

## Changing the Algorithm

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I want to spend a couple of moments talking about **The Algorithm**.

If that sounds ominous, it's because it is.

The social media algorithm is an invisible set of rules deciding what you see and what you don't. The Algorithm watches what we like, where we pause our scrolling, what we search for... and then it quietly curates our reality. It curates our reality in such a way that is designed to keep us scrolling, engaged.

Everything you watch, everything you click, everything you comment on, or simply linger over, teaches The Algorithm more about you, so that it can tailor itself to you. And the more it knows you, the more it personalizes itself to you, the more it can start to SHAPE you.

And we don't even realize it, because we don't notice The Algorithm. We think it's just a kind of mirror. TikTok's and X's For You Pages, Instagram's Explore page, YouTube's Shorts feed, Facebook Reels, but it's a sophisticated metric, calculated your watch times and engagement histories, so that it can perfectly spoon you the content that will keep you addicted and wanting more. And further, keep you inside a bubble. Where everything validates and enhances your own opinion, causing us to be less open-minded, less curious about the experience of people outside that bubble.

But we are so deep in it. There's a story of a deer standing by a stream, and two fish are swimming by. The deer says to the fish, "How's the water?" One fish looks at the other and says, "What's water?" The other shrugs.

But I want to tell you something that The Scouts here already know, and that Torah taught us long, long ago.

The Algorithm doesn't actually control you unless you let it. In fact... You. Control. The Algorithm. If you are Neo in the Matrix, right now let me be your oracle. You can control The Algorithm. You don't have to let it tell you what to buy, what to believe.

A couple of weeks ago I decided to do a little test. I decided to change The Algorithm. I started searching videos on Mongolian Cattle herders. I researched Mongolian cattle herding clothing. I learned that they wear a colorful tunic called a Deel, and felt-lined leather boots called gutal. I looked up handmade gutal on Etsy and created a "saved folder" of these special boots. I looked up tips and tutorial for training herding dogs on YouTube. I followed Mongolian farmers, chefs, and craftspeople on Instagram and TikTok.

Soon my feeds were filled with Mongolian dance, and incredible Mongolian music, sweeping vista, hunting with eagles. Hashtag Nomadic Life. Hashtag reindeer. I clicked like on every post about Mongolia that came up, and liked nothing else. Mongolian archery. Amazing. Mongolian horsemanship... It's like ballet. Mongolian beef. I'll have to try it. Mongolian hair cutting ceremonies. February 18 is the Mongolian new year, and by the way that date is different every year because they follow a lunar calendar. Their new year is called Tsagaan Sar, which means White Moon, and it's a time to reset, forgive, and start anew, like Yom Kippur. I was seeing tours of Mongolian gers, which is a kind of yurt, and eventually I started getting a lot of yaks on my feed. How to milk a yak, how to make yak butter, yak facts, textiles made from yak, yak jokes – like what do you call an animal know-it-all? A brain-i-yak! And I liked them all, made comments, let them play on repeat. More and more yaks. The Algorithm was fully in my control! I was no longer a middle aged female rabbi who likes interior design, bats, and polymer clay! The Algorithm now thinks I am a rugged homesteader with a yak farm. And then The Algorithm introduced me to a famous yak farmer Mingma Sherpa in Nepal who became a porter on Everest, summiting many times, which led me to Lhakpa Sherpa, a female Nepalese mountain climber who summited Mount Everest ten times, the most by any woman in the world, and who now works at Whole Foods in West Hartford Connecticut, and I followed her on Instagram and fully plan to go on one of the Appalachian hikes she leads.

The Algorithm doesn't actually control you unless you let it. You. Control. The Algorithm.

Step outside your algorithm.

Linger on the unfamiliar. Seek voices you don't usually hear.

Better yet, put the screens down altogether, and see what opens up.

Rabbi Jonathan Sachs once said: "Long ago, in a lonely desert, at the foot of a mountain in Sinai, God entrusted a small, fractured, obstinate people with nothing particularly to distinguish them, but he gave them an algorithm- it was called Torah.

"This algorithm turned them into the most remarkable, tenacious, fate defying people the world has ever known!"

He shares ways that the algorithm of Torah can impact your life including strengthening your relationships, strengthening your discipline and willpower, work-life balance through Shabbat, giving you an attitude of gratitude, a moral code, a sense of identity.

And similarly, the members of Scouting America here know it too, how important it is to break free of the digital algorithm, to break out of our bubble, open outward, be responsible for our actions, expand our expertise, and appreciate the gifts each has to offer.

On Shabbat, we log out of one algorithm and log into another. One that doesn't calculate how long we linger, but how deeply we live.

May this Shabbat help us become a little more aware, a little more awake, and a little more free.

Shabbat Shalom, or as they say in Mongolia, “Bayartai” (*bar-tye*) which means go with joy.