



Being a Good Neighbor

By Dr. Akiva Wolff

Living in this world means being a neighbor. This fundamental principle is so deep in the Jewish tradition that it is found in the very roots of our native language. According to 19th Century sage, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch: “[*The Hebrew word*] *shachan* means both to dwell, and also to be a neighbor. Therein lies the highest social ideal. In Jewish thought, to dwell means to be a neighbor. When a Jew takes a place on earth to be his dwelling place he must at the same time concede space and domain to his fellow men for a similar dwelling place.”¹

Being a good neighbor, as we will see below, is a Jewish obligation. It can also be a tremendous challenge. On the one hand, we all have physical needs and wants to satisfy in order to live in this world, especially in order to live satisfying, productive and enjoyable lives. On the other hand, much of what we do to satisfy these needs and wants can negatively impact our neighbors – everyone and everything in our environment. This is especially true in modern times, where there are so many more people, with so much technology, living on a material level beyond the dreams of our ancestors.

How are we to negotiate the challenges involved in being a good neighbor? Should we deny our own needs and wants in order to avoid causing harm? Can we just ignore the welfare of others, and put our own needs and wants first – like so many around us seem to be doing? How can we manage to live our lives within the dynamic tension of trying to satisfy both, often conflicting sides?

Fortunately, our Jewish tradition has much to teach us about how to be a good neighbor. While the scale of the challenge may have changed over time, the underlying factors remain much the same. The Torah teaches us how to balance the actions we take to satisfy our needs and wants with the often conflicting obligation to take into consideration the physical welfare of others, in a way that maximizes the welfare of both the individual and society.

As we will see, in Jewish tradition, being a good neighbor means to consider the welfare of others in all that we do. This is mainly expressed in taking preventive measures to avoid causing damage to others, and to the environment that we all share. In this article, we’ll follow chronologically how this concept was expressed and interpreted in the Jewish tradition.

The Principle of Being a Good Neighbor - Biblical sources

The main Biblical source for the principle of being a good neighbor is the classic injunction to *Love your neighbor as yourself*.² The Talmudic sage, Rabbi Akiva, called this the *overriding principle of the Torah*.³ The Talmudic sage Hillel also considered this a central tenet of Judaism.⁴ Interestingly, Hillel rephrased this concept in the negative as: *That which is hateful to you do not do to someone else*.⁵ Hillel’s rephrasing places the emphasis on avoiding causing any harm or damage to others which, as we will see below, forms the basis of the halachic (legal) requirements for proper neighborly relations. On this verse (Love your neighbor as yourself), Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch writes:

Hillel’s interpretation of this as: “That which is hateful to you don’t do to someone else” imposes complete equality of all as the guiding principle of all of our deeds, makes everyone take to heart the weal and woe of everybody else, changes selfishness...into consideration and love of one’s neighbor. The concept of “your neighbor” extends the ideas beyond the narrow confines of your fellow men to the idea of fellow creatures, so that in fact this sentence does contain the contents of the whole Torah, which indeed is nothing else, but the teaching

¹ Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, commentary on the Pentateuch, Book of Genesis, 9:27

² Leviticus 19:18

³ Babylonian Talmud, Shabbot 31a

⁴ When a proselyte asked Hillel to “teach him the entire Torah on one foot”, Hillel replied “That which is hateful to you don’t do to others, all the rest is commentary, now go and learn”.

⁵ Babylonian Talmud, Shabbot 31a.

*of avoiding everything which is contrary and hateful to the happiness and well-being of ourselves and to that of the fellow creatures who enjoy existence down here in this world.*⁶

In this commentary, Rabbi Hirsch expands the obligation of being a good neighbor beyond the conventional understanding. It is not enough to avoid harming our fellow human beings who reside in close proximity. We must also consider the welfare of other living beings on the planet. Thus, the obligation to be a good neighbor can be seen as a basis for all environmental protection. Being a good neighbor means taking good care of our environment/life support system to ensure that others can also benefit in a sustainable way.

