

A Place to Begin Again

A first-night Sukkos drush

I want to tell you a story tonight, and then ask a question about it. At the end, which moment was the turning point? If we listen for the miraculous moment, we may miss the one that matters most to us.

The man nobody recognized

The account begins in Krakow. A respected father had four daughters, each married to a Torah scholar. The first three sons-in-law were celebrated for their learning. The youngest daughter's husband, Reb Nosson Nota Schapiro, was also a great scholar, but he concealed much of his spiritual life. He would later become known as the Megaleh Amukos. At the time, even his three brothers-in-law did not recognize his stature.

Every night, Reb Nosson Nota rose at midnight for Tikkun Chatzos. He instructed his wife that no one must enter his room then. His brothers-in-law heard of this warning and took it for arrogance. One night they hid beneath his bed to discover what he did there. As he prayed, they heard a song of overwhelming beauty, and all three died. He had not known that they were there. The household was plunged into grief: three widows, children without fathers, and a man tormented by what had happened in his room.

Reb Nosson Nota had warned them, but he nevertheless felt a burden of responsibility. With his wife's consent he chose exile as his path of teshuvah. He left Krakow in beggar's clothes and joined the wandering poor. His father-in-law searched for him and sent letters describing him to the rabbis of other towns. For weeks he travelled without revealing who he was.

The splendid sukkah

As Sukkos approached, Reb Nosson Nota worried about the mitzvah. A traveller might have grounds to be exempt, but he wanted to sit in a sukkah and take the Four Species. In Lublin, an official arranged lodging for him with a wealthy, learned householder. The host had a beautiful sukkah, precious vessels, and fine Four Species. On the first night the guest recited Kiddush with great feeling and shared wonderful Torah insights. The host was delighted. Later, the guest asked to sleep in the sukkah, and the host agreed, reminding him to secure the door because of the valuables within.

In the morning, the door stood open and the valuable vessels were gone. Reb Nosson Nota had noticed nothing. The host, distraught at the loss, accused him of helping the thieves. He struck him three times and drove him out. Word spread to the beis midrash; there, too, people called him a thief and turned him away. Think of where he stood: already away from his wife and home, now turned out of the sukkah and the place where he hoped to pray. He fled toward the edge of town.

The sukkah at the edge of town

At the first cottage he approached, a widow opened the door and took him in. He prayed in her home. He made the blessing over an esrog that was only just fit for use. She gave him food in a sukkah that was itself only barely valid.

The account spends little time on her. We are not told her name or what she knew about the accusation. We are told what she did: she received the wandering man and gave him a place in her sukkah.

What happened afterward

The story does not end there. The rabbi of Lublin had received one of the father-in-law's letters. When Reb Nosson Nota was brought before him, the rabbi recognized the missing scholar and heard why he had gone into exile. He also heard that the guest had been absorbed in his learning and knew nothing of the theft. The rabbi told the host that the man he had struck was innocent. The host asked forgiveness. According to the account, a harsh decree then befell him; Reb Nosson Nota forgave him, prayed on his behalf, and blessed him that the stolen property would return so he could earn a living.

After Sukkos, Reb Nosson Nota took these events as the sign for which he had waited: his exile and teshuvah had reached their end. He went home. In time, Krakow accepted him as its rav.

Which moment changed the story?

We could answer: the rabbi's letter. It revealed who this stranger really was. We could answer: the return to Krakow, when a man who had hidden his greatness was recognized by the city. Those are extraordinary moments. But what happened between his expulsion and his vindication?

A widow opened her door. Her sukkah could barely satisfy the requirements, yet it gave him what the splendid sukkah no longer would: somewhere to sit as a Jew on Sukkos. He entered before anyone cleared his name. That small moment makes it possible to hear a teaching of the Sfas Emes in an entirely different way.

What does it mean to have no place?

The Sfas Emes asks why Sukkos comes immediately after Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. His answer is startling: baalei teshuvah have no place of their own, and HaKadosh Baruch Hu gives them a place: the sukkah. What does that mean? Surely a person who did teshuvah still has a house and a chair.

In his earlier teaching, the Sfas Emes says that after the cleansing of Yom Kippur we still must choose Hashem's guidance. We realize that we cannot establish our standing by ourselves; we shelter in His shade. In the later teaching he adds that the change given to us through Hashem's kindness can still face accusation. We have begun again, but our new beginning is tender. The sukkah is the protection Hashem gives it.

That is the "place": room in Hashem's presence to live the new life we have undertaken. A baal teshuvah cannot point to an unbroken record and say, "I have earned my standing." He knows what he regrets. He knows that a sincere resolution has yet to be lived through ordinary days. But Hashem does not ask him to wait outside until his future has been proven. Hashem invites him under the schach now, so that the good within him can come into action.

The Sfas Emes says this even more directly in a neighboring teaching: when a person has an inner point of good but cannot yet bring it fully into the world, Hashem helps him. And in a later Sukkos teaching he describes this closeness as more than a

pardon: on Yom Kippur, healing; on Sukkos, freely given love. The person who returns is given somewhere to stand, and from there, somewhere to go.

What the widow teaches us

Reb Nosson Nota was innocent of the theft. Nor are we being asked to decide that he was legally responsible for the deaths of his brothers-in-law; the story tells us how he understood his own burden. That distinction matters. The connection to the Sfas Emes is his experience of being unable to claim a place: he had left his home seeking atonement, and now people called him a thief. The widow's sukkah sheltered him before the truth came to light.

There are two ways to hear this on the first night of Sukkos. When we enter our own sukkah after Yom Kippur, we may still hear the voice that asks whether our teshuvah will last. The Sfas Emes says that Hashem gives it shelter while we learn to live it. And when another person has fallen out of place, we can give him room to take the next step. We need not know the end of his story before we make room for him in ours.

On Yom Kippur we ask to be forgiven. On Sukkos Hashem gives that forgiveness somewhere to live.

The great scholar's name was restored, and he returned to Krakow. But before any of that, there was a small sukkah at the edge of Lublin. Perhaps that was the moment to remember tonight: when he had nowhere to go, somebody opened a door. May we know how to enter the place Hashem gives us, and how to make a place for someone else.

Sources and textual notes

Story: "Devekus baSukkah," in the five supplied Hebrew scans, Ma'asei Tzaddikim, pp. 598-602; the printed account attributes the tale to Sippurei Niflaos. The narrative here is condensed for oral delivery and follows those scans; the spiritual interpretation is the drush's reading, not an ending stated by the printed story.

Sfas Emes, Sukkos 5635, essay 2: the return after Yom Kippur, choosing divine guidance, and taking shelter in His shade. <https://sfasemes.org/devarim/sukkot/5635-2>

Sfas Emes, Sukkos 5636, essay 1: baalei teshuvah have no place of their own; Hashem grants the sukkah, which protects their new beginning from accusation. <https://sfasemes.org/devarim/sukkot/5636-1>

Sfas Emes, Sukkos 5635, essay 3, on the inner point of good that Hashem helps bring into action; Sukkos 5652, essay 1, on Yom Kippur's healing and Sukkos's freely given love. <https://sfasemes.org/devarim/sukkot/5635-3> ; <https://sfasemes.org/devarim/sukkot/5652-1>