



## Being a Good Neighbor

By Dr. Akiva Wolff

Living in this world means being a neighbor. This fundamental principle is found in the very roots of the Hebrew language. According to Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch: “*[The Hebrew word] shachan means both to dwell, and also to be a neighbor... 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.*”

Being a good neighbor is a Jewish obligation. It can also be a tremendous challenge. We all have physical needs and wants to satisfy in order to live in this world, but much of what we do to satisfy these needs and wants can negatively impact our neighbors. This is especially true today, with so many people, with so much technology, living on a material level beyond the dreams of our ancestors.

The main Biblical source for the principle of being a good neighbor is the classic injunction to *Love your neighbor as yourself* (Leviticus 19:18). The Talmudic sages Rabbi Akiva and Hillel considered this a central tenet of Judaism. Interestingly, Hillel rephrased this concept in the negative as: *That which is hateful to you do not do to someone else*. Hillel’s rephrasing places the emphasis on avoiding causing any harm or damage to others, which forms the basis of the halachic (legal) requirements for proper neighborly relations.

The sages of the Talmud translated the principle being a good neighbor into concrete measures. Activities that endanger public health or quality of life were distanced from populated areas. For example, the Talmud instructs that *carcasses, graves, tanneries, and furnaces be distanced at least fifty cubits from a town*. The Talmud also regulated many domestic activities such as the placing of ovens, outhouses, and laundry pits to minimize harm to others.

The Talmudic measures for preventing damage were further elucidated and codified in the legal writings of Rabbinic scholars such as Maimonides. Maimonides' classic treatise, Mishneh Torah includes an entire section devoted to Hilchot Shechanim, or “Laws of Neighbors.

The Sages put special emphasis on regulating four types of damages (smoke, bad odors, dust and loud noise or vibration) which were considered especially difficult for neighbors to tolerate. The industrial revolution brought with it facilities that cause some if not all of these damages. Unfortunately, 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: *this law [of good neighborship], to our great sorrow is disregarded and many people suffer damage, and even have their lives shortened... 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.*

Most of the world has now adopted environmental legislation that echoes the wisdom of the Sages in being a good neighbor. The business world is also increasingly aware of their obligation to act as good neighbors. It is far more expensive to repair the damage inflicted by bad neighbors than to be a good neighbor and prevent the problems in the first place. Being a good neighbor promotes financial sustainability as well as ecological sustainability.

Being a good neighbor applies on every level. Owners and managers of polluting industries, because of their potential impact, need to be especially careful in doing all they can to prevent causing damage to their neighbors. For most of us, being a good neighbor may include using energy-conserving 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 careful not to litter the streets and hiking trails we share with our neighbors. We may even find ourselves walking, or using public transportation, rather than driving everywhere. 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.

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 tikkun olam.

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