



Insights into Pirke Avot

by

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Rosh Yeshivat Ahavat Shalom

Perek Alef, Mishnah Zayin (Part 1)

1:7 Nitai HaArbeli says, distance yourself from a bad neighbor and do not associate with a wicked person. And do not despair of punishment.

Neighbors and Neighborhood

Distance yourself from a bad neighbor.

This *mishnah* contains a wealth of excellent practical advice.

The *Tanna's* wording is very precise. It is not enough to avoid coming close to a bad neighbor. As we shall see, the dangers of association with bad neighbors can be so great that we must make every effort to stay as far from them as possible, even to the point of moving away from our familiar home and neighborhood. This is in keeping with the *Shulhan Aruch's* ruling that one must be prepared to forfeit all his money in order to refrain from transgressing a single Torah-ordained negative commandment (*Orah Hayyim* 656, Rema, citing Rashba and Raavad). If we must accept the loss of all our assets in order to avoid transgression, we must certainly be willing to forgo profit, as we learn from another *mishnah* in *Avot*.

"Rabbi Yosse ben Kisma said, once I was walking along the road and someone approached me. He said '*Shalom*' to me and I replied '*Shalom*' to him. He said to me, 'Rabbi, from where are you?' I said to him, 'I am from a big city full of scholars and scribes.' He said to me, 'Rabbi, would you like to live with us in our town, and I will give you thousands and thousands of gold *dinars* and jewels and pearls?' I said to him, '[Even] if you give me all the silver and gold and jewels and pearls in the world, I will only live in a place of Torah'" (*Avot* 6:10).



What an offer! If only Yosse ben Kisma agreed to move out of town, this man would make him a millionaire. Who would not at least consider the proposal? And yet his response was instantaneous and unequivocal. All the money in the world would not sway him to move to a neighborhood devoid of Torah; the losses and potential risks were just not worth it.

The intentions of the gentleman making the offer were undoubtedly pure. He was willing to spend a fortune to bring in a rabbi who would serve as a good influence for his neighbors and educate them in the ways of Torah. And yet, Rabbi Yosse ben Kisma refused the tempting offer, understanding that life in a community unlearned in Torah would surely have a detrimental spiritual affect on himself and his family. This is why he emphatically declared that no matter how great the financial incentive, "I will only live in a place of Torah."

Far and Near

On the other hand, we often see that living among neighbors who provide a positive example works subtle changes, even without any overt attempts made to exert an influence. A couple moves into a block or a building inhabited by families firmly committed to Torah. The wife's mode of attire leaves much to be desired, and the same is true of the husband. Time passes and they stay in the neighborhood. Slowly there is a shift and they begin to look a little different, more like the families around them. The external changes are matched by important private, internal changes as well. There was no sermonizing or missionizing; there was only the impact of living in a neighborhood permeated by Torah values.

A neighbor, then, is more important than we may realize – "A close neighbor is better than a distant brother" (*Mishle* 27:10). We may be fond of a brother who lives far away, but practically speaking, he is, or might as well be, across the ocean. Our neighbor is right nearby, allowing for warm friendship and mutual assistance and support, even without shared family ties. This is why our Sages attach such great importance to neighbors. The closer the relationship, the greater influence it will have, be it positive or negative, G-d forbid.

It is proper to maintain cordial ties with our neighbors – if they are indeed righteous, upstanding people. A bad neighbor is a bad influence, and we should keep our distance. A husband and father may feel that he is immune to neighborly influences because he spends most of his time at work or in a *yeshivah*. But what of his wife and children, whose lives are lived much more at home? The neighbors may have a television, radio, or other entertainment technology in constant use. They may purchase objectionable newspapers or magazines, conveniently displayed for visitors' perusal. Their language, dress, and behavior may be immodest. Far too



many homes have been ruined by innocent friendships with the neighbors' children. If we know that a neighbor is a problem or a potential problem, we must make sure to **distance** ourselves.

Sensitive to Sin

Distance yourself from a bad neighbor.

