

“Each man by his banner according to the insignias of their fathers’ household shall Bnei Yisrael encamp, at a distance surrounding the Ohel Moed shall they encamp.” (2:2)

After *Klal Yisrael* was counted, Hashem instructed Moshe *Rabbeinu* concerning their order of encampment, each tribe in a specific place with its own individual banner. This order was not merely good advice; it was a Divine edict that no member of the tribe of Zevulun reside next to the tribe of Yissaschar, etc. Hashem determined who should be neighbors with whom. Afterwards, Hashem made known where the *ligyono shel Melech*, King’s legion, *Shevet Levi*, should camp. The three Levite families are listed according to the place of their encampment – one directly to the north of the *Mishkan*; one to the west; and one to the south. Every person was placed according to the place most appropriate for him, personally and spiritually.

Yet, in his commentary to *pasuk* 3:29, *Rashi* writes that the placement of the family of Kehas, who resided to the south of the *Mishkan*, near the tribe of Reuven, ultimately was to the detriment of the members of the tribe of Reuven. When Korach, of the family of Kehas, rebelled against Moshe, impugning his leadership, he negatively influenced members of the Tribe of Reuven to follow him in his iniquity. *Chazal* declare, “Woe is to the wicked, and woe is to his neighbor.” We wonder how this could have occurred. If Hashem designated everyone’s place of encampment according to what was spiritually correct for them, how did the tragedy of Reuven falling under the influence of Korach occur? *Horav Avigdor Halevi Nebentzhal, Shlita*, derives from here that even under the most ideal circumstances one must take great care with whom he associates. As soon as Reuven saw Korach’s insolence, when he sensed his rebellious nature, he should have immediately approached Moshe *Rabbeinu* and entreated his help in warding off this dangerous influence.

Chazal demand of us, “Distance yourself from a bad neighbor, and do not associate with a wicked person.” This implies that a *shochein ra*, bad neighbor, is even worse than a *rasha*, wicked person. Regarding the bad neighbor, *Chazal* say that we should not even be in his proximity, while concerning the *rasha*, we are only told not to be his friend. The influence of a bad neighbor has greater constancy and is, therefore, more-enduring. One meets a friend upon occasion – even regularly, but a neighbor – one lives with him! They are together all of the time. I cannot break away from my neighbor unless I move away and he is no longer my neighbor.

Rav Nebentzhal elaborates on the damage sustained because of a bad neighbor and how it plays out. Regarding Amalek’s incursion against *Klal Yisrael*, the Torah writes, *Asher karcha baderech*, “That he happened upon you on the way” (*Devarim* 25:18). The word *karcha* can also be derived from *kar*, cold/to cool off. Amalek suppressed the great enthusiasm *Klal Yisrael* had for Hashem. He also cooled off the fear that the surrounding nations had of *Klal Yisrael*. How did he do it? By attacking us, by demonstrating to the world that the Jewish people can be attacked. True, Amalek lost the battle, but the damage was done. The awe and fear of Hashem that was imbued in *Klal Yisrael*, that overwhelmed the nations, was mitigated by Amalek’s aggression.

A similar phenomenon takes place when one is exposed to the evil perpetrated by a bad neighbor. Imagine living in a neighborhood that is not observant. When my neighbor decides to wash the car on *Shabbos* or takes a spin with the family – it leaves an impression. My *Shabbos* is no longer the same. My attitude towards *Shabbos* has been cooled. Suddenly, I see another lifestyle – one much different than the one to which I have dedicated my life.

We wonder if this is so bad. Whoever said that serving Hashem would be easy? There are challenges that must be overcome, and a bad neighbor is one of those challenges. Rav Nebentzhal explains that rather than garnering together one's strength to overcome evil, it would be much more appropriate to elevate one's spiritual status by focusing on the positive. When we are exposed to the negative, it wears down our resolve. The story is told that when an episode of *chillul Shabbos* once occurred in Radin, the *Chafetz Chaim* assembled the community in the *bais ha'medrash* and poured forth his heart with bitter tears. A while later when another instance of *chillul Shabbos* occurred, the *Chafetz Chaim* once again called together the community and wept as he spoke about the holiness of *Shabbos*. Yet, as the *Chafetz Chaim* himself attested, it was not the same weeping. He did not cry as bitterly the second time – because his affront at *chillul Shabbos* had been reduced.

A bad neighbor can have an influence on even the most devout and committed Jew. Avraham Avinu was told by Hashem to distance himself from his nephew, Lot, because Lot was a bad influence. Lot was not even that bad. He was a *baal chesed*, kind and caring person. Avraham Avinu was his *rebbe*, his spiritual mentor. He was effective, but it was not sufficient for Hashem. The Almighty did not want Lot's misconstrued perspective of religion to rub off on Avraham. Lot did not show his true colors until after Avraham had separated from him. He declared, "I want not Avraham, nor his G-d." Lot wanted to separate himself from *kedushah*. Avraham clung to *kedushah*. This dichotomy was not repaired until a descendant of Lot came along with a burning desire to cling to Hashem. Her name was Rus, the mother of monarchy, matriarch of *Malchus Bais David* and *Moshiach Tzidkeinu*. A *shachein ra* wants to undermine *kedushah*. A *shachein tov* seeks to embrace it. Rus exemplified this concept.