

Moses, Ruth, and David

Allan M. Langner

CENTRAL TO THE SPECIAL MEGILLAH READING FOR Shavuot is Ruth, the Moabite, who entwines her life with that of her Israelite mother-in-law, and in so doing, joins in the destiny of the Jewish people. Most striking about this outsider drawn in by the bonds of kinship and peoplehood is her origin, Moab. Ruth was born to a people that the Torah insists remain perpetually barred from “the assembly of the Lord.”

Here is the pronouncement, in parashat Ki Teitzei:

No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the Lord; even their tenth generation shall not enter the assembly of the Lord, never. Because they did not meet you with bread and water on the way when you came forth from Egypt, and because they hired Balaam son of Beor from Pethor of Aram Naharaim to curse you. But the Lord your God would not listen to Balaam; instead, the Lord your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because the Lord your God loves you. You shall not seek their peace nor their prosperity as long as you live. [DEUT. 23:4-7]

What is striking in this passage is the inordinately harsh treatment meted out to Moab. Twice in the space of four verses the word *l'olam* / forever is used. With the exception of Amalek, whose eternal enmity is declared in the final verse of the parashah, no other people was treated with such severity. The Torah records the behavior of other peoples who were far more hurtful towards the Israelites than Moab. And yet, these peoples were not proscribed from entering the assembly of the Lord forever. Why such harshness toward Moab?

The text offers two reasons. First, the Moabites failed to offer simple sustenance — bread and water — to the Israelites on their way out of Egypt. Second, the Moabites hired Balaam to curse the Israelites. While these were not acts of friendship by any means, they do not strike me as sufficient to

warrant eternal enmity. After all, the Moabites in Ar did sell food and water to the Israelites for money [DEUT. 2:29]. And although Balaam was engaged to curse the Israelites, he blessed them instead, and so no one suffered thereby.

Contrast this vehement pronouncement against the Moabites with the attitude of Moses towards the Edomites and the Egyptians in the verses that follow in Ki Teitzei:

You shall not abhor an Edomite for he is your brother. You shall not abhor an Egyptian because you were a stranger in his land. The children of the third generation that is born to them may enter the assembly of the Lord. [DEUT. 23:8-9]

How brotherly was Edom when Moses dispatched messengers to the king of Edom, seeking the right of passage through his territory? Moses pledged not to pass through any field or vineyard, not drink any water from their wells. Edom responded by threatening a military confrontation if Israel dared to trespass through its territory, forcing the Israelites to detour [NUM. 20:14-21].

How hospitable were the Egyptians towards the Israelites who sojourned in Egypt for four hundred and thirty years, languishing much of that time in slavery and subjected to genocidal decrees? *Every male child you shall cast into the river* [EX. 1:22]. Yet neither the Edomites nor the Egyptians were debarred from entering the assembly of the Lord, only the Moabites. Why this animus toward Moab?

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And, harsh as it was, Moses' out-and-out interdiction of Moab was not borne out in history. For who was the first to enter officially "the assembly of the Lord" — that is, to become an Israelite — and become, as well, one of the greatest spiritual heroines of our past, if not a Moabite woman, Ruth? The imperishable words by which she joined her destiny with that of the Jewish people are among the most quoted in Scripture: *For whither thou goest I will go, whither thou lodgest I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people, thy God my God* [RUTH 1:16]. Furthermore, Ruth turned out to be the grandmother of Israel's greatest

monarch, David, characterized in rabbinic writing as *mashiach tzidkekha*/Your righteous anointed one. Thrice daily in the Amidah we pray for the restoration of David's dynasty: *Et tzemach David avd'kha m'heirah tatzmiach*/May you speedily cause the offshoot of David to grow. Thus, ironically, the very people whom Moses banished from entering the assembly of the Lord produced Ruth and her descendant, David, two of Israel's most towering personages.

Our Sages, too, were struck by the harsh and absolute terms of the pronouncement regarding Moab, and by the importance of Ruth to the Jewish story. To reconcile the apparent discrepancy, the Talmud interprets the ostracization of Moab as being aimed solely at the males but not the females: *Moavi v'lo Moaviah* — a Moabite and not a Moabite woman [J. YEVAMOT 48B, B. YEVAMOT 76B]. In other words, Moabite men, but not Moabite women, were to be banned for all eternity.

