

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Ki Teitzei

Amoni and Moavi

לֹא יָבֹא עַמּוֹנִי וּמוֹאָבִי בְּקִרְבְּךָ ה'

An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter the congregation of Hashem (23:4)

TO WHOM DOES THE PROHIBITION EXTEND?

Our pasuk states that although descendants from the nations of Amon and Moav can convert to Judaism, they cannot marry in to the Jewish people. There is a well-known qualification regarding this prohibition, namely, that it only applies to male descendants of these nations, not to the females. As the Gemara puts it:¹

עמוני – ולא עמונית, מואבי – ולא מואבית

An Ammonite [is forbidden to enter] – but not an Ammonitess; A Moabite – but not a Moabitess.

In terms of reading the pasuk, the Meshech Chochmah notes the two terms “Amoni” and “Moavi” could be understood in one of two ways:

- ▶ If the reference is to *the nation*, then the use of the masculine form is *generic*, and it will include all members of that nation, including females.
- ▶ If the reference is to *an individual from those nations*, then the use of the masculine form is *specific*, in order to restrict the message to males and not to females.

Practically, both possibilities exist, which makes it impossible to tell whether or not females are excluded from the prohibition. However, says the Meshech Chochmah, while this lesson may not emerge from *the terms themselves*, it can still clearly be perceived from reading *the pasuk*.

¹ Yevamos 77a.

A POINT OF ORDER WITHIN THE PASUK

We note that the Torah mentions Amon first in the prohibition and then Moav. This ordering of the two nations requires contemplation, for we would have expected it to be the opposite. This is true for two simple reasons:

- ▶ The Torah records the birth of Moav from Lot's older daughter *before* that of Amon from his younger daughter.²
- ▶ While in the Wilderness, the Jewish people encountered Moav *before* Amon.³

Why, then, does the Torah mention Amon first?

In truth, there is a more compelling reason for the Torah to have mentioned Amon first. The Malbim⁴ demonstrates from many instances in the Torah that the order of terms within a pasuk will be to first mention the more intuitive idea and then to progress from there to the more novel idea.⁵ In light of this, let us consider which of these two nations we would have considered more likely to be forbidden. Upon reflection, the answer is clearly – Moav!

The Torah presents two reasons for the prohibition:⁶

- ▶ They did not greet the Jewish people with bread and water when they came out of Mitzrayim.
- ▶ He [Balak] hired Bilaam to curse the people.

Of these two reasons, whereas the first may have applied to Amon as well, the second was undertaken only by Moav, represented by Balak. As such, Moav would seem much more deserving of disqualification than Amon! Moreover, although not explicitly mentioned in the pasuk, there was another episode that caused great damage to the Jewish people specifically involving the females of Moav – the episode of *Baal Peor*! Based on all this, the order of the two prohibited nations in the pasuk should seemingly have been reversed: First Moav – the more obvious candidate, and then Amon, the less obvious one! Why does the pasuk not mention the greater chiddush second, as it generally does?

The answer, says the Meshech Chochmah, is that the pasuk *does* mention the greater chiddush second, not in terms of who is prohibited, but in terms of who is permitted. Once we understand that the terms “Amoni” and “Moavi” refer specifically to the males and not the females, then indeed we have a progression of chiddush: Not only with regards to Amon are the males prohibited while the females are permitted, but *even with regards to Moav* it is only the males who are forbidden and not the females! This is a truly amazing situation, as noting the order of the words in the pasuk gives us insight as to which direction to take in translating them.

2 Bereishis 19:37-38.

3 Devarim 2:9 and 19.

4 Commentary to Vayikra 5:4.

5 A concept referred to in the Gemara as “לא זו אף זו.”

6 Pasuk 5.

Internal and External Lashon Hara

כִּי תֵצֵא מִחֲנֵה עַל אִיבֶיךָ וְנִשְׁמַרְתָּ מִכָּל דְּבַר רָע

When you go out in a camp against your enemies, you shall be guard yourself against every evil thing (23:10)

The Sifrei on our pasuk relates the term “דבר (thing)” to the word “דיבור – speech,” explaining that the pasuk is coming to forbid evil speech. To what type of “evil speech” does this refer and why is it stated specifically within the context of a camp of war?

Two Sources for the Prohibition of Lashon Hara

Additionally, although the Yerushalmi, too, cites our pasuk as a source for the prohibition against lashon hara,⁷ it also cites the pasuk in Vayikra⁸ “ – לא תלך רכיל בעמך – *Do not go as a talebearer among your people.*” Why do we need two sources to prohibit the same *aveirah*?

The Meshech Chochmah explains that the two sources refer to two different types of lashon hara:

- ▶ The pasuk in Vayikra refers to lashon hara that Jews tell among themselves (“among your people”).
- ▶ Our pasuk refers to lashon hara that Jews tell their enemies.

This second category includes anything which could harm the Jewish people if their enemies hear of it. In the context of war, it includes any information which could place the Jewish camp at risk, such as its numbers, plans etc. This is also the intent of the Sifrei when it states that our pasuk comes to forbid “evil speech,” and for this reason, the prohibition is mentioned “when you go out in a camp of war.” Moreover, this gives us deeper insight into the pasuk that follows, which states that if a person should become *tamei* or needs to perform his bodily functions, he is to leave the camp. The point is that, barring such reasons, the members of the camp should not leave, as they can run the risk of capture by the enemy and may be forced to give up sensitive information regarding their comrades.

This second form of Lashon Hara not only places the Jewish people at risk, but is also implicated as a cause for them being deserving of exile. Thus, in our very first exile in Mitzrayim, Moshe exclaimed that he finally understood why his brothers were in exile when Dasan and Aviram threatened to inform Pharaoh that he had killed the Egyptian the day before.⁹ Likewise, the destruction of the second Beis Hamikdash was brought about by Bar Kamtza slandering the Rabbis before Caesar that they refused to offer a sacrifice that was contributed by Rome.¹⁰

7 Peah 1:1.

8 19:16.

9 See Rashi to Shemos 2:14.

10 See Gittin 56a.

TWO FORMS OF ATONEMENT

Taking this idea one step further, the Meshech Chochmah notes that Chazal have identified the offering of the *ketores* (incense) as a form of atonement for lashon hara.¹¹

The *ketores* itself is offered in two locations:

- ▶ On a daily basis it is offered in the *Heichal* (Main Sanctuary).
- ▶ Once a year, on Yom Kippur, it is offered in the *Kodesh Hakodashim* (Holy of Holies).

The daily offering comes to atone for lashon hara spoken among Jews. The yearly offering, on the other hand, comes to atone for lashon hara spoken to non-Jews. This type of lashon hara can bring about a *chillul Hashem* (desecration of Hashem's Name), a sin which the Yerushalmi¹² states is equivalent in severity to that of avodah zarah. Hence, like avodah zarah, even a thought to commit this sin that is never actually expressed requires atonement. For this reason, the atonement for this type of lashon hara takes place in the *Kodesh Hakodashim*, the innermost place where Hashem – Who Alone knows man's thoughts – resides.

11 Zevachim 88b.

12 Nedarim 3:9.