

Parashat Ki Tetze, 5773, 2013:

The Importance of Compassionate Loving-Kindness

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

The question of “Who may become a Jew?” is usually answered in a very inclusive manner. In short, nearly anyone whose heart and soul moves them to truly embrace the theology and practice of Judaism may convert to our faith. Our Sages defined the conversion process as being comprised of essentially three components. By way of illustration, the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) states:

And so, too, throughout the generations. When the non-Jew desires to enter into the Covenant and to find shelter under the protection of G-d’s divine presence, and he chooses upon himself to accept the yoke of Torah; he needs circumcision, immersion [in a mikvah – a ritual bath], and the sprinkling of the blood [upon the Altar in the Holy Temple] of his sacrifice. A woman, however, requires immersion and the sacrifice. As the Torah states: “Like you [the Jewish people], so, too, the convert.” That is, just as you [the Jewish people became Jewish] via circumcision, immersion, and the sprinkling of the blood, so, too, shall the would-be convert [become Jewish] for all time via circumcision, immersion, and the sprinkling of the blood [the blood of the sacrifice is only when the Holy Temple is in existence]. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Issurei Biah*, 13:4)

Given the aforementioned, it is fascinating to note that properly converted males of certain biblically-referenced nations are nonetheless permanently proscribed by Torah Law from marrying Jewish women: “An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter the assembly of the L-rd; even the tenth generation shall never enter the assembly of the L-rd.” (*Sefer Devarim* 23:4, this and all Torah translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) *Mishnah Yevamot* 8:3 clearly underscores the direct meaning of this text: “Ammonite and Moabite males are proscribed from ever marrying Jewish women; but

their females [i.e. Ammonite and Moabite women, following a proper conversion] may immediately marry Jewish men.” Maimonides, as well, follows suit in his halachic decision as presented in *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Issurei Biah* 12:18:

What is the law in regards to the nations of Ammon and Moab? The proscription of intermarriage with Jews is a permanent one for males, but not for females. As the Torah states: “An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter the assembly of the L-rd...” It is an *halacha l’Moshe m’Sinai* [a Jewish law stemming from the moment of the reception of the Torah at Mt. Sinai] that the male Ammonite and the male Moabite is permanently proscribed from marrying a Jewish woman – and so, too, any and all of his male heirs for evermore. [In contrast, however,] a female Ammonite or Moabite is immediately permitted to marry a Jewish man, [following a proper conversion,] just like the other nations of the world.

We are now faced with an obvious question: “Why are Ammonite and Moabite men disallowed from ever marrying Jewish women?” Our *parasha* (*Sefer Devarim* 23:5) provides us with two reasons as to why this is the case:

1. “Because they did not greet you with bread and water on the way, when you left Egypt,
2. and because he [the people of Moab] hired Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor in Aram Naharaim against you, to curse you.”

I personally find it fascinating that the Torah invokes two reasons as to why these men may never marry Jewish women. Surely, the second reason, alone, would have been sufficient cause for this prohibition. After all, the Torah explicitly states that Balaam was the mastermind behind the harlotry that transpired between many of the men of Israel and the wanton daughters of Moab: “They [i.e. the Moabite women] were the same ones who were involved with the children of Israel on Balaam's advice to betray the L-rd over the incident of Peor, resulting in a plague among the congregation of the L-rd.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 31:16) It should be noted that this plague of retribution took no less than 24,000 Jewish lives! Should not this have been reason enough to punish the Ammonite and Moabite men from ever marrying into our nation? Why, then, do we need the first

reason at all? Moreover, the order of the reasons given for this injunction is very intriguing. Even if we recognize the cogency of including both of these explanations, the second reason seems to be the primary one, whereas the first one appears to be purely subordinate in nature.

I believe the Torah is teaching us a lesson of fundamental import. The failure of Ammon and Moab to “greet you [i.e. the Jewish people] with bread and water on the way, when you left Egypt” portrayed a tremendous insensitivity to the needs of our nation. This act of hardhearted callousness represented the polar opposite of one of the most enduring and best-known qualities of the Jewish people: compassionate kindness (*chesed v'rachamim*). As such, Ammon’s and Moab’s behavior was antithetical to the very essence of *klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people). Their insidious influence could only undermine, and ultimately destroy, our *ammimut* (nature as a people). Little wonder, then, that they were absolutely proscribed from marrying our nation’s women, which would thereby dilute our nation’s soul and being.

We now can understand not only why we need both reasons, but their order as well. The Torah is teaching us that to be a Jew means to be a *gomale chesed v'rachimim* (a practitioner of loving-kindness and mercy). Someone who lacks these characteristics simply cannot join our nation. Thus the *Midrash Yalkut Shimoni*, Parashat Vayera states:

King David said: “There are three behavioral characteristics by which the Jewish nation is known: They are merciful, humble, and they perform acts of loving-kindness... Anyone who has these ethical traits is fitting to join this nation; and anyone who lacks these traits is not fitting to join this nation.”

We are now in the Hebrew month of Elul. As such, we are in the process of preparing ourselves for the great G-d-Man existential encounters of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Now, more than ever, we need to focus upon the singular import of compassionate loving-kindness, so that we can represent ourselves to the world as the authentic heirs of Avraham, Yitzhak, Yaakov, Sarah, Rivka, Rachel, and Leah. With G-d's help, may we find the inner resources, strength, and wisdom to do so. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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