

## Parshat Devarim 5776

Many years ago, I had the privilege of working for HE Ron Prosor, the then Israeli Ambassador to the UK. A central part of an ambassador's work, even more important than speaking at the ZF dinner, were regular meetings with foreign ministers or their shadow counterparts, to make the case for Israel. Countless were the occasions when I was sat in the room whilst a party's spokesperson for the Middle East would assure the ambassador that they were a great friend of Israel, traditionally via the opening gambit, "His Excellency, you should know that I fully support Israel's right to exist." Ron would invariably reply with wonderfully exaggerated deference, "Thank you so much. You should know that I also support the United Kingdom's right to exist." (I will be getting to Devarim shortly. Patience.)

באב is a day that recalls the cycle of persecution and regeneration, Jews amongst the gentiles, that has defined our national history. Yet tomorrow is entirely a day of parochial introspection – Jewish catastrophes are solely attributed to our actions, or those of our ancestors. At no point do we seek to allocate blame, or ask what responsibility our tormentors must take for their behaviour. But perhaps it is ok today, whilst we are not yet in full אבילות, to ask what we should expect from the nations of the world. We can become so used to formulations of words that we become anaesthetised to their power, or lack of. Should we be grateful merely for being allowed to exist? Is that the best our fate, and thus other states, can offer? Perhaps we can glean one small answer from this week's סדרה:

וְאֶשְׁלַח מַלְאָכַימ... אֶל סִיחוֹן מֶלֶךְ חֶשְׁבוֹן... לֵאמֹר:  
 אֶעֱבְרָה בְּאַרְצְךָ בְּדֶרֶךְ... :  
 אֶכֶּל בֶּכֶסֶף תִּשְׁבְּרֵנִי וְאֶכְלֵתִי וּמַיִם בְּכֶסֶף תִּתֶּנּוּ לִי וְשָׁתִיתִי...:  
 כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ לִי בְנֵי עֵשָׂו הַיֹּשְׁבִים בְּשֵׁעִיר וְהַמֹּאֲבִים הַיֹּשְׁבִים בְּעָר... :

*And I sent messengers...to King Sichon of Cheshbon...saying: Allow me to pass through your land...: You shall sell me food for money so I can eat, and exchange water for money so I can drink...: Just as the children of Esau who live in Seir, and the Moabites who live in Ar, did for me.*

As part of his abridged history of what has gone before, Moshe refers back to events in חקת, פרשת חקת, and the attempted passage into Israel from Egypt. Sichon refused entry, and the result was a war, but the pertinent part of the text for our purpose, is the assertion that בְּנֵי עֵשָׂו (also known as Edom) were the perfect hosts.

In fact, the חקת in חקת (כ:כא) is explicitly clear that Edom did not let בני ישראל in, to the extent that a total detour was necessary. רשי picks up on this difficulty:

"כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ לִי בְנֵי עֵשָׂו: לא לענין לעבור את ארצם אלא לענין מכר אוכל ומים"

In other words, the favourable comparison with Edom, wasn't that they allowed the בני ישראל through their territory, rather that they happily sold them food and drink, the second element of Moshe's aforementioned request. So whilst not a 100% success rate, to paraphrase a musician not so appropriate for the 9 Days, 'one out of two ain't bad'. But what about Moab? One must assume that given they are grouped with Edom, they too must have at least traded with us. The problem comes from a later חקת in חקת (כג:ד):

לֹא יָבֹא עַמּוֹנִי וּמוֹאָבִי בְּקִהְלִי הַזֶּה...עַל דְּבַר אֲשֶׁר לֹא קִדְּמוּ אֶתְכֶם בְּלֶחֶם וּבַמַּיִם בְּדֶרֶךְ בְּצֵאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרָיִם

*An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter the congregation of Hashem...due to the matter of not greeting you with bread and water on your way out of Egypt.* It now appears that Moab did not in fact feed or water us on our journey, to the extent that an eternal ban on their inter-marrying Jews is enforced. Yet their behaviour in this regard is at the same time offered as a paradigm for Sichon to follow. How can we make sense of this contradiction? This is a classic question, feasted upon by many Rishonim. I wish to focus however on the peirush of the מזרחי, the premier commentator on Rashi. He reiterates that it is clear Moab did sell us food and drink. That is why Moshe brings them into the conversation with Sichon, as an example of how they should now behave. But Sichon and Moab are two different entities, and are thus judged in two different ways. Sichon were our neighbours, geographic rivals with no prior connection to the Jewish people. Moab however, owed their very existence, as descendants of Lot, to the בני ישראל (and אברהם in particular). For them, the bare minimum was not good enough. Thus says the מזרחי, Moab should have provided the Jewish people with food and drink for free. This was no time to get away with, quite literally, business as usual. This was a time, in a people's hour of need, to repay a significant debt. The Torah is telling us that fair-weather friends are in fact no friends at all, to the extent that we do not want any of their people joining ours. Something to think about perhaps, the next time acknowledging our right to exist, is feted as doing a great service to the Jewish people.

Written לזכר נשמת my grandfather Victor Pollak, who lost his parents to the worst ever manifestation of anti-Semitism. His life was blighted thereafter by the question, "Did the Jews really have no friends amongst the nations of the world who might raise a hand to help us?"