Keeping good company is critically important: "He who walks with the wise will grow wise, and he who is the companion of fools will be shattered" (*Mishle* 13:20).¹ We are influenced by our surroundings, and a bad neighbor or neighborhood can be disastrous. If we grow up among non-Jews or even among secular Jews, we are likely to be shaped in some way by their behavior and speech patterns, albeit on a subtle, subconscious level. Even without direct contact or friendship, we can be affected, and our soul blemished. We learn from what we see around us, and the sight of those who mock Torah and *mitzvot* eventually chills down our own enthusiasm from red-hot to tepid.

We can understand this by considering just a single example. We know, by education and upbringing, that it is unquestionably forbidden to drive on Shabbat. Then we move to a neighborhood with many irreligious residents. On our first Shabbat in the new locale, we step out of the sheltered cocoon of our home to go to the synagogue. We see an obviously Jewish couple driving by, apparently without a care in the world, and we are horrified – Shabbat! *Shabbat!* Have these people no fear of death and excision (*Shmot* 31:14-15)? Their actions are earning them the punishment of execution by stoning, but they are perfectly calm while we are on the verge of fainting.

The next week, though, is a little easier. We have seen it before and we know what to expect. We are not happy about the situation, of course, and we express our displeasure when we get home. However, by the following Shabbat it is not even worth a comment, and soon enough, if we still notice, we merely shrug and say, "It's too bad, but that's how it is in these neighborhoods." The shock and the horror have worn off, and our firm belief in the immutable, binding force of Torah and *mitzvot* may have also worn off, G-d forbid. After all, the same people who were behind the wheel last week and the week before are still in good health, driving happily along on this Shabbat as well. What can we say, and what should we think?

¹ See Insights into *Pirke Avot* 1:4 for a fuller discussion of this topic



Awareness

Awareness and appreciation of the paramount importance of Torah and *mitzvot*, so easily dulled by exposure to sin, must be carefully nurtured. The famous *Berieta* of Rabbi Pinhas ben Yair tells us that “Watchfulness leads to zeal” (*Avodah Zarah* 20b). If we are meticulously careful in our approach to *mitzvot*, we will be zealous and eager in their performance. There is only one way to acquire the watchfulness that starts us on the road to maximum performance, spelled out at the beginning of that same *Berieta*: “Torah leads to watchfulness.” Only through learning will we know enough and care enough to be watchful, because we will understand just how serious and significant our every action is.

This principle is highlighted in an incident concerning the Vilna Gaon, whose entire life was devoted to Torah study. The Gaon reached an incredibly advanced level of awareness and watchfulness in every area related to the Torah and its sacred commandments. On one occasion, he accidentally handled the salted peel of a peanut on Shabbat, and fainted dead away! Peels are inedible, and therefore *muktzeh* which may not be handled on Shabbat. The enormity of the incident overwhelmed the Gaon, who understood all the profound implications of the transgression on their many levels. His mother was present at the time, and she instantly sized up the situation. She quickly took the peel and ate it, and the Gaon revived. Many people eat peanuts together with their salted peel, and will sometimes even eat the peels on their own, because they find them tasty. This practice classifies the peels as a food item, rather than as *pesolet*,² and as such, they are not considered *muktzeh*. By eating the peel the Gaon’s mother had redefined its status, so that her son had not transgressed by handling it.

We are not the Gaon, but the principle is true for all of us. Sin, rabbinically ordained and certainly Torah ordained, should so shock us that we faint. Instead, the negative influence of a **bad neighbor** blunts our sensitivities and we come to accept the violation of G-d’s Word with equanimity. After all, these people keep nothing and transgress everything even as we watch, and yet they live on in comfort, making a nice living and enjoying the world’s many pleasures. Maybe, just maybe, nothing ever does happen to sinners; perhaps there really is “no Judge and no judgment,” as they and their habits seem to broadcast.³

² *Pesolet*, literally “waste,” is any substance regarded as rubbish to be discarded. If we do not consider an item to be food which we would want to consume on Shabbat, it is *pesolet* with the halachic status of *muktzeh*, and it is forbidden to handle it on Shabbat.

³ See *Parashah Insights on Vayeshev* for a fuller discussion of this topic.



The continuation of our *mishnah* returns us to reality: **Distance yourself from a bad neighbor and do not associate with a wicked person. And do not despair of punishment**, because it will most certainly come, on two levels. The wicked will be punished, whether or not we personally witness the **neighbor's** sentence. In addition, it is inevitable that our continued association with a **wicked person** will eventually erode our own piety, even if we are not immediately aware that this is what is happening.

