

SICHA SUMMARY

Likkutei Sichos, Vol. 33

Bamidbar, Sicha 2

The Context:

In parshas Bamidbar, the Torah delineates the encampment of the Jewish people in the desert. On the south side of the Mishkan was the division of Reuben. Included under Reuben's banner were the tribes of Shimon and Gad. (Bamidbar 2:10-14) In the following chapter, the Torah details the genealogy and roles of the Levites, and informs us that the family of Kehos dwelled to the south of the Mishkan, making them neighbors of the Rebeunite division. (Ibid 3:29)

The divisive rebel Korach was of the Kehos family. Joining him in his rebellion were members of the Reubenite division. And so the sages derived from here, "woe to the wicked, woe to his neighbor." Korach's presence negatively affected the Reubenite division. But in the subtle differences in the sages' teachings on this subject, we can discern a range of opinions on the extent of this influence. How deeply does the proximity to evil tarnish the innocent?

Three Readings:

The Midrash Tanchumah writes: "In the south was the family of Kehos, and near them were the tribes of Reuben, Shimon, and Gad. From here we said, "woe to the wicked, woe to his neighbor." **These three tribes who were neighbors of Korach and his entourage to the south were lost with Korach and his dispute.**

Bamidbar Rabbah states: "Because the tribes of Reuben, Shimon, and Gad were neighbors of Korach, they were all divisive people, as it states, "And Korach took... along with... descendants of Reuben." (Bamidbar 16:1) And so, too, the children of Gad and Shimon were part of the rebellion.

Rashi formulates this teaching as follows: The families of the sons of Kohath shall camp to the south — Near them was the division of Reuben, who camped to the south. Woe to the wicked, woe to his neighbor! This explains why Dathan, Abiram, and two hundred and fifty men were smitten with Korah and his congregation, for they were drawn into the dispute along with them.

The Tanchuma merely says that the neighbors were punished ("were lost")

along with Korach and his entourage, not that they actively participated in his rebellion. Rashi adds, “they were drawn into the dispute with them,” meaning that Korach actually influenced his neighbors to join him in rebellion. The Midrash Rabbah intensifies this by saying that the neighbors were not only “drawn after,” but that they were “all divisive people.”

Neighborliness, then, can be interpreted in three ways: 1) It does not exert any substantive influence, it only touches the exterior of the other. The Reubenites do not become quarrelsome, they are swept along in the punishment. 2) It does exert some substantive influence; the Reubenites are dragged along in the argument. 3) It reveals that actually the neighbors share some essential traits, and that is why they gravitated toward each other in the first place. The Reubenites are essentially “divisive people.”

The Infected House

In the Halachic realm, these possibilities are alluded to in the law of homes contaminated with tzara’as. When a Jewish home in Israel contracts tzara’as (a green or red discoloration on the walls), the infected segments must be removed and replaced with new material. If the tzara’as persists, then the house must be destroyed. What if the house shares a wall with a neighboring house? What level of participation is required of the neighbor?

The Mishnah rules, “From here they have said: Woe to the wicked, woe to his neighbor. Both must take out the stones, both must scrape the walls, and both must

bring the new stones.” (Negaim, 12:6) Three interpretations of this law emerge from the commentaries:

1) The neighbor must assist the afflicted homeowner with removing the stones, but he does not need to remove the stones on his side of the wall opposite the infected stones. This aligns with the position that neighborliness has only an external influence. (Bartenura) 2) When the affected stone is a corner stone that is seen from both sides of the wall, the entire stone must be removed, even the unaffected part on the neighboring side. This aligns with the position that negativity has a deeper effect on those in its proximity. 3) Even a standard infected stone in the middle of the wall that cannot be seen on the other side obligates the neighbor to remove his corresponding portion. This aligns with the position that neighborliness reveals a shared connection between both parties. The very fact that this home is infected reveals to us that the neighboring house is suspect, even without any visible contamination.

Good Neighbors:

Whatever is true in the negative realm is intensified in the positive realm. If negativity affects its neighbor, then positivity has an even greater effect. The sages also teach that the division of Yehuda, along with Yissachar and Zebulun, camped near Moshe and Aharon, and therefore were positively influenced to become Torah scholars.

While the Tanchuma implied that negativity only has an external influence, when it comes to this teaching, it states that the

tribes neighboring Moshe “became great in Torah,” implying that the positive does have an actual, internal effect. And Rashi, who implied that Korach did influence his neighbors to join his quarrel, only said so in regard to a specific group of people from one tribe, Reuben (“Dathan, Abiram, and two hundred and fifty men”), while regarding the positive, he says that all three neighboring tribes became great in Torah.

The Lesson:

The antidote to division represented by Korach and his influence is the “Torah of Moshe” and its influence. Torah unites and brings peace to the world. This is why the precursor to the giving of the Torah was the Jewish people’s unified encampment at Sinai. Therefore, we read parshas Bamidbar prior to the holiday of Shavuos, to reinforce the idea of the positive influence of unity and Torah against the forces of division.
