

THE INIQUITIES OF AMMON AND MOAB

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When barring Ammonites and Moabites from marrying Israelites, the Torah says: *An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter into the assembly of the Lord; even to the tenth generation shall none of them enter into the assembly of the Lord for ever; because they met you not with bread and with water on the way, when you came forth out of Egypt; and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Aram-naharaim* (Deut. 23:4-5).

This passage explicitly states that the Ammonites and Moabites are to be ostracized *because they met you not with bread and with water on the way, when you came forth out of Egypt*. However, another passage in Deuteronomy seems to contradict this. When Moses requested permission from Sihon king of Heshbon to pass through his land and buy food and water, he supported his request by noting that the Edomites (*the children of Esau*) and the Moabites had already allowed the Israelites to do so. Moses said: *'Thou shalt sell me food for money, that I may eat; and give me water for money, that I may drink; only let me pass through on my feet; as the children of Esau that dwell in Seir, and the Moabites that dwell in Ar, did unto me; until I shall pass over the Jordan into the land which the Lord our God giveth us'* (Deut. 2:28-29). This contradicts the assertion above that the Moabites *met you not with bread and with water*.

In fact, there is another problem with the second passage: it seems to contradict the Torah's account of the encounter with the Edomites in the Book of Numbers. There, the Torah mentions that after the Israelites requested permission to pass through Edomite territory, *Edom said unto him: 'Thou shalt not pass through me, lest I come out with the sword against thee'* (Num. 20:18). Yet Moses told Sihon king of Heshbon that the Israelites had been granted permission to pass through Edomite territory. Rashi, in his commentary to Deuteronomy 2:29, resolves this question by explaining that when Moses said, *as the children of Esau . . . did unto me*, he did not mean that the Edomites had allowed the Israelites to pass through their lands, but was only

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referring to their having sold the Israelites food and water.¹ Ibn Ezra points out in his commentary to Deuteronomy 2:29 that Rashi's explanation resolves the second contradiction, but only serves to strengthen the first one – since Rashi obviously understood that the Moabites did indeed sell food and water to the Israelites, while Deuteronomy 23:4-5 condemns the Ammonites and Moabites precisely for not doing so.

There are several ways to solve this conundrum. I will now indicate the approaches adopted by various commentators throughout the ages and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each.

THE ISRAELITES PASSED THROUGH FOREIGN TERRITORY

The simplest way to resolve the contradiction is by explaining that the words *as the children of Esau that dwell in Seir, and the Moabites that dwell in Ar, did unto me* refer to two different actions: the Edomites sold food and water to the Israelites, and the Moabites allowed them to pass through their land. In fact, however, the Edomites would not allow the Israelites to pass through their land, and the Moabites did not sell them food and water.

A variation of this approach is adopted by Ibn Ezra (Deut. 2:29), by the twelfth-century French scholar Rabbenu Joseph Bekhor-Shor (Num. 21:22; Deut. 2:29) and by Rabbenu Bahya (Num. 20:18; Deut. 2:29). They explain that the Israelites passed through the outskirts of Edomite and Moabite territory without entering their heartland, and that they asked Sihon's permission to do the same in his case. According to their understanding of the text, *as the children of Esau . . . did unto me* refers only to the Israelites passing through Edomite and Moabite lands,² not to buying food.

Rashbam, in his commentary (Deut. 2:4 and 29), splits the meaning of this phrase in the opposite way, explaining that *as the children of Esau that dwell in Seir . . . did unto me* refers specifically to the Edomites who lived in Seir. They allowed the Israelites to pass through their land, while the other Edomites did not grant such permission and even threatened to retaliate if the Israelites violated their territorial sovereignty. Rashbam likewise explains that *and the Moabites that dwell in Ar did unto me* indicates that only those Moabites living in Ar sold food and water to the Israelites, while all other Moabites did not. Rashbam probably saw this explanation alluded to in the

text, since the Torah makes a point of mentioning where exactly these Edomites and Moabites lived, instead of simply identifying their nationality without any geographical markers.³ R. Menahem Meiri (on TB *Yevamot* 77a) also writes that only the Moabites who lived in Ar supplied the Israelites with food and water, whereas the other Moabites did not.⁴ Since the Moabites inhabiting other localities did not supply food and water, the entire Moabite nation was to be ostracized.⁵

