

KIND-HEARTED ENEMIES

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

An Amoni or Moavi shall not join the congregation of Hashem. Even their tenth generation shall not join the congregation of Hashem - forever - because they did not greet you with bread and water on the road when you were leaving Egypt, and because he hired Bilam...to curse you.

Be'er Yosef - It is hard to imagine that these two reasons to keep Amon and Moav at arm's length can be spoken in the same breath. The first misdeed seems like a breach of good manners. It would have been the civil thing to offer some food to some people in need passing nearby. The second was a diabolical plot that, had it succeeded, would have put the entire Jewish people in peril, and could have meant their destruction. How can these two factors be placed on the same playing field?

One possibility is that the first reason greatly compounds the gravity of the second. By contracting Bilam to curse Klal Yisrael, they to disrupt the connection between the Jewish people and their heavenly Protector. Moreover, they sought to use HBKH's power for their nefarious plans. Had their plan succeeded - had Bilam gotten the opportunity to make full use of the power of a Divine curse - the results would have been catastrophic. The upshot of the episode is Hashem's love for Klal Yisrael, and the pains He took to prevent their falling prey to an unseen danger.

Yet, they would not be the last group to attempt to deliver a body blow to the Jewish people. The Torah makes no provision for distancing any future oppressors from marrying into the Jewish nation. Such enemies seem to be the everyday state of affairs for us. Amon and Moav, however, were different. There was a history that bound us together. They could have been expected to take the initiative to be of assistance to us in our time of need. After all, they came into being as a people only because of Avrohom! He risked his life to take on the four mighty kings who had captured Lot. Later, Lot was rescued from the overturning of Sodom only in the merit of Avrohom.

In other word, they owed us. And not only did they turn their backs on that debt of gratitude and not offer us food and drink as they should, but they conspired to destroy us. This made their crime much more serious.

Alternatively, the Torah might be teaching a lesson about the power of chesed. The ancient Egyptians were also anathematized. Yet they were only distanced for three generations, while Amon and Moav's disqualification has no limit. What made the Egyptians different is that they had hosted Yaakov and his family when they left Canaan and took up residence in the south. All the viciousness that they visited upon us in later years did not erase the fact that at one point, they provided refuge

for us during years of famine. This tempered the Divine edict against their marrying in to the Jewish people, allowing it to expire after a few generations.

The same could have happened to Amon and Moav, had they greeted us on the way into Israel with bread and water. Their punishment for hiring Bilam would have been cut back in recognition of the chesed they would have done. When they failed to seize the moment, they were punished fully for funding the plot to curse us.

The Torah here stresses the value of the small, simple deed. One genuine display of kindness would have had huge impact on the way Amon and Moav are treated and remembered. No small mitzvah goes unrewarded - and Hashem overlooks no good deed, even when performed by evildoers.

Sources:

1. Based on Be'er Yosef, Devarim 23:4-5
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