This was not the case, however, at the emergence of Ammon and Moab. In that unique case, it was a father and his daughters that initiated the process of national emergence. Consequently, the contribution of the father, directly and through his daughters was overwhelming and the female element in Moab and Ammon remained undeveloped and insignificant. This is why the women were excepted for they did not possess that determinative Moabite quality. In fact, we might say that it is precisely this that allowed Judah's seed to stamp its own quality upon the Moabite feminine substrate, taking from it only what it itself lacked, only the positive and nothing of the negative.

This explication of Ruth's origin provides an important insight into her qualities and character. We have already noted that Ruth plays an exceedingly passive role in this book. Ruth follows the direction of others and never asserts herself; even her child "is born to Naomi". It teaches us that the Redemption can only be impressed upon the willing. Those powers and forces that oppose the Redemption will not benefit by it but shall be utterly routed and destroyed. The overpowering revelation of Divinity at the core of Redemption will overwhelm all of creation and only those who are ready to open themselves and to receive it can survive; the rest will be shattered. "It should be known that just as powers of holiness are sustained through the Light of King's Countenance so do the powers of impurity derive their vitality from the same source. When the Presence is revealed, all draw toward it.... When the effusion of spirituality overtakes them and they are not suitable for it, they are harmed. This is why the firstborns in Egypt (and their gods) were destroyed (as Hashem went forth in the midst of Egypt). (Netsiv, Commentary to Exodus 11, 3).

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