

There's an old NFTY song that goes, "Wherever you go, there's always someone Jewish." Well, for the past two Shabbatot, and over these Yamim Noraim, I have experienced this firsthand, having had the distinct pleasure of serving as the rabbi in a small congregation in Aiken, South Carolina. Aiken is situated smack dab in the middle of the Bible Belt and not much else.

Surprisingly, though, there are a handful of Jews living there, spread out inconspicuously between the churches that literally dot every street corner. These South Carolina Jews, despite being few in number, showered me with an abundance of truly hamische Southern hospitality, so I soon felt comfortable enough to ask my hosts the big question that was on mind; what on earth were Jews doing in a backwater Baptist town in the South?

I posed the question to several different congregants, yet each time, I received strikingly similar answers.

"Well, my great-grandpappy must've been some sort of traveling salesman, and I guess when he got to Aiken, the horse just died." I have a feeling these stories may have been apocryphal and perhaps just told for my benefit as the visiting Yankee rabbi, because I did hear one completely different version of the story of how Jews got to Aiken.

The unofficial Jewish historian of the town, an aged yet lovely Southern belle who was known to all as Miss Doris, gave me a very surprising answer. Miss Doris told me that the first Jewish arrivals in Aiken were not merchants or peddlers at all. Believe it or not, they were Deep South Kibbutzniks. These primarily Russian Jewish immigrants, having somehow landed in South Carolina after coming to the States, decided to try their hands at farming and built themselves a little socialist, agricultural commune called Happyville. Yes, Happyville. Unfortunately, little remains of the failed experiment that was Happyville. There are just a few letters from a correspondence and one black and white picture of some very *unhappy* looking Jews holding pitchforks and spades.

A segment from one of the remaining letters, written by a Happyville kibbutznik in the last days of the commune, tells it all. "It appears," the letter closes, "that we Jews were just not meant to be farmers."

Of course, this has not always been the case with the Jewish people. Sukkot is a harvest festival, also known as Chag Ha-Asif, the Festival of Ingathering.

Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, Jewish farmers took this opportunity after the harvest to offer God thanks for all that had been provided, and for the blessing of having grown enough crops to supply food for their families and even their community. Yet over the course of the centuries, the forces of history have driven Jews away from agriculture and towards a more urban existence.

Cities, as we know, are centers of great marketplaces where a tremendous volume of exchange takes place. Yet this kind of exchange is not limited to financial trade; the city is also a marketplace of ideas, a place where people are able to come together and coexist in relative harmony, despite any differences they may have.

Because we are so densely packed in, as Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi contends, we have a greater and more immediate effect on each other: density breeds more frequent contact. In the city people can prosper and develop, mingle and learn about others lives and practices, and since this process allows for more liberal ideas to flourish, we “different” ones can live without much fear. It is in the city that we feel safest, that we can have a true Jewish community and all that it provides. Urban living has been the catalyst that has allowed Jewish culture and wisdom to flourish and expand for many generations.

After the Industrial Revolution, an increasing number of Jews became exposed to a new living situation that emerged both in Europe and in this country, one that would affect them and all Western civilization drastically. This was the birth of suburbia. Western European and American Jews living in the late twentieth century were privy to greater tolerance, prosperity, and opportunities than they had ever seen in generations before. So with this increased prosperity, plus the rise and spread of modern technology, in particular the automobile, new communities started to emerge, neighborhoods that were neither city nor country, neither urban nor rural: suburbia. Unlike much rural living, where people are spread out over great distances, one can still have a real Jewish community in the suburbs, yet people aren't forced to live on top of each other as they are in the city.

In theory, it's a wonderful combination of the best parts of both city and country life, but, and I say this as a born and bred suburbanite myself, something happens to folks living in suburbia. The world becomes suddenly very small. We tend to live in areas with essentially the same kind of people, yet still, we build fences and walls, put in security systems and always lock our doors. We clearly define what is mine and what is yours. Safe suburban houses become like little bubbles, one bubble to each family. We don't have to even mingle with others when we leave our houses-everyone has his own family car, at the very least. We interact with others at school, at work, at synagogue, but only for our appointed hours or tasks, then again it's the retreat home: each person to herself, each family to itself. We return home and again lock our doors, set the alarm, and withdraw from the community.

This withdrawal takes place on a number of levels: in terms of the community from other communities, then with the individual family from the community at large. The withdrawal takes place even within the family. We see now with the advent of personal computers, video games, and television sets in every room, there are diversions that divide us even within the family, partitioning us into even smaller units. In essence, we have become conditioned to retreat into our own safe, small, private places, away from each other, away from the community, away from the workings of the outside world.

Sukkot, then, the time where we leave our secure homes and go even just as far as into our own backyards, can actually be a real retreat from the ordinary. Despite being Zman Simchateinu, the time of our joy, leaving the safety of our homes can be a somewhat daunting prospect. The Torah and Jewish tradition ask us to leave the protection of our homes and build fragile, makeshift structures to stay in.

This is not just meant on a pshat level of leaving our homes, but it is a metaphor as well, a commandment to go outside of ourselves. Leaving our homes, our safety nets, ourselves, to go out in the sukkah can then be unnerving. Will storm winds blow our walls down? Will the borders we've so carefully secured, the fences we've built-be breached?

Hopefully, yes! This is what Sukkot is all about. The sukkah is anything but a bubble. Your sukkah may be the one you built in your backyard, or perhaps the one here at the synagogue, but it is not for you alone. When the Israelites were wandering in the desert,

they too had sukkot, huts for protection, but we don't know if each family had one, or if perhaps they were more like Bedouin tents, where everyone could be together under one roof with open walls.

What we do know is that the sukkah walls are permeable. Like a city, they allow new people and new ideas to flow in and out. We welcome our friends and neighbors into the sukkah, people with whom we might never before have sat around a fancy dining room table, but with whom we can now sit under the elegance of the open sky. Sukkot is the time for ushpizin, guests, perhaps ancestors whom we symbolically invite in, or true strangers and newcomers to our community and lives from whom we can learn. In the Sukkah, we act as if we were Abraham, we welcome guests into our new, fragile worlds, knowing nothing about them, yet giving them all we have to offer. It is a frightening thing to let others in, to allow ourselves to be vulnerable enough to let down our guard, to put down the goods we've earned and collected long enough to open our arms.

We suburbanites, who have so much that we are privileged to call our own, are called upon to use this season of rejoicing to invite others into our lives. We allow ourselves to be fragile and permeable, like the sukkah walls, to see what new ideas and new people we can let in. We venture outside of our homes and our safe places to engage in the mitzvah of hachnasat orchim, just as Abraham did, inviting new people into our lives and even into the safe confines of our homes and families.

Perhaps Happytown, the South Carolina kibbutz, didn't work because Jews weren't meant to be farmers, or maybe it was just that the Jewish community wasn't strong enough to make it last. But we, here in Long Island in this vibrant, powerful Jewish community, have so many of the chances that those folks did not. In our suburbanite paradise, we can actually bring some sort of Happytown to fruition, by opening our arms and our hearts to the members of the community and beyond.

Then we can truly call Sukkot Zman Simchateinu, because our mitzvah of living as Jews and welcoming in the stranger will have been accomplished. This Sukkot, may we all go outside of ourselves and our homes and let others in. It may be difficult, but in the end, God willing, even in the suburbs, Sukkot can be a Chag Haasif, a time of ingathering in which every one of us will have been enriched.