

Parshas Behaaloscha 80 – Pirkei Avos Chapter Two

2nd Round

During these last few months, we have all been facing many new and unimagined challenges.

One particularly sensitive one is dealing with our neighbors. Not only are we home more often and in each other's faces, but with the need for social distancing, inevitably there is going to be a differing of approaches to this topic. One person may feel imposed upon unjustly by all the many restrictions, while others feel endangered by the laxity of others.

It is a delicate tightrope we must walk to preserve our former relationships from fraying.

What are the pitfalls we must avoid? How do we balance our personal needs with the need to be attentive to those in our proximity?

Read on and discover the secret to becoming a good neighbor and learn what attitude leads one to transform into a bad one.

Discover a family that lived up to their father's remarkable legacy he left for them.

It is a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood

King David beseeches G-d: (תהלים פו ב) *שמרה נפשי כי חסיד אני*, *Guard my soul, for devout I am.*

The Holy Bnei Yissaschar wonders why would someone who feels he has attained piety need to ask for special protection, wouldn't it be assumed?

Quoting a 'drash' he once heard, he answers that it is precisely the one who seeks to go 'beyond the call of duty' that needs extra supervision. An average person who feels an urge to sin can simply follow the advice the Talmud offers to "*drag the evil inclination to the the Bais HaMedrash*", finding the strength to ward him off by anchoring oneself firmly to the dictates of the Torah. One however who looks to go beyond the strict letter of law will be coaxed into sin by the evil inclination who disguises himself as the good inclination, trying to seduce him into committing sinful acts all in the name of Heaven. The message of Torah will not suffice to stifle his quest, for this 'pious' one attests to go beyond the mere limits of obligation. He justifies his actions in a distorted claim he is truly doing the 'will' of G-d.

Isn't that the tale of Korach? Observing the reality that he descends from Levi whom the Torah describes as (דברים לג ח) *איש חסידך*, *Your devout one*, and having grown up on the lap of his grandfather Kehos whom the Targum Yonoson (שמות ו יח) refers to as *חסידא*, *the pious one*, he too aspires to rise up the ladder of *חסידות*, *piety*. In that pursuit nothing can stop him since from his perspective he is fulfilling a higher and undefined calling.

Indeed, King David, wisely appeals for a safeguard against this dangerous attitude, for the normal restraints cannot contain its 'pious' self-righteousness. (אדרא דכלה קרח)

Where did Korach go wrong? Is there a specific character flaw that planted the seed for his perilous dissent/descent?

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2nd Round

In two places Rashi points out that not only was Korach corrupt, but his negative attitude influenced his ‘neighbors’, the tribe of Reuven, who both were situated and encamped south of the Tabernacle.

(רש"י בשם התנחומא במדבר ג כו, טז א) *Woe to the wicked, woe to his neighbor.* אוי לרשע אוי לשכנו

The rabble rousers Dasan and Aviram as well as the 250 contentious heads of courts who joined Korach’s ranks all stemmed from the neighboring tribe of Reuven.

In Avos (א ט) we are advised to distance ourselves from a שכך רע, *a bad neighbor*.

Evidently Korach epitomizes the ultimate ‘evil neighbor’ who took down the ‘hood’ with him.

In another Mishna in Avos (ב יא-יד) we are taught about the illustrious students of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai. Among them is numbered Rabbi Yosi HaKohen who is conferred by his beloved teacher the title of חסיד, devout one.

When asked by his Rabbi to discern a proper way that man should cling to, Rabbi Yosi responds, שכך טוב, *a good neighbor*. And when requested to describe the evil path man should avoid he avers, שכך רע, *a wicked neighbor*.

It is safe to assume that this ‘devout one’ selected an approach that reflects on the attribute he so famously extols, that of a חסיד, a pious one.

So here we have Rabbi Yosi HaKohen, a proud descendant of Levi, the devout one, contrasted with another grandson, the nefarious Korach, a Levite, the paradigm ‘bad neighbor’.

How is the character trait of piety evident specifically in being a ‘good neighbor’?

In what way did Korach fail in his neighborly manners that set into motion these tragic events?

