"Ki teitzei: nations to be welcomed and nations to be shunned?"

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There is a passage in today's sidrah which appears enigmatic. It enumerates two neighbouring nations whose citizens Israel is instructed to keep at arms' length and who are never – or, at least, 'for ten generations' – to be allowed to marry into the Israelite community. This is followed by reference to two other nations whose members may be accepted into the Israelite community notwithstanding compelling reasons for their rejection:

> 'No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord – none of their descendants, even in the tenth generation, shall ever be admitted into the congregation of the Lord – because they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt, and because they hired Bilaam son of Be'or, from Petor of Aram-naharaim, to curse you…' (Deut. 23:4).
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> 'You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your kinsman. You shall not abhor an Egyptian, for you were a stranger in his land. Children born to them may be admitted into the congregation of the Lord in the third generation. (vv.8-9).'

The reference to the rejection of Ammon and Moab follows on, significantly, from the verse, 'No mamzer (offspring of an incestuous or adulterous liaison) shall be admitted into the congregation of the Lord (23:3). This provides a further rationale for the exclusion of Ammonites and Moabites whose earliest

ancestors were born from the incestuous union of Lot and his daughters.[1] This stringent measure to exclude their offspring forever is a signal to Israel that God, though forgiving in many situations, would never tolerate the flouting of the sexual barriers He had put in place to ensure the sanctity, dignity, and inviolability of family life.

One of the most startling examples of God's toleration in other contexts is provided by vv. 8-9 above, wherein Edomites and Egyptians are 'not to be abhorred,' but, to the contrary, are to be welcomed in 'in the third generation,' once the memory of the original enmity and tension had had time to become dissipated.

The rationale offered to justify a benign attitude towards the Edomites – 'for he (viz. Esau) is your kinsman' – is interesting and provides an insight into the importance the Torah attaches to family unity. It is a call to put differences in lifestyle and religious or moral standards to one side, and to work hard towards maintaining harmonious and fraternal relationships.

It must strike us as astonishing, however, that such a benign attitude should have been extended towards the Egyptians. After all, given the duration and ferocity of the Egyptian bondage,[2] it is surely more than paradoxical that such a lenient, even welcoming, attitude was expected to be adopted towards them. We may also wonder that God should have been prepared to overlook Pharaoh's obduracy, his cavalier attitude towards Him, as reflected in his derisive remark, 'Who is the Lord that I should listen to His voice?' (Ex. 5:2)

and the fact of his genocidal decree to 'all his people' to throw all the Israelite males into the Nile (Ex. 1:22).

The question is frequently asked how it was that, notwithstanding the efforts of the two midwives to save the Hebrew babes, the entire Egyptian populace clearly ignored their king's edict given that the Hebrews thrived[3] and were sufficiently strong to build the king's cities and storehouses.[4] Perhaps the king had a change of heart and realised that he had far more to gain from a live Israelite work-force. Also, as Brevard Childs points out, the most effective way of reducing a people is by destroying the females rather than the males.[5]

The Midrash, on the other hand, has a more fanciful explanation. It depicts three wise men in Pharaoh's court – Bilaam, Reuel (aka Yitro) and Job – as having been summoned by the king, on the day that Moses was rescued from the Nile, to interpret a fearful dream he had in which an Israelite male child was born and who was destined to supplant Pharaoh, destroy Egypt, and lead the Israelites to freedom.