The sages also found reference to the principle of being a good neighbor in the Biblical verse “Don’t put a stumbling block before the blind.”⁷ On this verse, Rabbi Hirsch writes: *This is a sentence of the most far-reaching import. It warns against carelessness in word or deed through which the material or spiritual well-being of our fellow man could in any way be endangered.... Thus the whole great sphere of the material and spiritual happiness of our neighbor is entrusted to our care. Our care and consideration must be exercised for the benefit of our neighbor to prevent his coming into any material or moral harm through our means.*⁸

Another Biblical verse which addresses our concept is: “[The Torah’s] ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace.”⁹ Based on this verse, the Talmud teaches that “The entire Torah is also for the sake of social harmony.”¹⁰ The bottom line in facilitating social harmony, which closely relates to good neighborly relations, is surely the injunction to “do no harm.”¹¹ As Hillel says above, “all the rest is commentary, now go and learn” -- which we will proceed to do.

Halachic Requirements for Being a Good Neighbor¹²

As we discussed in the introduction, the Torah negotiates the dynamic balance between providing people with the freedom they need to act in this world in order to meet their physical needs and wants, and protecting neighbors (society and the environment) from the damage these actions may cause.¹³ While the sages recognized that it is not possible, nor even necessarily desirable, to forbid all potential sources of damage, they required that these sources be carefully regulated to prevent or minimize any damage or harm to others.

With this value in mind, the sages of the Talmud translated the principle of not causing damage to others into concrete preventative measures that cover a wide scope of common activities.¹⁴ The second chapter of the tractate Baba Batra focuses on these preventative measures. For example, the first Mishna in this tractate states: *A person may not dig a cistern next to the cistern of his neighbor, nor a water channel, nor a cave, nor an irrigation ditch, nor a washing trough – unless he distances [the outside wall of his structure] from the outside wall [of his neighbors cistern] three*

⁶Hirsch, commentary on Leviticus 19:18

⁷ The Rema (16th century Poland) interpreted this verse (Leviticus 19:14) as referring to the principle of not causing damage to others.

⁸ Hirsch, commentary on Leviticus 19:14

⁹Proverbs 3:17. The Rosh (14th century Germany and Spain) interpreted this verse as referring to the principle of not causing damage to others. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, in his commentary on this verse writes, “*Even the paths of our own individual endeavors are shaped and guided by the spirit of the G-d given Torah towards fulfillment, without causing offense or danger to others, and with the preservation of both our outer and inner peace.*”

¹⁰ Babylonian Talmud, Gittin 59b.

¹¹ It is interesting to note that many consider the injunction to “do no harm” to be the bottom line in medicine (Hippocratic oath) and in education.

¹² It is revealing that Maimonides and others classify what would today be called “environmental legislation” under the title *Hilchot Shechanim*, or Laws of Neighborly Conduct.

¹³ The Talmud (Second Chapter of Baba Batra) cites a disagreement between Rabbi Yossi and the Sages on which side of this balance to lean. Rabbi Yossi ruled more to the side of individual freedom, while the Chochamim ruled more to the side of protecting neighbors. Interestingly, the halacha was decided in favor of Rabbi Yossi’s position. On the other hand, the Sages praised those who go beyond the halachic requirements, and take extra care to avoid harming their neighbors. For example the Sages say that a person that wants to be more spiritually elevated should be extra careful in not harming others (Babylonian Talmud, Baba Kamma, 30a).

¹⁴Although these regulations prohibit a wide range of actions, actual monetary liability for harm is only imposed when there is a direct causal relationship between the action and the harm. For examples of this, see Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra ch. 2 (contains cases and discussion that develop principle of distancing oneself from actions that might cause harm to another). See also Rabbi Moses ben Joseph Trani, Kiryat Sefer, Hilchot Shechanim [Laws of Neighbors] ch. 9. (14th century commentary on Maimonides Mishneh Torah).