Strictly Business

The *Tanna* goes on to say, **and do not associate with a wicked person.**

We accept that socially, we should be selective of the company we keep and avoid bad neighbors, so we are careful to live in a lovely religious neighborhood where we can have a circle of fine, observant friends. But what of the many people we encounter through our business or other affairs.

For example, thanks to modern technology, the actual contact with irreligious business associates can be kept to a minimum. Perhaps we live in America and the other party lives in Israel. The transactions and correspondence can all be handled by telephone, fax, and computer, so that we have no real need to ever actually meet. True, there is an element of association because we do business together, but it is so very impersonal that there can hardly be a question of negative influence. Can something so benign be included in the *mishnah's* warning not to **associate with a wicked person?**

Yes, it can, as we learn from an ancient incident in our people's history.

Many centuries ago, Yehoshafat, the pious king of Judea, established a commercial partnership with Ahazyahu, the wicked king of Israel. Together the two kings built ships which they planned to send to Tarshish on business. The prophet Eliezer ben Dodavah criticized Yehoshafat sharply for this deed, telling him, "When you joined with Ahazyahu, Hashem wrecked your endeavors.' And the ships capsized and sank, and did not succeed in getting to Tarshish" (II *Divre HaYamim* 20:35-37).

Ahazyahu was wicked by any criteria, and dealings with him were doomed to failure. *Metzudat David* comments, "Even though Ahazyahu was wicked and did evil, Yehoshafat did not refrain from associating with him..." The result? "Because you associated with Ahazyahu... disaster and wreckage will overtake your endeavors and you will not succeed." Merely having contact with an evil person, even if only for business and not on personal or social terms, will keep success at bay, and in fact lead to disaster.



The problems inherent in association with the wicked, even for practical purposes, extend also to areas which appear not only harmless, but in fact beneficial. A common contemporary example is accepting funding for Torah study from donors who live their lives in contradiction to the Torah's most basic principles. It is a well-known rabbinical saying that "The inner soul of the producer is expressed in his product" (*Igra D'Kallah Parashat Shoftim*; see Responsa *Vayashov HaYam* vol. II, para. 7, note on p.145). In the case of donations from impure sources, given by wicked individuals to support Torah institutions, something of the donor's impurity will cling to the money, which will in turn have a detrimental effect on the Torah studied there.⁴

We find this concept in the Bartenura's commentary on our *mishnah*. He writes, "For so our Sages said, anyone who cleaves to the wicked, even if he does not behave as they do, receives the same recompense as they do. To what is this comparable? To one who enters a tanner's house. Even if he did not buy any leather from him, he still absorbed a bad odor and has taken that with him." Whether or not we actively adopt anything sinister from our negative associations, their stench is sure to cling to us like glue.

No Harm Done?

Our Sages teach that "the pure-minded people of Jerusalem...did not go into a banquet unless they knew who would be sitting there with them" (*Sanhedrin* 23a). This seems surprising. What could be so terrible about attending a dinner where a few participants were not quite up to their exacting standards of piety?

These righteous individuals understood that partaking of a shared meal has more profound ramifications than we may at first realize. Going out for dinner together has long been recognized as an accepted way to enhance friendships, and may G-d spare us, "social drinking" is a recognized phenomenon. Sharing food and drink brings people together, so much so that our Sages decreed against consumption of non-Jewish bread and wine, as a safeguard against potential intermarriage (*Avodah Zarah* 35b). The "pure-minded people of Jerusalem" feared that even passing social contact with wicked individuals could taint their carefully guarded spirituality, and they avoided it all costs.

⁴ It should be noted that the definition of a "wicked individual" in this context is one who transgresses the Torah's commandments out of a willful desire to rebel against the Al-mighty.



Later in *Avot*, our Sages warn us, “Beware of rulers, for they only befriend a person for their own needs. They appear to be friends when they benefit from it, but they do not stand by a person in his time of need” (*Avot* 2:3). With these words, our Sages teach us that any connection with politicians who are known to be double-dealing and dispense insincere promises and declarations, saying one thing and meaning another, is bound to have a bad influence. This may strike us as a bit extreme. Political connections are no more than a convenience which can lead to receiving valuable benefits. It would seem that the so-called association itself is meaningless and insignificant; we have our own outlook and our own way of life, and only utilize their services to the extent that it suits us. Why give up on rights and prerogatives which are our due?

