

Yes

No. No, no, no, no.

Last year I had the rare opportunity to spend a Friday night at another synagogue. As I walked through the front doors and prepared to enter the sanctuary, I was greeted by a large poster with the 10 Commandments of this community's sacred space:

No cell phones

No talking

No food

No drink

No gum or candy

No inappropriate attire

No coats. No umbrellas. No bags

And the list continued. I thought to myself, "Well, Shabbat shalom to you too!" As a stranger entering that sanctuary for the first time, it was a daunting and intimidating welcome. For even as I agreed with the environment such rules created, it would come at a cost. The cost of warmth. The cost of embrace. The cost of aspiration. The cost of constructive ideal. The cost of no.

The average toddler hears the word "no" an astounding 400 times a day.¹ And we now have decades of studies that point to the ramifications of such an environment – in the home, in the workplace, in society. Toddlers who hear "no" more often have a stronger likelihood to have language delays and struggle with discipline later on – for over time the "no" loses its power. People working in environments who are persistently reprimanded are more likely to grapple with depression and experience stagnancy in their careers. There is a reason "no" is the simplest and easiest word to utter in any language; it is used with such frequency, it's simply a function of efficiency.

But there is always a cost to no.

Shonda Rhimes in her bestselling book reflects on a conversation with her sister Delorse about all the missed opportunities in her life. Shonda, an award winning TV producer and writer, recounts how she turned down a string of speaking engagements, awards, and talk shows, offering a cascade of the challenges in her life: her demanding children, the rise of her tv stardom, her writing and managing, the deluge of things that stop her from the possibilities before her. Delorse fires back:

¹ http://msue.anr.msu.edu/news/gaining_cooperation_from_a_young_child_more_than_just_saying_no

“...Now, all of these amazing opportunities are coming your way – once in a lifetime opportunities – and you aren’t taking advantage of any of them. Why?”

[Shonda reflects:] I shift, uncomfortable. For some reason, I do not like this. I don’t like anything about this conversation at all. My life is fine. My life is great. I mean, look around! Look! I’m....happy. Ish. I’m happyish. Kind of. *Mind your own business Delorse. You are annoying Delorse...* But I don’t say any of that. Instead I stand there for a long time. Watching her chop [the onions]. And finally, I answer. Putting just the right amount of casual arrogance in my voice.

“Whatever.”

And then I turn away, hoping to indicate that the conversation is over...That’s when she says it. The six words. Mutters them. Almost under her breath. As she finishes chopping the onions. Six startling words. “You never say yes to anything.” For a single beat, time stops. Becomes a clear, frozen moment I’ll never forget. One of the paintings that will never be taken from my mental wall. My sister, in a brown hoodie, her hair in a neat knot at the nape of her neck, standing there with that knife in her hand, head down, the little pile of white onion pieces on the cutting board before her. She tosses the words out there. “You never say yes to anything.”

It would take three weeks. And that’s when the grenade explodes. I don’t just understand her – I believe her. I hear her. And I know. She’s right. BOOM. Grenade. When the dust settles and everything is clear, I am left with one thought rattling through my head. I’m miserable. That makes me put down my wineglass...Am I kidding me? Did I just think that? Honestly, I’m a little indignant with myself. I’m embarrassed to even be having that thought. I’m ashamed, if you really wanna know. I’m bathed in shame. I’m miserable? Who the hell do I think I am?...You know who gets to be miserable? Malala. Because *someone shot her in the face* ...and yet, I’m miserable. I’m miserable?”²

Yes.

It turns out that admission, even saying that little three letter word, may make all the difference. For years, researchers have identified that simply saying the word “yes” changes our brain.³ Emotions incline to the positive, physical and mental performance increases, and as a result, new neural connections are formed to reinforce this growthful experience.⁴ But there’s a problem: the brain responds minimally to our positive words and thoughts, compared to negative ones.⁵ Positive thoughts are not indicative of a threat to our survival, so the brain doesn’t need to respond as rapidly as it does to negative thoughts and words.⁶ We have a neural bias for negativity.

² *Year of Yes*, pp. 10-11

³ Specifically, the orbitofrontal cortex, the basal ganglia, and the limbic system.

⁴ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/words-can-change-your-brain/201208/the-most-dangerous-word-in-the-world>

⁵ Kisley MA, Wood S, Burrows CL. Looking at the sunny side of life: age-related change in an event-related potential measure of the negativity bias. *Psychological Science* 2007 September; 18(9): 838-43.

⁶ May I have your attention, please: electrocortical responses to positive and negative stimuli. Smith NK, Cacioppo JT, Larsen JT, Chartrand TL. *Neuropsychologia*. 2003;41(2):171-83.

In the summer of 1986, Larry Harvey gathered a group of friends together to experiment with a new type of temporary society. He wanted to see what could exist in a space where people focused more on aspiration rather than limitation. 30 years later, the social experiment continues. It has grown from a dozen people to more than 70,000, but each summer a collective says yes to 10 principles, including self-reliance, unconditional giving and generosity, inclusion, and civic responsibility.⁷ And while there may be plenty to question and critique about Burning Man, its annual attendees attest to the power of living with yes in the air. As one of my friends, who joins this temporary society annually, challenged, what would it mean to exist in a life that was about saying yes to inclusion and yes to generosity and yes to civic responsibility? What would it mean if I actually became the parent who did more than deluge his children with “no” after “no,” and rather redirected their energy with a form of a yes? What would it mean if I became the partner or the rabbi or the fellow member of society who did more than resist and block and bar, but kept saying yes and yes and yes?

