

When ordering the encampment positions of the Shevatim, the Torah places Shevet Reuven adjacent to the Levite family of Kehas and Shevet Yehudah adjacent to Moshe and Aharon. Rashi (on Bamidbar 3:29, 38, from Medrash Tanchuma: Bamidbar 12) comments on the major future significance of this positioning: Since Reuven was next to the family of Kehas, Dasan, Aviram and numerous other members of Shevet Reuven became deeply involved with Korach's rebellion, for Korach, who was part of the Kehas family, was a neighbor of Shevet Reuven. On the other hand, Shevet Yehudah, as well as the Shevatim of Yissachar and Zevulun, who encamped along with Yehudah, became great in Torah scholarship, as these three Shevatim encamped adjacent to Moshe, who was immersed in Torah learning.

The powerful effect of good or bad neighbors is demonstrated by these situations. However, one must ask why Rashi saw it appropriate to teach this lesson at this specific juncture, right near the beginning of Sefer Bamidbar. In fact, explaining the first pasuk of Parshas Korach (16:1), Rashi again quotes Medrash Tanchuma (P. Korach, s. 4) and invokes the same interpretation about the negative influence of bad neighbors, describing once more how Dasan, Aviram and many members of Shevet Reuven were swept up by Korach, their neighbor from the K'has family. Why does Rashi deem it necessary to feature the lesson about the influence of neighbors, seemingly prematurely, in Parshas Bamidbar? Rashi writes about it anyway in Parshas Korach, where it would appear to be of direct relevance. Why bring it up in Parshas Bamidbar, way before Korach's rebellion, especially when the lesson would be taught at the beginning of Parshas Korach anyway? (This question actually pertains to Medrash Tanchuma itself, which notes the effect of Korach on his neighbors both in Parshas Bamidbar and then again in Parshas Korach.)

One can suggest that Rashi (and the Medrash) maintains that the Torah addresses two distinct methods of one being adversely influenced by others. One is the direct method, in which a person is persuaded to do evil or observes evildoing and follows suit. Another, more subtle method, is that of an individual imbibing the negative attitudes of those around him; these attitudes grow with the individual and can impact his decisions and actions in multiple and very profound ways that were not to be predicted beforehand.

The first method of being adversely influenced by others is depicted at the beginning of Parshas Korach, where Korach campaigns against the authority and leadership of Moshe and Aharon by way of public arguments and protest. Many of those who were in the close proximity of the action, specifically Korach's aforementioned neighbors from Shevet Reuven, were swept up by it.

The second method of being adversely influenced by others is illustrated at the very formation of the tribal encampments. Dasan, Aviram and others in Shevet Reuven who joined Korach's rebellion were privy to Korach's disrespectful attitude toward Moshe and Aharon. The Ramban (on Bamidbar 16:1) notes that Korach harbored great resentment toward Moshe for a very long time prior to his rebellion, but that there was not an opportune moment for Korach to act upon his feelings until after the many incidents of

sin and punishment in the middle of Sefer Bamidbar. Based on the Ramban's explanation, we can clearly picture the wealthy, powerful and confident Korach routinely belittling Moshe and Aharon in the presence of his neighbors, and the eventual degradation of respect toward Moshe and Aharon in the eyes of those neighbors. After having been presented with such a negative image of Moshe and Aharon for an extended duration, Korach's neighbors from Shevet Reuven – including the Nasi and other heads of Sanhedrin from Reuven (v. Rashi ibid.) – were all too ready to support Korach's attempt to overthrow Moshe and Aharon. Just as we read of people in many parts of the world who are virulently anti-Semitic as a result of the nasty attitudes toward Jews to which they are exposed throughout their lives in local media, even though such people have usually never met, seen or had anything to do with Jews, so too did Korach's followers from Shevet Reuven form a total disrespect toward Moshe and Aharon as a result of daily exposure to Korach's negative attitudes toward them and his continuous malicious statements about them. This negativity festered within B'nei Reuven and naturally inclined them to join Korach's rebellion without even giving it second thoughts, as they had a sharp and crisp image of Moshe's and Aharon's abuse of power from their ongoing, long-term exposure to Korach.

Whereas Rashi in Parshas Korach teaches how on-the-spot persuasion and example are used to influence the masses to sin, Rashi in Parshas Bamidbar teaches how one's exposure to negative attitudes over time foments deleterious results ever so gradually, such that the illustrious Nasi of Shevet Reuven and hundreds of talmidei chachamim from that Shevet passively and perhaps unwittingly, yet dangerously, became full-fledged enemies of Moshe and Aharon through long-term exposure to Korach's mere words. This is precisely why Rashi (and Medrash Tanchuma) points to the influences of one's neighbors first in Parshas Bamidbar and again in Parshas Korach.

It is noteworthy that the eminence in Torah scholarship which the Tribes of Yehudah, Yissachar and Zevulun would attain from their exposure to Moshe's constant immersion in Torah is described by pesukim in Tanach that were written many centuries after Moshe had passed away. (V. Rashi from Medrash Tanchuma on Bamidbar 3:38.) Just as it took time for the full-blown hatred toward Moshe and Aharon to materialize on the part of Dasan, Aviram and the elites of Shevet Reuven, it may have taken time for positive tangible results in Torah learning to become manifest in the Shevatim who were Moshe's neighbors in the Midbar. The daily example of Moshe Rabbeinu steeped in Torah learning made an impactful impression as to how important and transformative Torah study is. This sentiment bore great fruit, as the central role of Torah learning became a major focus in the value systems and lifestyles of the Shevatim of Yehudah, Yissachar and Zevulun and yielded illustrious Torah leadership.

In his shiurim and writings, Rav Yosef Ber Soloveitchik describes how he used to watch his grandfather Reb Chaim of Brisk recite the Kiddush of Rosh Hashanah night and the Avodah of Yom Kippur with such awe, passion and fervor, and how these experiences impacted him and permanently formed his religious personality. Rav Soloveitchik also relates how, when he was a little boy, his father Reb Moshe taught talmidim in the house of Rav Elihayu Feinstein (Rav Soloveitchik's maternal grandfather) in the room

where the bed of the young Yosef Ber was situated. Daily, from his bed, did Reb Yosef Ber hear and watch his father struggle with extreme intensity and experience delight as he figured out difficult passages in the Rambam and defended the Rambam against those who argued against him, such that the young Yosef Ber would experience great elation when his father succeeded in explaining the Rambam's reasoning to defend him from his critics and would cry when his father did not succeed. Even though Reb Yosef Ber was too young to understand the issues in the Rambam that were under discussion, the intensity and devotion to Torah in his childhood home obviously yielded tremendous results years later.

As much as people can be influenced by direct persuasion and action, passive influence via attitudes is far more powerful. The Torah adjures us to be ever so cautious and avoid regular, casual exposure to those who harbor harmful attitudes, and it instructs us to become close to those whose attitudes are praiseworthy in order that they positively impact us and may cultivate within us seeds of greatness.