*handbreadths and seals [his structure] with plaster.*¹⁵ All of the listed activities can cause damage to neighbors. For example, digging these structures can disturb a neighbor's land. Each of these structures can also allow the destructive infiltration of water into the outer walls of a neighbor's cistern.

The Mishna requires that if someone digs a water structure near his neighbor's property he must provide a suitable buffer zone – in the form of waterproofing and adequate distance to protect his neighbor's property.¹⁶ In our technologically advanced era, perhaps this concept of a 'buffer zone' can be likened to pollution control devices such as smokestack scrubbers and water treatment plants which can work more effectively in a much smaller area to reduce or eliminate damaging effects before they reach any neighbors.

Distancing Sources of Damage from and within Populated Areas¹⁷

Potential sources of damage that were a danger to public health or an unbearable intrusion on quality of life were subject to broad zoning restrictions in the Talmud. Activities that were a constant source of smoke, smell, or particulates were banned within city limits. For example, the Talmud instructs that *carcasses, graves, tanneries, and furnaces be distanced at least fifty cubits from a town.*¹⁸ Beyond providing a protective buffer zone, the Talmud also required that these activities be placed in locations where the damage would be minimized.¹⁹

For example, according to the Talmud: *One must distance a fixed threshing floor fifty cubits from a town. One may not establish a fixed threshing floor within his own property unless he [allows a buffer zone of at least] fifty cubits in every direction, and he must distance [it] from the plantings of his neighbor and from his plowed-over areas so that it should not damage [them]*²⁰. " Threshing floors, used to separate chaff from grain, produce a large amount of potentially harmful particulate matter. Therefore, threshing floors were considered a public health hazard that should be prohibited within municipal boundaries.²¹

The Talmud also regulated many domestic activities that cannot be placed outside municipal boundaries, such as ovens, outhouses, and laundry pits. For example, the Mishnah prohibits the placing of olive refuse, manure, salt, and lime against a neighbor's wall because of the corrosive properties of these materials.²²

Ovens were similarly regulated to reduce the risk of fire spreading to an upstairs or downstairs neighbor²³ by requiring four cubits of space above an oven if there is an upstairs neighbor, and a layer of plaster three handbreadths thick underneath an oven located on an upper floor.

The Talmud prohibits opening a bakery, dye shop, or cattle shed under a neighbor's storehouse because the associated heat and odor might damage the neighbor's produce.²⁴ Other Mishnaic laws include requirements to distance soaking flax

¹⁵ Mishna Baba Batra, 2:1.

¹⁶The primary measure used in Talmudic times to prevent neighbors from damaging each other was leaving a protective buffer zone between any potentially damaging activities and the neighbors. Available technology was very limited by today's standards, so the main way of preventing damage was to allow natural processes to work over however much distance was required to dilute the harmful agents to a less harmful level. Note that this is similar to the concept of "the solution to pollution is dilution" which is still in use today.

¹⁷ Several sources within this section and this article in general were informed by Ora Sheinson's comprehensive article, "Lessons from the Jewish Law of Property Rights for the Modern American Takings Debate," *Columbia Journal of Environmental Law*, 2001.

¹⁸ Mishna Baba Batra 2:9. The Tosefta on Baba Batra 1:10 adds that one must also distance furnaces fifty cubits from the city. Note that according to R. Batzri, we can rely on the opinion of today's experts to know how much of a buffer zone (in terms of physical distance or available technology) would be required to prevent damage (see footnote 9 of *Dinei Mamanot, sha'ar chamishi, Hilchot Shechanim*).

¹⁹ For example, in the land of Israel, these activities must be placed to the east of a city, where the prevailing winds would cause the least damage. The Talmud also includes complex discussion over whether the placement should change in Babylonia in light of different wind patterns. See also Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Shechanim [Laws of Neighbors]* 10:4.

²⁰ Babylonian Talmud Baba Batra 2:8

²¹ The particulate matter can cause respiratory damage to people, as well as damage to crops.