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There is a whole set of laws governing relations between neighbors. The delicate tightrope a neighbor must walk is that fine line between ‘rights’ and ‘responsibility towards others’. Too often we are protective of our domain and property rights to the point of losing our humanity and sensitivity towards others. Therein lies the danger among neighbors that require being ever attentive to not crossing those dangerous lines.

Truth is we have no ‘rights’. We possess only responsibilities. There is no inherent right to money or property but rather the privilege of being blessed by G-d with opportunities to use these tools effectively in bringing honor to G-d.

Parshas Behaaloscha 80 – Pirkei Avos Chapter Two

2nd Round

Korach mistakenly believed he was entitled to privilege. Certainly he aspired to use these instruments for the betterment of society and the promotion of his pious mission but it was terribly flawed by the attitude of entitlement that he displayed. One who feels he deserves to be pious because of his lineage and good fortune will eventually poison the atmosphere with selfishness and indulgence.

The word חסיד is used in the context of excessive devotion towards a cause or alternately to mean shamefulness. One who continuously gives of himself towards others and to G-d out of a sense of 'shame', a healthy shame that stems from an overwhelming sense of gratitude for the benevolence G-d showers on him daily that compels him to feel so undeserving that he wants to devote his entire being to G-d, is a true חסיד, devout one. Those, however, who perform magnificent acts of devotion merely to promote their personal agenda no matter how noble, are mired in shame.

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The Talmud (ברכות ת.) states that one who lives in a city where there is a synagogue and doesn't join with the community to pray there is called a שכן רע, *a bad neighbor*.

Why is someone who chooses not to pray labeled a bad neighbor more than simply a bad Jew?

Perhaps it isn't the lack of prayer per se we are concerned with but rather his unwillingness to connect, identify with and sense the joys and plights of others. One who believes his place on earth allows him to disconnect from others and be absorbed with his own program is truly guilty of being a very bad neighbor.

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Rebbi Yosi in a later Mishna (י) promotes three ideas: 1. Let your fellow's money be as dear to you as your own 2. Apply yourself to study Torah, for it is not yours by inheritance 3. Let all your deeds be for the sake of Heaven.

The first message is not simply that one must be attentive to other's property as your own. It is rather the assertion that there is no real difference between your properties and others; they are all gifts from G-d to be utilized not out of right but responsibility.

The second lesson he wishes to teach is that the fortune of being born into greatness and privilege only multiplies the duty to give ever more of oneself.

Finally, one need not search for opportunities to give grandiosely of oneself, in every detail of life one can raise the bar of piety in serving G-d fully.

Korach was vastly wealthy but missed the message therein. He erroneously thought his pedigree entitled him when in fact it obligated him. He thought he could only find piety in aspiring to greater positions of stature when in fact the prospect for utter devotion lay at his very footstep.

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A remarkable story was retold recently about a family in Jerusalem of seventeen children who inherited a small fortune. Usually these types of situations result in acrimonious disputes with many of the children feeling cheated. This family successfully developed a plan that all consented to without any residual feelings whatsoever. The Tolna Rebbe was so amazed by their behavior he requested from the family a copy of their amicable agreement so he could frame it and hang it on his wall as a glorious testament to this Kiddush Hashem!

The children related that their good character was a product of the lessons for life they learned from their parents.

They reported how they never forgot when their upstairs neighbor who had a houseful of kids, requested of their parent's permission to extend their apartment, and encroach on their property slightly. They acquiesced but discovered much later that the neighbor took advantage and built out their apartment in a way that not only took up more space but also severely blocked any natural light from entering the lower apartment.

Instead of going to court or Beis Din they remember the words their father uttered upon the disappointing discovery.

"Yes, he is in the wrong, but at least his living situation has been alleviated, and his relief is far greater than our damage. Let us accept upon ourselves to keep silent and not say one word. we will forgo the matter and take this mitzva with us after 120 years to Olam Haba."

The extension still stands till this day! *(Ami Magazine June 3, 2015)*

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What an authentic 'good neighbor'! What true 'piety'! What a genuine *Kiddush Hashem!*

One need not look far to find opportunities to devote ourselves in attaining exquisite closeness to the Almighty!

May we each strive to be more attuned and responsive to the many chances we have to reach for that greatness!