

PIRKEI AVOS CHAPTER 1 MISHNAH 7

נתאי הארְבלי אומר, הרחק משכּוֹן רע, ואל תתחבֵר לרָשָׁע, ואל תתנַאש מן הפרְענות:

Nittai HaArbeli used to say: keep a distance from an evil neighbor, do not become attached to the wicked, and do not abandon faith in [Divine] retribution.

At the beginning of the first chapter of Pirkei Avos, we are told about the pairs of Tannaim who led the Jewish People in each generation. Each one of those pairs had a mission to teach the world a particular idea or perspective and their thoughts are recorded here in Pirkei Avos for posterity. In the previous *mishnah*, Yehoshua ben Perachya taught about the importance of attaching to good things; make for yourself a *rav*, acquire for yourself a friend and judge everyone favorably. His partner is Nittai HaArbeli who teaches the flip side of those ideas in our *mishnah*. Rather than focus on who one should attach to, Nittai HaArbeli emphasizes who one should distance himself from. He teaches that one should stay away from a bad neighbor and refrain from attaching to someone who is wicked. People sometimes think that they are internally strong and can resist outside influences but Nittai HaArbeli teaches that one should not think that he can do that without being influenced by the deeds, behaviors and attitudes of the wicked. People are influenced by their surroundings and if one wants to continue their path of spiritual development and their trajectory of growth, they should keep away from a bad neighbor and certainly refrain from attaching to someone who is wicked.

The last part of Nittai HaArbeli's statement is interesting and requires some consideration. He concludes his message with the idea that one should not abandon faith in Divine retribution. What does that have to do with the topic at hand? He began by emphasizing the importance of staying away from people who are wicked and then transitions to maintaining faith in Divine retribution, or more accurately, not abandoning faith in Divine retribution. What is the connection? Another question that we could ask is if our opening assumption is accurate, that this and the previous *mishnah* are two sides of the same coin, then we would expect that this statement regarding faith in Divine retribution is somehow connected to the end of the previous *mishnah* related to judging everyone favorably. What is that connection?

I think the answer has to do with our perspective towards different people. Regarding people in general, one should adopt a positive attitude towards them and as the previous *mishnah* teaches, one should always give them the benefit of the doubt. This is part of the overall outlook that one should attach to teachers and have friends because they are helpful towards one's growth. The more attached one is to others, the stronger

Prepared by Gershon Eliezer Schaffel
Young Israel of Skokie

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will be one's foundation. However, the sad truth is that there are some people who are wicked. It may be a neighbor or just someone that you know. Since wicked people can have a negative influence and can hinder one's growth, one should keep a safe distance from them. Furthermore, if we look at a wicked person and see their success, we can become misled into thinking that their success informs us that they are not truly wicked. How can a wicked person achieve success? It must be that they are not wicked. Therefore, the *mishnah* teaches that one should not use a person's success as the barometer of their wickedness. It is possible that they are indeed wicked but for some reason Hashem hasn't responded yet to their wickedness. Therefore, Nittai HaArbeli warns us that we should not abandon faith in Divine retribution and one should realize that the wicked person's success will not last and thus, if it is determined that they are wicked, one should be careful to keep a safe distance to avoid becoming influenced by them.