²² Mishna Baba Batra 2:1; Yad Avraham on Baba Batra at 25. The Mishna allows these activities if the wall is first protected with lime to neutralize the damage. The Mishna also prohibits placing a plow, seeds, or urine against a neighbor's wall, but does not permit whitewashing as a mitigating factor, because these substances also damage the earth, which loosens the foundations of the wall.

²³ Mishna Baba Batra 2:2.

²⁴ Mishna Baba Batra 2:3; Commentary of Rashi on Baba Batra 2:3.

from neighboring vegetable gardens,²⁵ leeks from onions²⁶ and mustard plants from domesticated bees, in order to prevent damage.²⁷

These Talmudic measures to prevent damage to neighbors were further elucidated and codified in the legal writings of post-Talmudic scholars such as Maimonides²⁸ and R. Yosef Caro.²⁹ Maimonides' classic treatise, *Mishneh Torah*, includes an entire section devoted to *Hilchot Shechanim*, or "Laws of Neighbors."

While the Sages were concerned about all kinds of damages, they particularly focused on preventing four categories of damages: smoke, bad odors, dust and vibrations.³⁰ These damages were considered especially harmful and difficult to tolerate.

The industrial revolution, beginning in Western Europe in the 18th century, and subsequently spreading to much of the world, brought with it massive industrial facilities that were often the source of some, if not all four, of the Sages' categories of damages. Unfortunately, during this time period, the awareness and actions necessary for industries to fulfill the requirements to be good neighbors usually lagged far behind.

In the words of contemporary scholar, Rabbi Ezra Batzri, one-time head of the Rabbinical Court in Jerusalem: *And behold, this law [of preventing damages], to our great sorrow is disregarded and many people suffer damage, and even have their lives shortened, (may G-d protect us), as the experts inform us, and we should sound the alarm on this. Especially responsible are those that are involved in community affairs, who should not be silent on this matter. New factories in particular, should be inspected carefully to know what type of damages they are likely to cause to the community and factories should not be permitted to be established until they are known to be observing the law of distancing of damages properly, and to have all the necessary devices for ensuring that their wastes will not damage the environment.*³¹

Rabbi Batzri emphasizes the need for governing authorities to ensure the proper regulation of polluting industries, and bemoans the fact that this has been so disregarded in modern times. In fact, corporations, large and small, also have the obligation of being good neighbors, by preventing damage to others. Nevertheless, as Rabbi Batzri writes, compliance with these obligations has all too often been wanting.

It is interesting to note that most of the world has now adopted environmental legislation that echoes the wisdom of the Sages in the matter of being a good neighbor. The business world is also, increasingly, waking up to their obligation to act as good neighbors. There is growing recognition that being a good neighbor promotes financial sustainability as well as ecological sustainability. For example, writer Daniel Goleman, in his book *Ecological Intelligence*, discusses at length how several major international corporations have learned that their continued success will depend on their being better neighbors, and paying more attention to reducing their negative impacts to their neighbors.³²

Both government and business can no longer hide from the fact that it is far more expensive to repair the damage inflicted by bad neighbors than it does to be a good neighbor and prevent the problems in the first place. For example, in a 2003 report on the cost-effectiveness of pollution prevention, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency found that "in almost every case, these efforts have not only led to environmental improvement, but have been cost-effective, saving millions of dollars per year." The report showed a high benefit to cost ratio for pollution prevention assistance programs, and reported that over a two year period between 1998 and 2000, there were six dollars of pollution prevention savings for every dollar

²⁵ Mishna Baba Batra 2:10. Flax must be soaked for several days before it can be processed into linen. The soaking process releases toxins into the water, which might then be absorbed by any plants growing in the vicinity. See Yad Avraham on Baba Batra.

²⁶ Ibid. See also Commentary of Maimonides on Baba Batra 2:10 (which explains that leeks diminish the sharpness of onions that are grown near them).

²⁷ Ibid. (which explains that when bees eat mustard, their honey becomes pungent, and is ruined).