None of these explanations are compatible with Rashi's view. As mentioned earlier, Rashi explains that *as the children of Esau did unto me* refers to the Edomites selling food and water to the Israelites. It would therefore appear that the Moabites mentioned in the same verse also sold food and water to the Israelites. Commenting on Numbers 21:13, however, Rashi states that the Moabites did not grant the Israelites leave to pass through their territory. In his commentary to Deuteronomy 23:5, Nahmanides (Ramban, 1194–1270) both mentions and rejects Ibn Ezra's explanation because he finds no textual evidence that the Israelites encroached on the territories of Edom or Moab. The Torah, in fact, makes it perfectly clear that the Israelites did not enter either of those lands.⁶

DIFFERENTIATING BETWEEN "MEETING" AND "SELLING"

Several commentators answer the presumed inconsistency in the Torah's description of the Moabites' behavior by differentiating between Deuteronomy 23:5, which condemns the Moabites for not "meeting" the Israelites with free bread and water; and Deuteronomy 2:29, which states that the Moabites sold provisions to the Israelites. This basic answer is supplied by Ibn Ezra on Deuteronomy 2:29 and Hizkuni on Deuteronomy 23:5. Similarly, R. Obadiah Sforno, commenting on Deuteronomy 23:5, explains that neither the Ammonites nor the Moabites "met" the Israelites with food and water; however, the Ammonites would not even sell to the Israelites, while the Moabites did. Both nations were to be ostracized as if they had acted in the same way, because even though the Ammonites' offence was worse, the Moabites committed the additional sin of hiring Balaam to curse the Israelites.

R. Elijah Mizrahi (1455-1525), in his famous supercommentary on Rashi (Deut. 2:27), agrees with this explanation and R. Pinhas Ha-Levi Horowitz (1731-1805) considers it the best explanation of Rashi's view.⁷

R. Isaac Arama (c. 1420-1494) focuses the Torah's criticism of the Moabites on their failure to take action at the appropriate time. The Moabites, he declares, were expected to sell food and water to the Israelites immediately upon their exit from Egypt, when they most needed it, before the manna began to fall. In an enlightening play on words, Arama explains that supplying the Israelites with food and water in their fortieth year in the desert is not called "meeting" (*makdim*) them, but "being late" (*me'aher*).⁸ Don Isaac Abrabanel, in his commentary to Deuteronomy 23:5, gives the same explanation.

Nahmanides (Deut. 23:5) had earlier objected to such approaches, writing that the Moabites should not have been expected to supply the Israelites' large camp with free provisions, or even to engage in selling them food and water, so they deserved no blame for actually vending these supplies.

However, R. Samuel Edels (1555-1631) refutes Nahmanides' argument, quoting the once widely observed practice among nations at peace. Should one nation's traveling camp approach the border of another nation, the latter's army would greet the former by offering them provisions free of charge.⁹

HIZKUNI'S LITERARY APPROACH

Hizkuni (Deut. 2:29) suggests that *as the children of Esau that dwell in Seir*, and the Moabites that dwell in Ar, did unto me does not refer to the preceding verse, which contains the Israelites' request to pass through Heshbonite land and buy food and water from its inhabitants. Rather, it alludes to the fact that Sihon king of Heshbon acted just as the Edomites and the Moabites had done, flatly rejecting the request. In essence, Hizkuni suggests that Deuteronomy 2:29 and 2:30 should be reversed and he renders the whole passage as follows:

And I sent messengers out of the wilderness of Kedemoth unto Sihon king of Heshbon with words of peace, saying: 'Let me pass through thy land; I will go along by the highway, I will neither turn unto the right hand nor to the left. Thou shalt sell me food for money, that I may eat; and give me water for money, that I may drink; only let me pass through on my feet.' But Sihon king of Heshbon would not let us pass by him; for the Lord thy God hard-

ened his spirit, and made his heart obstinate, that He might deliver him into thy hand, as appeareth this day, just as the children of Esau that dwell in Seir, and the Moabites that dwell in Ar, did unto me [i.e., they blocked our passage]; until I shall pass over the Jordan into the land which the Lord our God giveth us (Deut. 2:26-30).

In light of Hizkuni's rendering of the account in Deuteronomy, the text neither implies that the Israelites passed through Edomite and Moabite territories (in fact it says the opposite) nor that the Edomites or Moabites supplied the Israelites with food and water, thus all contradictions are resolved. Nonetheless, the difficulty with this approach is glaringly obvious: the order of the verses in the Torah already precludes such a rendering.

