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INSULARITY



BUBBLES

It's a good thing

Last week, I had the opportunity to take part in an event that was quite unique. Beth Medrash Govoha, where I learn and work, organized a two-day Yarchei Kallah, which they held in a beautiful hotel in Princeton, New Jersey. While most people would probably not primarily associate Princeton with intensive Torah study, the almost 400 participants created an atmosphere that could only be described as an authentic yeshivah experience, adhering to regular *sidrei Hayeshivah* for a 48-hour stretch.

For the people who were in the hotel ballroom, nothing else existed. It was as if they were in a bubble.

'Bubble' is a word that has been bandied around a lot, of late. The inexplicable election of President Trump has left the political world in search of answers. Not only does the question of how he got himself elected beg for an answer, but how it was that most people didn't see it coming needs an explanation as well.

Of course, introspection is always helpful when facing challenges such as these, but the avoidance of introspection — especially among the "ruling class" — is a phenomenon which is almost as sure as death and taxes.

Former President Barack Obama skirted all responsibility for the rise of Trumpism, instead blaming it on the bubbles Trump voters live in. In his farewell address, Obama said that "for too many ... it's become safer to retreat into ... bubbles ... surrounded by people who look like us and share the same political outlook and never challenge our assumptions." These bubble-bound people, he says, won't admit that their "opponent might be making a fair point, and that science and reason matter," which is why, he presumes, they ended up voting for Trump.

While the conventional wisdom is to shun bubbles, nobody puts more effort into maintaining a bubble than *frum* Jews. We will only live in specific communities, send our children to very specific schools, and we get our news from specific sources. We embrace the bubble. We don't seek to thin bubbles; we seek to thicken them.

The Rambam (*Hilchos Deios* 6:1) extolls the virtues of bubbles, writing that man is naturally drawn "b'deiosav u'w'maasav achar reivav v'chaveirav v'noheg b'minhag anshei medinaso — in both thought and in deed after his friends and associates, and to act in the customs of the local people." It is for that reason, he teaches us, that if the people in one's town are lacking, "yelech l'makom she'anashav tzad-

dikim v'nohagim b'derech tovim — one should move to a place where the people are righteous and act in ways which are good."

That is the reason, explains Harav Meir Tzvi Bergman (*Shaarei Orah*, Vol. 1, "Vayishlach") why Rav Yosi ben Kisma (*Avos* 6), despite being offered untold riches to do so, declined to move from a city he defined as being full of wise men and *talmidei chachamim* to a different place. He couldn't have used the money he was being offered to teach Torah in this new town because of one condition his interlocutor put before him. "*Shetadur imanu binkomeinu* — you should live with us in our place." They wanted that Rav Yosi should live in their town, not that he should create a bubble for them to grow in — and that, he refused to do.

The reality is that everyone lives in a bubble. All people interact mostly with their own neighbors and their own circle of friends, and their worldview is shaped by how they see the world — from that perspective.

Even Obama had to concede, in his exit interview with ABC's George Stephanopoulos, that he himself, as president, also lived, to some extent, in a bubble. And while Obama certainly understated the extent to which he lived in a bubble, at least he recognizes that it exists. But those (primarily in the media) who seized on Obama's defining the unenlightenedness of Trump voters as being the product of their being in a bubble don't recognize the bubble of their own.

That is what is key. Bubbles will always exist, and are important, even; but what's vital is to recognize this as a matter of fact. *Frum* Jews who live in our carefully constructed bubbles are very aware of this; we are, after all, a people who, as Bilaam so cogently said (*Bamidbar* 23:9), "*levadad yishkon* — dwells alone," and we are aware and very cognizant of this fact.

But it's fair to say that the pejorative use of "in a bubble" should be reserved for those who live in a bubble but are unaware of this fact. For all the others, who live in communities which are either religious or in "flyover country," living in the bubble is something that ought to be embraced.

And for two days in Princeton, the idea of the bubble was reclaimed once again. The participants, who usually need to spend time outside the bubble, embraced the opportunity to be entirely ensconced in the bubble that is the walls of a *beis medrash*. Aware as they are of the world outside it, they still wanted to be back inside it. Because the bubble, and everything inside it, is good. ■

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