



# OUR QUESTIONS

The Mishna tells us to distance ourselves from a bad neighbor. Is this a purely physical directive or are there wider implications? And why do you think this is necessary?

**2** The second part of the Mishna tells us not to befriend a bad person. Is this related to the first part of the Mishna, and if so, how?

**3** Are these first two directives describing two stages of a process of protecting oneself from evil? Is there any indication which is worse, a bad neighbor or just associating with a bad person?

**4** The last part of the Mishna warns us, “Don’t abandon the belief in punishment” — presumably for bad behavior. How does this relate to the first two statements of our Mishna?

**5** Is there something about associating with bad people that might make us forget this concept?

Also, why does the Mishna phrase this in the negative, instead of saying something like, “Always remember the belief in punishment”? And what is the reason for the use of the strange term “abandon”? The Mishna could have said simply, “Don’t forget.”

## COMMENTARY BY RABBI MORDECHAI ROTTMAN

“ Nitai from Arbel says: “Keep far away from bad neighbors, do not befriend a bad person, and do not abandon the belief that acts of evil will be judged.”

### SYNOPSIS:

**While associating with good people brings us closer to our Creator, association with negative people does the opposite. A man cannot think that he is immune to societal influence. As Maimonides writes in the Book of Knowledge, “The nature of man is to be drawn after his environment.” Notice, Maimonides writes that is the “nature” of man. Societal influence falls under two headings: neighbors and friends. It is to these two aspects of social influence that the Mishna directs our attention.**

### A Deeper Look:

The preceding Mishna speaks of the positive relationships we should strive to acquire. We also mentioned that in order to maintain this relationship we would have to learn how to judge people favorably. In this Mishna we are being warned that despite the fact that one needs a friend and should judge that friend favorably, we should still be aware of the fact that many people can be negative influences upon us and we would do well to stay far away from them.

One kind of negative social influence is a bad neighbor. A bad neighbor is not necessarily a person that I have much interaction with; he just happens to live near me. The Mishna is warning me that despite the fact that I may say regarding my bad neighbor, “But I have nothing to do with the guy! We just happen to live next to each other!” beware, for his very presence can have a negative effect on us.

How so? Because when we get used to seeing negative behavior we eventually lose our sensitivity to it. Once we lose our sensitivity to it, we are more susceptible to behaving that way ourselves, or allowing our children to behave that way. Whether it is violence or drug abuse, studies show that the more one is exposed to these behaviors, the less sensitive one becomes to its deleterious effects.

Another kind of negative social influence is a bad friend. Unlike the neighbor whom I may never even talk to, a friend is a person I am actively seeking out, a person I want to have a relationship with.

The question that is often asked here is, if the Mishna has already warned me to distance myself from a bad neighbor, is it really necessary to tell me not to associate with a bad friend?

The answer is that many times we think we can befriend someone for one reason or the other, and remain unaffected by him. We are confident that since we're aware of the danger, and we intend to associate with this person for a short time only, we will be able to protect ourselves accordingly. The truth is not so. To quote Rabbi Berel Wein, "When we shake the hand of an evil man, the smell of his cologne remains on our palm."

Of all of the many important concepts mentioned in Pirkei Avos, the ideas mentioned in this Mishna are particularly relevant for those of us living in a typical Western society. It is so difficult to find a decent place to raise one's family nowadays. Crime, drugs, and promiscuity are rampant. Our debased environment pounds away at our sensitive moral fiber, numbing us into the acceptance of senselessness and depravity. Electronic media has turned our households into potential spiritual sand traps for our children. The "bad neighbors" not only live next door, but lurk within every television screen and monitor in the house. Decadence is but a few finger flicks away from the curious hand of every 10-year-old.

Resisting negative social influences takes determination and courage. One must be exceedingly self-confident and brave to stand up to society and say, "I refuse to be drawn into the mire. I insist on my right as a human being to live in dignity and G-dliness. I refuse to be influenced by a society that values superficiality and glitter.

In the end, it is this brave man who will triumph. It is he who will be there watching the sinking ship of a morally bankrupt society, slowly disappearing beneath the insatiable waves of selfishness and greed.

The Mishna concludes by telling us, "**Do not think that evil will remain unjudged.**" This addition is directly related to the first part of the Mishna. How so?

At times, it is tempting to side with evil. After all, they may appear so successful! The head of the mafia lives a luxurious lifestyle and appears to wield enormous influence. The Mishna is assuring us that evil will fall. It is only a matter of time. Good will eventually prevail. Do not be allured by the false sense of security the evil people exude; their success is merely temporary.

I recall an article I read several years ago regarding the capture of the drug lord Pablo Escobar. The article mentioned that the police had attempted to catch this man, who had seeded the world with so much despair, no less than 1,600 times! Finally, Escobar made a slight but fatal mistake, and the police tracked him down and shot him as he attempted to escape. The great cocaine baron lay dead, riddled with the bullets that had eluded him 1,600 times...

Evil may sometimes triumph, but it never conquers.

## SUMMARY

**The people we associate with have a powerful effect on us. Whether we are actively seeking out the friendship of a negative friend, or just happen to live next door to one, we must remember not to trade our spirituality for fleeting associations that offer nothing more than temporary satisfaction in a transient world.**

One of the traits of man is to seek respect from his peers. This desire for respect generates a need within us to meet the approval of our friends and neighbors. When they approve us, we feel accepted and worthy. When they don't, we may feel rejected and lonely.

Needless to say, the people we live with, just like ourselves, are products of the society they are a part of. The values of that society become their values, and respect is given to the man who upholds these society-created values.

All this is fine and dandy as long as the societal values correspond to G-d's system of values. But when man no longer corresponds with G-d to determine morality, when he is of the opinion that only the individual has the right to impose morality on the individual, then the values of the society slowly but surely degenerate into baseless morality.

Woe to the man who lives in such a society. The desire to gain respect within him will undoubtedly lead to his spiritual demise, as slowly but surely he sinks into the mire of social decay, created by the self-indulgent values of the people that surround him.

The Mishna goes on to warn us not to befriend an evil person. The obvious question is: If I must stay away from bad neighbors, as the Mishna already stated, isn't it obvious that I should not befriend an evil person? Perhaps the answer is that with regard to an evil friend, I may have special reasons why I want to befriend him. Perhaps it will benefit mankind in the long run; therefore, the Mishna says, "Do not befriend an evil person," meaning, under any circumstances, even if you think it will result in good. No good can result from association with the wicked.

We can sum up what was said in the Mishna with the words of the Rambam. The Rambam says in the Mishna Torah, that if a person cannot find a decent society to live in, he should live like a hermit in the desert rather than expose himself to the negative influences in his society! Imagine what the Rambam would say about Western society today! Let us take note and try to surround ourselves with people who reflect Torah values. G-d fearing people who are striving to give of themselves to the world and the betterment of mankind.