Bilaam advised that, since the Israelite God destroys by water (as with the flood), the only way to frustrate that child would be to have all the Israelite children thrown into the Nile. His plan was foiled, however, since the king's astrologers immediately reported the good tidings (partially true) that that child had already been seen floating in the waters of the Nile and that the king could feel safe, therefore, and need no longer proceed with the suggested decree. Thus, all the Israelite boys were saved, which accounts for the fact that there is no subsequent reference to their deaths in the biblical tradition.[6]

The exclusion of the Ammonites and Moabites creates its own problems. First, the fact that Ruth, the Moabitess was indeed welcomed into 'the congregation of the Lord!' The answer of the Talmud is that the biblical formulation, *lo yavo ammoni umo'avi* ('an Ammonite and Moabite may not enter…') is couched in the masculine form in order to exclude only those nations' males, but not their females (*ammoni v'lo ammoniyah; moavi v'lo mo'aviyah*).[7] The Talmud then proceeds to probe the consistency of such an inference, by querying why it was not also applied in order to restrict the prohibition of accepting into the community Edomites and Egyptians to their males. Its answer is that such an inference cannot be borrowed from the context of Ammon and Moab's males, since the explanation of the latter's exclusion is made clear in their context – namely because 'they didn't meet you with food and water' and 'because they hired Bilaam to curse you' – and it is the exclusive role of men both to provide provisions and to hire. No such male-only inference may be derived, however, from the Edomite and Egyptian context.

The second problem, not so easily resolved by rabbinic exegetical ingenuity, is that the reason given by Moses for not accepting Ammonites and Moabites – namely, that 'they did not meet you with food and water on your journey after you left Egypt' – does not, in fact, equate with the Torah's earlier description of events. There we are told that the Israelites made a detour around the land of Ammon and did not therefore request any assistance;[8] and, furthermore, that they did in fact receive food and water from the

Moabites![9] It was to Sichon King of Heshbon (in the Amorite territory) that the request was made – and refused – to sell food and water to the Israelites.[10]

The reason given for extending a welcome to the Egyptians – 'for you were strangers in their land' – is also, at first glance, mystifying, as it implies that the Hebrews were welcomed by the Egyptians who acted as hosts to them rather than as whip-wielding task-masters! The difficulty is compounded by the fact that the Talmud even links this expression of gratitude to that country to the maxim, 'into the well from which you have drunk, do not throw clods of earth.'[11] We must assume, therefore, that the sages understood the Torah as demanding an unusually, if not impossibly, high level of gratitude even towards an enemy who did no more than feed a morsel to stop one from starving or who provided a flimsy roof over a slave's head to stave off the cold of winter and the scorching sun of summer.

Perhaps its ethical message is that, however frosty relationships may subsequently become, one should strive to remain ever cognizant of past generosity or kindness extended. Egypt extended a welcome to Jacob and his sons, saved them from starvation and allocated to them the most fertile area of the country wherein to live safely, and thrive to become a nation of, according to tradition, some two million souls. All of that must never be expunged from the historical and emotional record. Gratitude must never be allowed to evaporate. Remember that 'you were strangers in their land!'

There is a modern-day application for those of us 'of a certain age' who remember the early post-WW2 Jewish attitude of mistrust and hostility

towards anything associated with Germany or Germans, and which extended to buying any goods from that country.

I can remember my own sense of incredulity when, as a rabbinical student in 1960, I learnt that Israel was buying a significant amount of armaments from Germany; and, to this day, I have retained an ingrained reticence when it comes to buying a German car, notwithstanding that Germany is the State of Israel's largest trading partner and has expressed its remorse and paid reparations for the horrors inflicted by the Nazi regime. In the light of that, and given that its trade with Israel provides its citizens with diplomatic, economic, military and defence support, I am conscious that my attitude is unreasonable, and, against the background of our sidrah, halachically dubious!

Shabbat shalom,
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NOTES

1. See Gen. 19:30-38.
2. Ex. 1:13-14.
3. Ex. 1:7, 12.
4. Ex. 1:11.
5. Brevard S. Childs, *Exodus: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1974), p. 11.
6. *Sefer Ha-Yashar*, *Shemot* 16.
7. Tal. Y., *Yev*. 8 (3).]
8. See Deut. 2:19, 29, 37.

9. See vv. 28-29.

10. See vv. 24, 26-30.

11. Tal. *B.Kam*. 92b.