A NEW APPROACH BY NAḤMANIDES

Naḥmanides (Deut. 23:5) explains the Torah's rationale for condemning the Moabites in a way that differs from a simple reading of the text. Thus, for banning Ammonites and Moabites from the assembly of the Lord, the text adduces two reasons, each of which applies to only one of the nations. The Ammonites are to be ostracized *because they met you not with bread and water*¹⁰ while the Moabites, who did sell bread and water, are to be ostracized *because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor*. This explanation is also quoted by Hizkuni (Deut. 2:29) and by Ritba in the name of the Tosafists.¹¹

Naḥmanides deduces that *because they met you not with bread and water* cannot be the reason why the Moabites were ostracized, since both the Moabites and the Edomites sold provisions to the Israelites. Thus, if the Torah forbids the Moabites to marry into the Jewish people, it should likewise include the Edomites in this prohibition. The fact that the Edomites are not ostracized proves that the Moabites must be condemned for a reason other than failing to supply the Israelites with free provisions.

DIFFICULTIES WITH NAḤMANIDES' APPROACH

Rabbis Arama and Abrabanel note that a grammatical nuance disproves Naḥmanides' view. When the Book of Nehemiah recalls the prohibition to marry an Ammonite or Moabite, we find: *On that day they read in the book*

of Moses in the hearing of the people; and therein was found written, that an Ammonite and a Moabite should not enter into the assembly of God for ever; because they [plur.] met not the children of Israel with bread and with water, but hired [sing.] Balaam against them, to curse them; howbeit our God turned the curse into a blessing (Neh. 13:1-2).

When the first reason for ostracizing the Ammonites and Moabites appears, their sin is described in the plural: *because they met not the Israelites with bread and water*; but when the second reason follows, a singular form is employed: *because he hired Balaam against them*. Thus, the simple reading of the biblical texts confirms that the first reason refers to both the Ammonites and the Moabites, while the second refers only to the Moabites. This would invalidate Nahmanides' claim that the first reason applies only to the Ammonites.

Mishnah *Yevamot* 8:3 rules that the Torah's prohibition of marrying Ammonites and Moabites only applies to a Jewish woman marrying an Ammonite or Moabite man, whereas a Jewish man is allowed to marry an Ammonite or Moabite woman. After a lengthy discussion, TB *Yevamot* 76b-77a concludes that this gender difference is based on the Torah's rationale for prohibiting the Ammonites and Moabites. They are to be ostracized because they *met not the Israelites with bread and water*. The Talmud reasons that while it is the nature of men to be outgoing and to meet people, this is not the nature of women. In his work *Minhat Yehudah* (Deut. 2:29), the Tosafist Judah ben Eliezer points out that this also negates the view of Nahmanides, that only the Ammonites did not provide food.¹²

THE IMPORTANCE OF A SIP

Another Talmudic passage runs counter to the explanation of Nahmanides. TB *Sanhedrin* 103b declares: "Fateful is a 'sip' (*legimah*), since two families were excluded from Israel because of it." In context, the Talmud basically means that because the Ammonites and Moabites did not offer the Israelites a "sip" from their water, they were barred from entering the assembly of the Lord. Both the Ammonites and Moabites are understood to be outsiders because they did not meet the Israelites with bread and water. This difficulty was noted by many rabbinic commentators.¹³

R. Jakob Ettlinger (1798-1871) offers a delightful solution to the problem. He maintains that the episode in which the Moabites decide to collaborate with the Midianites in hiring Balaam to curse the Israelites can also be referred to as a "sip." *Moab said unto the elders of Midian: 'Now will this multitude lick up all that is round about us, as the ox licketh up the grass of the field'* (Num. 22:4). Here, the Moabites used a "licking" metaphor to express their fear that the Israelites would consume them. With that in mind, Ettlinger explains that when the Talmud proclaims, "Fateful is a 'sip', since two families were excluded from Israel because of it," this indicates two different reasons why the two different nations were ostracized: the Ammonites would not even offer the Israelites a "sip" of water, and the Moabites hired Balaam out of fear that the Israelites would consume the surrounding region as an ox licks up grass in the field.¹⁸ It is not clear whether Ettlinger's response was made in all seriousness or with tongue in cheek, but one can easily counter it by noting that there is a difference between "sipping" and "licking."

NOTES:

1. Ibn Ezra and *Sifte'i Hakhamim* on Deuteronomy 2:29 explicitly ask this question and present this answer. See also Hizkuni (loc. cit.), who finds support for this in Deuteronomy 2:6, where God specifically tells Moses that he should purchase food and water from the Edomites.
2. S. D. Sassoon, ed., *Moshav Zekenim* (London, 1959) p. 473, quotes another approach in the name of Bekhor Shor which is not printed in his commentary. He explains that while it is true that the Edomites had refused the Israelites entry, Moses nevertheless assured Sihon that the Edomites had permitted the Israelites to travel over their territory so that Sihon would be more willing for them to do the same. Leaving aside the theological implications of Moses telling a lie to coax Sihon into granting the Israelites entry (with his lie being recorded in the Bible for posterity); it seems implausible that Moses would lie about something that could easily be disproved. This explanation may perhaps supplement that of Abrabanel (cited below, note 6), who states that even though the Israelites were refused entry by the Edomites and Moabites, they still passed through their lands.
3. Hezekiah ben Manoah (Hizkuni), a thirteenth-century French commentator of Rashi's school, mentions this explanation in his commentary to Deuteronomy 2:29.
4. S. Dickman, ed., *Beit ha-Behirah al Massekhet Yevamot* (Jerusalem: Makhon ha-Talmud ha-Yisre'eli, 1962) p. 280. Rabbi Israel of Bruna (1400-1480) offers the same explanation: S. D. Englander, ed., *Gilyon Rabbenu Yisrael mi-Bruna* (Lakewood: Makhon Mishnat Rabbi Aaron, 2001) pp. 112-3.
5. This begs the question as to why the Torah issued a blanket prohibition forbidding marriage with all Moabites. The Torah should have made an exception for the Moabites of Ar, who did indeed offer bread and water to the Israelites and were undeserving of punishment. Meiri answers that since the majority of Moabites did not meet the Israelites with bread and water, all

Moabites are included in the prohibition because they all share collective guilt based on the rule of majority. R. Jakob Ettlinger of Altona gives the same answer in his *Arukh la-Ner al Massekhet Yevamot* (Piotrkow, 1914) p. 206. R. Joseph Colon (c. 1420-1480) explains that it would have proven difficult – if not impossible – to establish the lineage of every single Moabite thereafter so as to determine whether he was descended from the Moabites of Ar or from Moabites elsewhere. See E. D. Pines, ed., *Hiddushei u-Feirushei ha-Maharik* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1971) p. 142.

6. Abrabanel (on Deuteronomy 2:26 and 23:5) offers an original explanation that can be used to resolve Nahmanides' objections to Ibn Ezra, et al. He writes that although the Bible makes it clear that the Edomites and Moabites both denied the Israelites' request to pass through their respective lands, the Israelites did so nevertheless, albeit without permission. Thus, when presenting their request to Sihon king of Heshbon, the Israelites warned him that just as they had traversed the lands of Edom and Moab after being denied permission, they would do the same to him should he withhold his consent.

7. Alternatively, R. Israel of Bruna explains that the Moabites did not proactively initiate trade with the Israelites, but merely played a passive role in allowing goods to be sold to the messengers. For this, the Moabites were punished. In his *Amar Neke* commentary (to Deuteronomy 2:27), R. Obadiah of Bertinoro (c. 1450-1509) similarly explains that the Moabites should have offered to sell the Israelites bread and water even prior to a request.

8. *Akedat Yitzhak* (Warsaw, 1883) p. 128.

9. *Hiddushei Maharsha* to TB *Sanhedrin* 103b.

10. The assumption that the Ammonites had no hand in hiring Balaam to curse the Israelites is subject to controversy and will not be discussed here.

11. *Hiddushei Ha-Ritba* to TB *Yevamot* 76b.

12. *Rabboteinu Ba'alei ha-Tosafot Devarim* (Warsaw, 1876) pp. 3-4. Riva notes that R. Moses of Coucy, in his *Semag (Sefer Mitzvot Gadol, Negative Commandments #113-114)*, provides an answer to this difficulty. The Moabites were indeed ostracized only because they hired Balaam to curse the Israelites. However, Moabite women are allowed into the assembly because it was presumably the men who hired Balaam, as it is not the nature of women to be involved in commercial matters. This answer is already alluded to by Nahmanides himself, who quotes TJ *Yevamot* 8:3 and *Ruth Rabbah* 4:8 to the effect that it is the nature of men, not women, to go out and meet people, and the nature of men, not women, to hire others. These sources are apparently offering two modes of reasoning: the former to explain why the Ammonite women are permitted and the latter to explain why the Moabite women are permitted. See *Sefer Mitzvot Gadol ha-Shalem* (Jerusalem: Makhon Yerushalayim, 2003) pp. 186-7.

13. *Be'urei Maharai Isserlin Devarim* (Chernovtsy, 1856) p. 1; *Hiddushei Maharsha* to TB *Sanhedrin* 103b; *Be'er Sheva* (Jerusalem: Zikhron Aharon, 2004) pp. 378-9; C. Chavel, ed., *Divrei David* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1978) p. 567; *Parashat Derakhim* (Venice, 1743) fol. 23a.

14. Ettlinger, *Arukh la-Ner al Massekhet Yevamot* (Piotrkow, 1914) p. 206.