

# You Become Like Those You Live Around

PARSHA INSIGHTS - BAMIDBAR (5759)

## CHOOSE YOUR NEIGHBOR

Today's *parsha* [Torah portion] delineates the camping formation for the *Bnai Yisroel* [Children of Israel] as they journeyed in the wilderness. We will examine one aspect of this, and it will shed much light on the attitude we are supposed to have about neighbors. A *pasuk* [verse] in the Torah portion will be studied, and a section of *Gemara* will be brought to further demonstrate the importance of choosing righteous neighbors whenever possible.

There were three families of *Levi'im* [those of the tribe of Levi], branching out from the three original sons of Levi. Their names were Gershon, Kehas, and Merari. We are informed in 1:53 that these servants of Hashem were to camp immediately around the *Mishkan* [Tabernacle]. The purpose was to safeguard and tend to the needs of the *Mishkan*, and no outsiders were to interfere with their *avoda* [service].

The Kehas branch would reside south of the *Mishkan* (3:29). (Although Moshe and Aharon were also from the family of Kehas, they camped east of the *Mishkan*, and so did Aharon's sons {3:38}. This was due, in part, to their special functions in leading *Bnai Yisroel*.)

The tribe of Reuven also camped south of the *Mishkan*, further from the *Mishkan* than the *Levi'im* of Kehas. Recall that the twelve *shevatim* [tribes] were positioned around the Tabernacle, three on each of its four sides. The southern camp consisted of Reuven, Shimon, and Gad (2:10-16).

Thus, one division of *Levi'im* - the people of Kehas - were south of the *Mishkan*. Also, the tribe of Reuven camped to the south. The *Midrash Tanchuma*, cited by *Rashi* 3:29, teaches us something about neighbors based on this "neighborhood of the south." An evil person is doomed, and so is the person who lives in close proximity. "Woe to a *rasha* [wicked person], and woe to his neighbor!"

Because they lived in the same area as Kehas, members of the *shaivet* [tribe of] Reuven were eventually swept into Korach's uprising. You are probably aware that Korach, son of Yitzhar, **son of Kehas**, son of Levi rebelled against the authority of Moshe and Aharon. The details are in *Parshas Korach*; we have investigated various aspects of this episode before. Who joined him? Dasan and Aviram, plus 250 men. These cohorts were Reuvenites, as indicated by *Rashi* here, 3:29. Actually, *Rashi* on *Korach* 16:1 remarks that while Dasan and Aviram were certainly from Reuven (as stated explicitly other places in the Torah), "most of" the 250 men came from Reuven, Kehas' neighbors.

We see that neighbors can help determine a person's fate. Who knows how events would have looked if the tribe of Reuven had not lived in close proximity to Kehas? True, Dasan and Aviram tormented Moshe since before we left Egypt. They were independently capable of joining or even staging a rebellion against his authority. Even so, this *Tanchuma* brought by *Rashi* seems to tell us something shocking. If not for their "bad neighbor", Korach of the *Bnai* [sons of] Kehas, they might not have become part of the tragic uprising which cost them their lives in a cataclysmic way.

**A remarkable example of neighbors affecting each other is found in the *Gemara Succah* 56. Some introduction is needed.** In the *Bais Hamikdosh* [Temple], there were twenty-four *mishmaros* [watches] - separate groups of *kohanim* [priests] who performed the service. Each *mishmar* ["watch" or work assignment group] would carry out its tasks at certain times. The *mishmaros* would change on *Shabbos* [Sabbath], at which time the *lechem hapanim* [special bread kept in the *Bais Hamikdosh*] was divided between the incoming and outgoing groups of *kohanim*. Specifically, twelve fresh loaves were arranged on the *shulchan* [table] every *Shabbos*, and those of the preceding week were removed and divided between the two *mishmaros*. Details of this are in *Parshas Emor* 24:5-9.

The new *mishmar*, upon entering the Sanctuary, needed to divide up their loaves among themselves. The *Mishna* in *Succa* 56A states that the incoming *kohanim* used to divide their *lechem hapanim* in the area of the courtyard north of the altar. That is where the holiest offerings were generally slaughtered. This showed that they were getting ready to devote themselves to the service of Hashem in the *Bais Hamikdosh*, *Rashi* explains. The

outgoing company divided their loaves south of the altar, an area not used for special purposes. This symbolized that their term of duty was over.

The work assignment group named Bilga (after one of its progenitors) always divided the *lechem hapanim* in the south, EVEN WHEN COMING IN to serve in the *Bais Hamikdosh*. They did not merit the special privilege of distribution in the northern sector. Bilga was penalized for a crime committed by one of its family members, as we will soon explain.

Furthermore, Bilga's "ring" was permanently set. What is the meaning of this statement of the *Mishna* in *Succa* 56A? There were twenty-four rings or collars in the Temple courtyard, corresponding to the twenty-four *mishmaros*, work groups of *kohanim*. They were set into the floor, open on one side. When flipped upward, the neck of an animal could be placed into one of these rings, and it would be closed up again. This would make it easier to slaughter animals for offerings. As stated before, the collar of the *mishmar* called Bilga was permanently closed up as a penalty. Bilga would always have to use the rings of others, and this was degrading.

Third, their cubby or compartment for storing knives was closed and inaccessible. *Rashi* points out that there were "lockers" or cubbies in the knife storehouse, in the thickness of the walls of the offices or chambers in the north of the Sanctuary. Bilga's was not to be used.

Why was the *mishmar* of Bilga so severely punished? On 56B, the *Gemara Succa* tells us of an episode. It occurred during the *Chanuka* events, so keep it in mind for a *Chanuka d'var Torah* [lesson]. A woman named Miriam, of the Bilga family, abandoned Judaism and married a Greek noble, an officer. When the Greeks entered the *Bais Hamikdosh* and defiled it in the days of Matisyahu Ben Yochanan, she kicked the altar with her shoe. She cried, in Greek, "Wolf, wolf! How long are you going to consume the money of *Bnai Yisroel* (they spend money on offerings), and you do not stand up for them in times of hardship?" She was obviously referring to the crisis which eventually led to the *Chanuka* miracle, the Greek occupation of the Temple, and perhaps other persecutions we had suffered (but ultimately always were delivered from). After the Chashmonaim retook the *Bais Hamikdosh* and defeated the Greeks, the sages heard of this disturbing episode. Their reaction? The family of Bilga was to experience the three punitive measures discussed before.

There is another opinion in the *Gemara* regarding the wrongdoing of Bilga, but we will follow through with what we have thus far developed, since it relates to our topic of neighbors. The *Gemara* wonders: Why should EVEN Miriam Bas Bilga's FATHER suffer for his daughter's actions? Abaya answers: The talk of a child likely originates in the home, with his or her parents. Her father MUST HAVE spoken about the altar or the service in the *Bais Hamikdosh* in a derogatory way. The next question is crucial to our discussion: Why should the entire *mishmar* of Bilga be disciplined because of Miriam Bas Bilga's parents? **Abaya answers again: Woe to a rasha, and woe to his neighbor. Similarly, it is marvelous for a tzadik [righteous person], and so it is for his neighbor.** Every individual greatly affects those around him.

Hopefully, today's two examples of the importance of neighbors have given us a fresh look at the topic. We should be encouraged to select righteous neighbors whenever possible, whether in our homes, our seats in *shul* [synagogue], or regarding our friends in general.

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