Regardless of the apparently harmless circumstances, the very fact of *any* connection with evildoers is wrong. While this connection may not involve personal encounters which could exert an influence, it is improper nonetheless. Even in a seemingly safe fashion, we should **not associate with a wicked person**. If we do, “Hashem will destroy our endeavors,” G-d forbid, as was the fate of Yehoshafat.

In the Dorm

However, what if our dealings with a less-than-pious individual are for the purpose of helping him spiritually? We plan to be a good influence on him, not to pick up his bad habits! This question is especially relevant in a *yeshivah* for returnees to Judaism. Perhaps one student has already made excellent progress and is truly, seriously committed and G-d fearing, while other students still have a long way to go. If this serious student were to be the roommate of some of the more lighthearted boys, might it not be a tremendous opportunity for them? Surely he is the perfect positive role model. The dorm counselor is ready to move the boy's mattress right then and there, for the sake of the cause. But then he hesitates; can he abandon this good boy to the mercies of a roomful of rather **wicked** associates?

To answer this question, let us first consider the setting in which the association is taking place. It is a *yeshivah*, an inherently wholesome atmosphere, and not a backyard barbecue. Also, the contact is for the sake of outreach, an inherently wholesome purpose, and not for all-night poker. Under these conditions, there should not be any negative backlash. However, it is a situation which must be handled with great caution and great wisdom.

We can gain insight into this issue from the Four Sons in the Passover *Haggadah*. The *Haggadah* cites four verses which tell us how to respond to our children's questions about Passover. Our Sages explain that these verses refer to four different types of sons (Jerusalem Talmud *Pesachim* 10:4):



- “And if your son asks you tomorrow, saying, ‘What are the testimonies and statutes and judgments which Hashem our G-d commanded you?’” (*Devarim* 6:20). This is the question of the *hacham*, the wise son.
- “And it shall be if your sons say to you, ‘What is this service for you?’” (*Shmot* 12:26). This is the question of the *rasha*, the wicked son.
- “And it shall be if your son asks you tomorrow, saying, ‘What is this?’” (*Shmot* 13:14). This is the question of the *tam*, the simple son.
- “And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, ‘Because of this Hashem did for me when I went out of Egypt’” (*Shmot* 13:8). This is the response to the *she’eno yode’a lishol*, the son who is a dullard incapable of even formulating his own questions.

The sequence in which the lads are listed is wise, wicked, simple, and a dullard. Arranged in descending order, the more likely listing would have been wise, simple, and a dullard, with the wicked son as last –and worst – of all. However, the order as it stands is not a technicality; it carries a message. We have a mixed group. What is the best way to place them, in the dormitory and in the *bet midrash*?

Obviously, the biggest problem is the wicked son. If we know that a certain individual is likely to be a bad influence, we must separate him from those who are vulnerable to damage. We should instead pair him with stronger partners; they will not be hurt and hopefully he will benefit. It follows that the best way to counter the wicked son’s negative influence is by putting him together with the wise son, who can contend with him and may even help him. The simple and dull sons will be a safe pair, as long as they are removed from their wicked companion. If we let him near these weaker students, he will ruin them.

Generally speaking, the students in a *yeshivah* are interested in spiritual growth. Working from that perspective, stronger and weaker students learning together would not fall under the category of **distance yourself from a bad neighbor and do not associate with a wicked person**. Yet even so, we must choose our friends carefully. We may undertake to learn with a less serious partner for the high-minded motive of “getting him into learning” while improving his soul. If all goes well and we really do stick to learning, fine. Our purpose is positive and in theory, there should not be a harmful outcome. But our companion may decide that the relationship is a little drab, and try to liven it up a little. One day he suggests, “Let’s do something together tonight. I’m going downtown and it would be fun if you came along.” If we are capable of being taken in by a ploy like that, we should not have gotten involved with him to begin with.



Assimilation from Within

One of the most difficult trials in our generation is what we may call “internal assimilation,” or assimilation from within.