This interpretation, however, is somewhat strained. Moabite — *moavi* in Hebrew — is a generic term that encompasses both males and females, just as *b'nei Yisrael* — literally, the sons of Israel — embraces both males and females. Had the intent of the text been to exclude females, it would have specified such, as it does in the case of making a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, where it says *yeira-eh kol z'khurkha / all your males shall appear before the Lord* [EX. 34:23; DEUT. 16:16]. Since no such clear-cut gender distinction is made, one can conclude that the passage in Deuteronomy 23 gives a blanket indictment of all Moabites, male and female, who were to be excluded from entering the assembly of the Lord forever.

But why was Moab treated with such asperity? What caused Moses to be so infuriated as to make this sweeping interdiction against all Moabites? The only occurrence mentioned in the Torah that might account for such fury was the incident of Baal Pe'or, recounted in Sefer B'midbar, Numbers, where the Israelites engaged in idolatry and eroticized worship practices.

...the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moab who invited the people to the sacrifices for their god [NUM. 25:1].

So odious was this that Numbers 31 describes the most punitive measures that were carried out against the Midianites (who were based in Moab). Balaam, who was slain in the ensuing war against Midian, was killed not for being commissioned to curse the Israelites, but for his role at Baal Pe'or, for having counseled the Israelites “to revolt” and “to break faith with the Lord” [NUM. 31:16].

If the incident of Baal Pe'or was the motivation for the harsh indictment against Moab, why was it omitted from the passage in chapter 23 of Deuteronomy? It could only be in order to feature God's love for Israel as their sustainer in the desert and as the one who turned Balaam's purported maledictions into blessings. The Baal Pe'or episode would not only show Moab in a bad light, but the Israelites, as well. But the placement of the indictment of Moab, following a series of pronouncements about sexual improprieties [DEUT. 22:13-23:3] suggest that an eros of sinfulness might be behind the harsh judgment of Moab, as well.

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Although the Talmud regarded the incident of the golden calf as Israel's cardinal sin in the wilderness, so baneful was the episode with Baal Pe'or that the generation of Joshua, the one following that of Moses, recalled Pe'or as Israel's foremost iniquity. In the Book of Joshua we read:

Ha-m'at lanu et avon Pe'or asher lo hitaharnu mimenu ad ha-yom hazeh va'yehi ha-negef ba'adat Adonai/Is the iniquity of Pe'or, from which we have not cleansed ourselves to this very day, and which brought a plague upon the congregation of the Lord, a small matter to us? [JOSH. 22:17]

That Moses was prone to anger we know from other episodes in the Torah. Upon descending from Mount Sinai and spying the people dancing around the golden calf, Moses, in his rage, smashed the tablets [EX. 32:19]. Leviticus 10:16 tells how Moses flared up against two sons of Aaron who did not enact ritual sacrifice precisely as instructed. In another moment of irascibility, piqued by the Israelite people's lack of assurance that God would provide for them, Moses smote the rock twice to obtain drinking water, rather than simply speaking to it as God had commanded. Because his temper got in the way of demonstrating the miraculous nature of God's sustenance, Moses was not permitted to enter the promised land [NUM. 20:1-13].

What occurred at Baal Pe'or involving some, perhaps many Moabites, Moses considered so heinous that he turned against all Moabites and barred them from entering the assembly of the Lord forever. But edicts proclaimed in

the midst of frenzied indignation rarely, if ever, endure. As the psalmist reminds us, *I said in my haste, all men deceive* [Ps. 16:14]. True, there may be some, even many, people who are deceptive, duplicitous, and deal underhandedly. But to implicate “all men” is the expression of a moment of wrath and vexation. When a person is extremely agitated, sweeping declarations can ensue. And yet, when one calms down, a less extreme view may prevail.

Looking back at the episode in Baal Pe’or, many Moabites were culpable. But to indict all of them, down the generations in perpetuity, is the voice of emotions run high, of edicts rashly made. The tides of history inform us that such decrees do not last. Ruth and David are the proof.

How fitting, then, that the reading for Shavuot, the festival commemorating the revelation at Sinai and the loving covenant between God and Israel, rolls back the imprecation of anger and opens doors we couldn't have foreseen.



RABBI ALLAN M. LANGNER was ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1948. He was Rabbi of Congregation Beth-El, Town of Mt. Royal, Quebec, Canada, for 50 years, and is now Rabbi Emeritus.