

The Backfire Effect

Sukkos Day 1

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I remember it like it was yesterday. I was in ninth grade, and it was right after Yom Kippur. I was in the basement of Congregation Beth Haknesses HaChodosh in Rochester, New York, the shul of my youth, and I was manning the Arba Minim sale of the shul. A young mother came in with her toddler daughter, and the Rabbi, who was there as well, engaged the little girl in conversation. “Who is going to be with you for Sukkos? Will your Abba and Ima be there?” She said, “Yes.” “Who else? Will your sister be there?” Excitedly, she said yes again; she loved her sister. “What about Hashem? Will Hashem be in the Sukkah with you?” At that moment, to everyone’s surprise, the girl began bawling. She didn’t quite understand yet what Hashem is (and who really does?) and she thought the Rabbi was talking about some creepy intruder! I tell you this story because I remember it well, though it is a measure of how old I sometimes feel when I tell you that the young protagonist is now a mother of four. I tell it to you as well because, throughout the holiday, we invite mystical, supernatural guests into our Sukkah and we, too, don’t quite understand what it means.

Today is the first day of Sukkos, and last night, we began to invite the seven spiritual guests, the Ushpizin, into our Sukkah- the people known in our tradition as the *shiv’at haro’im*, the seven shepherds of the Jewish people. Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov,

Moshe, Aharon, Yosef and David will all “stop by,” in some sense, on their spiritual Sukkah hop. If this is such an important part of the Sukkos experience, it behooves us to ask a simple question: Why? What is the connection between our forefathers and the Sukkah?

This morning, I'd like to share an explanation with you, one offered by the Sfas Emes, Rav Yehuda Aryeh Leib Alter, the second Gerrer Rebbe. The purpose of leaving the Sukkah is known to us- Chazal tell us that it is meant to teach us (Sukkah 5a)-

בסכת תשבו שבעת ימים - אמרה תורה כל שבעת הימים צא מדירת קבע ושב בדירת עראי

On Sukkos, we leave our permanent dwelling and establish our primary residence outside it, in a temporary residence. Who was the person who most embodied this idea? It was Avraham, the first of the Ushpizin, who was told by God, לך לך מארצך, וּמִמְלוּדוֹתְךָ - leave everything that is familiar to you: Your land, your culture, your birthplace, your family and follow me to a land I will show you. The purpose of Avraham's test was to encourage him to break free of what was familiar to him and try and see life from a different perspective. For Avraham, it was the perspective of blind faith, which he had never placed in another person and certainly not in a deity. Stepping outside the confines of what is familiar to us and what represents our comfort zone certainly is challenging, but that is what Avraham's visit in the Sukkah is about. By leaving our usual homes and entering an environment that is unfamiliar to us, we are challenged to look at the world around us from a perspective that is unfamiliar as well. In today's political climate especially, people speak with shrill, strident voices on

subjects about which they are completely certain and are often ill informed. We are completely unwilling or unable to see the other side, becoming the embodiment of Winston Churchill's definition of a fanatic- someone who can't change his mind and won't change the subject. Whether we are arguing about Jewish philosophy, the direction of Modern Orthodoxy, communal politics, Obamacare, Trump vs. Hillary, proper technique for smoking meat or the Dallas Cowboys offensive line, nothing will sway us from our opinion once we have formed one. Consider the insanely offensive, patently anti Semitic statement issued by the wastrels at UNESCO this week, disavowing any connection between the Jewish people and the Temple Mount. No amount of archaeological evidence and no part of the voluminous historical record that exists will convince these who carry water for the most viciously anti semitic nations on the planet, that we have any claim to this holy site, and it does not help that the Waqf routinely destroys evidence. It is to be hoped that we don't hold such opinions on this issue, but in general, no matter what facts come to light about any subject about which people hold an opinion, nothing will sway people once they have formed one. Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, researchers at Dartmouth University, have termed this the "backfire effect." To quote their scholarly words, it is

...The process by which people counter argue preference-incongruent information and bolster their preexisting views. If people counter argue unwelcome information vigorously enough, they may end up with 'more attitudinally congruent information in mind than before the debate,' which in turn

leads them to report opinions that are more extreme than they otherwise would have had."

This is a fancy way of saying what US Representative Earl Landgrebe said during the Watergate hearings- "Don't confuse me with the facts!" The more information we learn that runs counter to a previously held opinion, the more likely we are to double down and hold on even more tenaciously to that same opinion. Going out into the Sukkah is a challenge to take our mind out in the open as well- to try to see issues from the perspective of people with whom we disagree, or from the perspective of people with differing life experiences than our own, and even to see people in a different light than the narrative we have already told ourselves about them. If we are able to do this, we will truly be students of Avraham, who was able to change his perspective on the world entirely. Let us be open to the possibilities of opening our minds- if we change our perspective, it may change our lives, and our minds, too.