

The Torah bans Ammonites and Moabites (descendants of Abraham's nephew, Lot) from ever being admitted into **קהל** *the assembly of God*, the *joinable tribal group with a common history, homeland and culture* otherwise known as **עַם יִשְׂרָאֵל** *Am Yisrael, the people of Israel*.¹ Why? *Because they did not greet you with food and with water on the way, at your going-out from Egypt.* Moreover, they engaged Bil'am to curse Israel (Deut. 23:5-6). In other words, because they were cruel and malicious. But beyond banning them from joining the people of Israel, the Torah goes a step further by prohibiting any engagement with these two distant kinfolk:

(דב' כג:ז) **לֹא תִדְרֹשׁ שְׁלָמָם וְטִבָּתָם כָּל יְמֵיךָ לְעוֹלָם.**
You are not to seek their well-being or their good, all your days, for the ages! (Deut. 23:7)

The wording of that ban, specifically the phrase **לִדְרֹשׁ שְׁלָוִים** *to seek well-being (peace) and good* calls our attention. What exactly does it mean? It must mean more than restricting the courtesy of commonplace interactions. We can gain some insight into this phrase by examining other places where it, or something very close to it, appears in the Bible. One that we might be familiar with is found in the very last verse of the book of Esther (Esther 10:3):

כִּי מִרְדֵּכָי הַיְּהוּדִי מִשְׁנָה לְמֶלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוּשׁ וְגָדוֹל לַיהוּדִים וְרָצוּי לְרֹב אֲחָיו דָּרֵשׁ טוֹב לְעַמּוֹ וְדֹבֵר שְׁלָוִים לְכָל זֶרְעוֹ. (אסתר י:ג)
For Mordecai the Jew ranked next to King Ahasuerus and was highly regarded by the Jews and popular with the majority of his brethren; he sought the good of his people and interceded for the welfare of all his kindred.

Because it is the last verse of the megillah, we are so used to reading it with gusto and fanfare. In fact, it is our custom to read it aloud as a congregation prior to it being chanted by the reader. But it is precisely because of its triumphalism that we miss its deeper significance. Note: it says that Mordecai was *popular with the majority of his brethren*. Aha! That means that *some* Jews did *not* like Mordecai! The Talmud (Megillah 16b) states:

"לְרֹב אֲחָיו", וְלֹא לְכָל אֲחָיו. מִלְּמַד שְׁפִירְשׁוּ מִמֶּנּוּ מִקְצַת סְנֵהדְרִין.
"To the majority of his brethren." And not "to all his brethren." This indicates that some of the members of the Sanhedrin disavowed him.

Why? Rashi explains that it was because *he became too close to the monarchy and neglected his studies*. In other words, *he became too involved in politics*! He enjoyed the intrigue, the power, and the influence and neglected the internal world of Torah. The majority of Jews admired him for that because they benefited from his political engagement. But the minority, repudiated him for that, perhaps out of envy or out of a suspicion that in it for himself. Or perhaps they had a legitimate fear of the danger

in linking their collective destiny to a relationship between the king and one man. Remember Joseph? A lot of bad things happened *when a new king arose in Egypt who did not know Joseph* (Exod. 1:8). Hundreds of years of infanticide, slavery and suffering! Perhaps they thought that *relying on one person's relationship with the king is a bad strategy for survival because that relationship could sour*.



Nevertheless, the majority of the Jews in Persia disregarded that danger. They admired Mordecai because of his power and influence and also because, like all good politicians, he was good at gaining protection and favor for his constituency and he was good at keeping his fellow Jews united. In the words of the book of Esther, 1) he

seeks good for them - meaning, he keeps them safe and protected - and 2) he *speaks peace* - meaning, he is always conciliatory and strives to keep the community at peace with one another. *By working hard to maintain the king's favor while at the same time, keeping his people united, Mordecai succeeded in maintaining his legitimacy as their leader.* Despite the objections of a minority, Mordecai symbolizes the predominant strategy for Jewish survival in the Diaspora. Lacking territory, sovereignty, and hard power, we Diaspora Jews have always had to rely on powerful others to maintain our security and survival. That meant forming close relationships, engaging in diplomacy - and plenty of *quid-pro-quo* - while at the same time, stewarding ourselves to sustain our communities and our unity. **Therefore, the meaning of *דָּרֵשׁ טוֹב וְדֹבֵר שְׁלָוִים* is this: active engagement in communal diplomacy and leadership, all aimed at ensuring the people's survival.**

Let's return to our parasha. In Deuteronomy, Moses envisions that Israel will wage a war of conquest, that it will be able to defend itself, that it will wage wars of self-defense if necessary and wars of choice if desired, and that it will establish a self-governing polity. He imagines Israel situated on a land that extends northward to the Euphrates and southward to the Negev, and that it will have a set of relationships with many nations way beyond its borders. *But not with Ammon and Moab who denied them passage and assistance and were belligerent towards them.* Moses envisions a permanent state of hostility between them and Israel, exacerbated by their territorial proximity. There should be no diplomacy with them, no dialogue or de-escalatory activity under any circumstance. No future generation of Israel may engage with them in any way. This political posture of non-engagement is completely opposite to the one we saw with Mordecai in the Book of Esther. We can compare the two:

¹ This formulation of Jewish peoplehood is from the writer Dara Horn. **We ought to memorize it and amplify it.**

Deuteronomy's Proscription Against Ammon and Moab	Mordecai's Strategy for Jewish Survival in Persia
לא תִּדְרֹשׁ שְׁלָמָם וְטָבָתָם	דָּרַשׁ טוֹב לְעַמּוֹ וְדִבֵּר שְׁלוֹם לְכָל יִרְעוֹ.
<i>Do not seek their peace or their welfare.</i>	<i>He sought goodness for his people and spoke peace to all his descendants.</i>
Do not engage in any form of diplomacy with these hostile and belligerent neighbors.	Mordecai must engage in diplomacy and cultivate relationships with those in power.
Israel is sovereign in its land and constitutes the majority. It decides who it can admit and with whom it can engage.	Jews have no sovereignty and are a minority. They have no choice but to engage with their host nation.
Israel's territorial and national existence depends on its ability to erect boundaries and defend itself from malicious enemies and nefarious actors.	Diaspora Jewish survival depends on internal cohesion, access to power, and the favorable disposition of the sovereign.
The leader follows a foreign policy delineated in the Torah, in which interactions are governed by moral considerations.	The leader improvises a strategy of survival based on creating set of relationships necessary to secure favor.



Mordecai's dual strategy of maintaining communal cohesion and ensuring access to power was operative throughout most of Jewish history. Each community boasted of its *shtadlan* or *Court Jew* who

would be both a uniting force within the community and an able advocate for the community, soliciting protection and favor from the powers that be. While circumstances are much different today, nevertheless, Diaspora Jewish communities still have to devise political and diplomatic strategies to promote their political interests and secure their existence, especially when confronted with hostility. Likewise, Deuteronomy's strategy of non-engagement with Ammon and Moab may have been operative during a brief period in the biblical era (we note that early on, Ruth the Moabite gained admission into Jewish peoplehood, and became the maternal ancestor of King David) but it must have evolved as political realities and national interests changed. Maimonides understood this. When commenting on this particular text, he offers the following (Mishneh Torah, Kings and Wars 6:6):

וְאִם עַל פִּי שְׂאֵין שׂוֹאֲלִים בְּשָׁלוֹמָם אִם הִשְׁלִימוּ מִעֲצָמָם תַּחֲלָה מִקְבִּילִין אוֹתָן:
<i>And even though you are not supposed to seek peace with them, if they agree to peace on their own volition, we accept them.</i>

Which is quite stunning! Maimonides imagines that there are circumstances in which the permanent policy of non-engagement in Deuteronomy will simply not work. It is one thing to maintain distance between us and our adversaries, but when our adversaries reach out to us, ***we should accept them***. Thus, the principle of non-engagement is set aside ***for the sake of peace***. In the case of Ammon and Moab, a potential petition for peace suggests that they will have undergone a genuine transformation or what we would call *teshuvah*. Maimonides would argue that just as individuals can undergo transformations through individual *teshuvah*, nations also can undergo national transformations through a process of national *teshuvah*. Arguably, that idea, mediated of course by the sobriety of realpolitik, animates Jewish political thinking in our own time. How else should we understand the relationship between Germany and Israel? To rehabilitate itself after its defeat in WWII, a repentant Germany agreed to provide reparations to the nascent state of Israel to enable it to absorb hundreds of thousands of Holocaust survivors. Despite acrimonious internal debate (now largely forgotten), Israel eventually accepted Germany's financial assistance, and relations have since grown between them. When belligerent adversaries seek peaceful relations with Israel they are, in the end, always accepted. Egypt and Jordan have signed peace treaties. The UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan have joined the Abraham Accords. These countries and their leaders underwent significant changes in their political postures, a kind of *teshuvah*, in which they reassessed their national interests and concluded that a policy of peace was better for them than sustained hostility. Israel was not passive in these endeavors. It did not follow the non-engagement policy of Deuteronomy. On the contrary, together with the US, ***Israel actively pursued these relationships***. This is consistent with its self-understanding as expressed in its founding document, the Declaration of Independence:

WE EXTEND our hand to all neighboring states and their peoples in an offer of peace and good neighborliness, and appeal to them to establish bonds of cooperation and mutual help with the sovereign Jewish people settled in its own land...

Thus we can witness here an evolution from punitive non-engagement to pro-active diplomatic engagement.

Deuteronomy	Maimonides	State of Israel
No diplomacy with belligerent adversaries.	Passive acceptance of diplomatic overtures.	Active pursuit of peace through creative diplomacy.

Sovereignty and exile present separate sets of challenges for Jews. Exile inspired Jews to create one set of political strategies. Sovereignty inspires another set. Both have the same goals: peace and wellbeing. **Shabbat Shalom!**

This Parasha Sheet is sponsored by Heather and Philip Kibel in celebration of their move to their new home in Highland Park. Mazel Tov!