In the past, negative influences were clearly defined. Torah-observant Jews were surrounded by the larger non-Jewish society, or, sad to say, by fellow Jews who had abandoned Torah observance and values. The attractions of their more permissive, comfortable or secure lifestyle posed a continual spiritual danger, but this danger clearly came from without; we knew who we were and how a Torah Jew should live, and their way of life had nothing to do with ours. Those who unfortunately succumbed had fallen victim to “external assimilation.”

In our times, popular opinion is very much shaped by the media, both secular and religious, in all its forms. However, since even the religious media is not necessarily guided and directed by great Torah authorities, it does not always represent the authentic Torah viewpoint. Instead, it is produced and controlled by amateurs who are obviously on a much lower level than our Torah leaders. Because of this, under the auspices of the “kosher media,” many new ideas, opinions, concepts and customs are popularized in the religious community, without proper rabbinical supervision.

In addition, our generation has been blessed with the return of many of our formerly unobservant brethren to Torah. They sincerely wish to fulfill the Torah’s commandments, but with their limited background, they lack extensive knowledge of *halachah* and the Torah’s overall philosophy of life. At the same time, they are still attached to many of the practices and habits they enjoyed in the past, which may not be strictly forbidden according to basic *halachah*. While they are well-intentioned, they are not very knowledgeable concerning the more subtle nuances of accepted religious behavior as passed down from generation to generation among Torah-observant Jews. As a result, they adapt what are essentially alien behaviors to meet the minimum requirements of the Orthodox community.

Newly refurbished, these pastimes, fashions, and entertainments, although they may not be directly related to Torah and *mitzvot*, are granted the dubious title of “*glatt kosher*.” They are promoted by the religious media, and somehow make their way into our homes through the back door. This is a source of great confusion because the people introducing these innovations are far from wicked; they are part of the religious community, Jews who are clearly observant of all clear-cut, black-and-white halachic obligations. We may term this introduction of new patterns of speech and dress, and new perceptions of how we should spend (or waste) our time a form of “internal assimilation,” from sources within our own camp. This type of



assimilation from within is more difficult to contend with than the more obvious, undisguised dangers of assimilation from without.

It is up to us, as Jews and as parents, to be on our guard. Not everything labeled “kosher,” be it food products, vacation packages, or media presentations, is indeed suitable or safe for our consumption, or for that of our children.

We learn this lesson from our Forefather Yaakov. Yaakov, formerly a sheltered *yeshivah* student who had grown up in the most pious of homes, suddenly found himself living in a depraved, corrupt society, in the home of an utterly wicked and dishonest individual, who was no less than his own uncle and father-in-law! At the end of his twenty years with Lavan, Yaakov was able to say, “I have lived with Lavan and fulfilled the six hundred and thirteen commandments, and I did not learn from his evil ways” (*Bereshit* 32:5, Rashi).⁵ He was the same *tzaddik* the day he left as he had been when he arrived.

Considering who Yaakov was, this statement is rather surprising. What else would we have expected of this saintly Forefather? Surely he had the moral strength not to adopt Lavan’s blatantly wicked ways. Realistically, would someone of Yaakov’s caliber suddenly begin to desecrate the Sabbath or commit other gross transgressions, simply because he was living with Lavan?

Apparently, Yaakov was speaking of another spiritual accomplishment. During his sojourn with Lavan, not only did he fulfill the six hundred and thirteen commandments, he *also* did not learn from Lavan’s evil ways. He did not take on his bad *middot*, coarse manner of speech, and the other big and small behaviors that made Lavan whom and what he was. These were not outright transgressions, which Yaakov would obviously avoid. They were only mannerisms and habits, almost effortless to imitate and then justify as harmless. The tendencies of a Lavan are the antithesis of the refinement which a Jew must work to cultivate. This is why our Sages tell us, **distance yourself from a bad neighbor and do not associate with a wicked person**. If we live near him, are friends with him, and do business with him, it will be all too easy for us to learn from his evil ways.

This essay contains divre Torah. Please treat it with proper respect.

⁴ The Hebrew word *garti*, “I lived,” is composed of the same letters as *taryag*, an allusion to the six hundred and thirteen commandments.