²⁸ See *Mishneh Torah*, chapters 9-11 of *Hilchot Shechanim*

²⁹ See for example chapter 156 of the *Shulchan Aruch*

³⁰ *Shulchan Aruch*, Choshen Mishpot 155:36 states: "All four of these damages [smoke, bad odors, dust [particulates] and vibrations [which includes groundshaking and, it would seem, loud noises which are also a form of intense vibrations] are exempt from chazaka. Even if a neighbor tolerated them for a number of years, he can always change his mind and force the owner [of the source of these damages] to distance them from him."

³¹ *Dinei Mamanot* by Rabbi Ezra Batzri, , chapter 2, pg 376, footnote 9

³² Goleman, Daniel (2009), *Ecological Intelligence*, Broadway Books, NY.

invested by the Federal Government.³³ Similarly, according to an international study on the state of the world's environmental health, the 2005 Millennium Ecosystem report, "the cost of [ecosystem] restoration is generally extremely high compared with the cost of preventing the degradation of the ecosystem. Not all services can be restored, and heavily degraded services may require considerable time for restoration."³⁴

How to Do It

Practically speaking, how can each of us better fulfill the Jewish obligation to be a good neighbor? As a general guideline, we could begin by trying to stop and think before doing anything that may have a negative impact on other people or on the environment we all share. If there may be negative impact, we could try to do whatever possible to prevent it. Where some negative impact is unavoidable, we need to judge (preferably with the assistance of qualified experts) whether the likely potential benefits of the action outweigh the potential costs.³⁵ If we do carry out the action we need to do everything we can to minimize the harm. This is true on every level, individual and communal.

If we take the time to consider the effects of our actions on our neighbors, we may find ourselves acting differently in the world. Those who engage in activities which can be especially damaging, such as the owners and managers of polluting industries, need to be particularly careful in observing their obligations to be good neighbors. For most of us, being a good neighbor may include using energy-conserving lighting and appliances. This can help reduce the damage to our neighbors, however far away, caused by extracting, transporting and burning oil and coal to generate energy. We could be more careful not to litter the streets and hiking trails we share with our neighbors. We may even find ourselves walking, or using public transportation more often, rather than driving. This can give us more of a sense of connection with our neighbors, while helping to improve the quality of the air we all breathe. There are so many little actions we can take to benefit our neighbors and to help build a more sustainable world for us all.

In today's world, it is easier for us to see how we are all neighbors on the same small planet. We can more easily understand how so many of our activities affect our neighbors and how our neighbors activities affect us. Together, we face mega-issues, such as global climate change, where each of us may be contributing to a problem that affects not only us, but also our future generations. More than ever, the Jewish principle of being a good neighbor deserves attention in today's world. Proper observance of this important principle could save many precious lives, significantly reduce human misery, save billions of dollars, and contribute greatly to the tikkun olam that we were all placed here to accomplish.

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Dr. Akiva Wolff is a therapist/coach/consultant helping people improve the quality of their lives and their environment. He has a doctorate from the University of Leiden, in the Netherlands, and M.A. and M.S. degrees from Boston University and the University of North Texas respectively. He previously served as the director of the environmental responsibility unit of the Jerusalem Center for Business Ethics and taught environmental management at the Jerusalem College of Technology.

³³ United States Environment Protection Agency, *An Ounce of Pollution Prevention is Worth Over 167 Billion Pounds of Cure: A Decade of Pollution Prevention Results 1990 – 2000*, by the National Pollution Prevention Roundtable, (Washington, 2003); available at: http://www.p2.org/p2results/2418_historyfinal.pdf.

³⁴ Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, *Ecosystems and Human Well-Being: Synthesis* (Washington D.C., 2005), p. 23.

³⁵ We need to keep in mind that according to Rivash, (Rabbi Yitzhak bar Sheshet, Spain-Algeria, 14th century), "One may not save his own property from damage at the expense of causing his fellow damage." (Rivash, Responsum 196)