Barbara Fredrickson, one of the founders of the Positive Psychology field, discovered that we need to generate at least three positive thoughts and feelings for each expression of negativity. If you express fewer than three, personal and business relationships are likely to fail. If you want your business and your personal relationships to really flourish, you’ll need to generate at least five positive messages for each negative utterance you make. For most of us, that means adding a great deal more “yes” in life. And there are other benefits as well. Bringing those three letters into conversation and thought will enhance your sense of happiness, wellbeing, and life satisfaction, and have been shown to significantly build resilience when we are faced with life’s problems.⁸

Imagine a river. It flows in the path of least resistance, in the most natural direction towards its destination. Say you wish to stop this river from emptying into a nearby lake. So you simply place a large boulder in its path. The boulder may indeed hold back the water for a period of time. But eventually the water will build and build, and will either push the boulder out of the way, or simply flow around, still ending up in the lake. No matter what I do, the river will not stop flowing. The only way to accomplish this task is to say yes to the flow of the river, and direct it in a new path, a new direction. When you say yes to the flow, suddenly you come to realize it could be used to power a nearby city or irrigate vast tracts of land.

I remember as a boy I would constantly ask my mom for candy. And the response would always be: No. It’s 7am. No you may not have candy. And what did I do next? I would ask my dad. And if he didn’t bend to my will, I would ask the next person I encountered. And eventually, no matter how many rocks my parents put down, and how many people were told I shouldn’t get candy, this boy would somehow always find candy. But, it is remarkable how dramatically things changed the first time my parents said yes. Yes you may have candy. And you know exactly what you need to get it – eat a healthy breakfast, lunch, and dinner, fill your body with the nutrients you need, and yes, yes you may have candy. I pushed, I resisted the parameters at first, but just hearing that word “yes” directed my energy enough to see that I was the only thing stopping my craving for candy from being sated. And still to this day I always eat my veggies.

⁷ <http://burningman.org/culture/philosophical-center/10-principles/>

⁸ Happiness unpacked: positive emotions increase life satisfaction by building resilience. Cohn MA, Fredrickson BL, Brown SL, Mikels JA, Conway AM. *Emotion*. 2009 June; 9(3):361-8.

So many of us, we find ourselves angry at the world. Furious at the boulders thrown in our path. So many of us, we find ourselves broken by the nos, by the tragedy, by the cynicism. And we find ourselves caught in a swirl of no. We say no to our friends and partners, for we have limited time and we are so incredibly busy. We say no to our children, no to our colleagues. We say no to the person begging, because we're in a rush and we question how they would use the money. We say no to the stranger who looks lost, as we look away. We say no to our doorman when we speed past as he greets us. We say no to dream, no to hope, as we disguise cynicism in the garb of "realism." We say no to ourselves, as our body cries out to be treated better, as our spirit wails looking for a place of belonging. No. No. No.

But there is always a cost to no.

In the Torah, the word "no," and its derivative forms, appears thousands of times. However, in biblical Hebrew, there is no word for "yes."⁹ While one might imagine this casts a certain trajectory for Jewish negativity, there is a profound linguistic teaching: in our sacred text, "yes" is not a verbal declaration, but an action – as many translations reflect, "yes" is woven into the act of going and speaking and doing and making. In our Torah, saying "yes" means an affirmative action.¹⁰

While many of us are familiar with the wisdom of improv, in which practitioners must become gifted in saying "yes, and" to whatever environmental inputs they receive, this wisdom is actually the foundation of our sacred scroll. If you look in a Torah, you will see that every column of text begins with the same letter: the prefix "vav." The best way to translate this is "and then," or "yes, and." With each successive column of text, it begins by accepting what came before and indicates the story continues. Our source text calls out to us to make sure the narrative continues. When we come to the final words of the Torah, we immediately begin it again, making the bold declaration that our story, my story, is not over. Never are we boxed into a corner; never is our fate forever set. Yes we are created in the image of God, and yes we fail again and again to live out this potential; yes our ancestors were courageous, and yes they were flawed; yes our story seems to come to the brink of destruction again and again, and yes there is always a path forward.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once stated that "prayer is meaningless unless it's subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehoods. The liturgical movement must be a revolutionary movement seeking to overthrow the forces that destroy...promise...hope...and vision."¹¹

I'm not sure how many of us tonight saw entering this space as an act of audacity. How many of us see ourselves right here, right now in the heat of a rebellion. But according to Heschel, that is exactly what tonight is about. A grand rebellion. A breaking of boulders that block our paths. Prayer is not merely words, it is a way of living. In Judaism, "yes" is an action.

Our tradition asks us daily to lift up our voices in song and hope, even as the world burns. We are asked to meld our prayers together believing that the world can change, the country can change, we can

⁹ Edward Greenstein, "The Syntax of Saying 'Yes' in Akkadian and Biblical Hebrew," *JANES* 19 (1989)

¹⁰ For an interesting philosophical approach to this, see Frederick Nietzsche's *Anti-Christ* 24, in which he affirms Jews as having the "toughest life force" and in *Genealogy*, he argues for the pursuit of Yes to all life as the compulsion to live.

¹¹ *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, pp. 262-3.

change for the better, even as the collective fears the sky is falling. We rebel against a world of no. Instead, we act with “yes.”

So much of our liturgy is about finding a way to say yes when everything in our heart says no. When the world tells you that there is no hope, only despair, our liturgy urges us “*Shiru l’Adonai Shir Chadash*” “Sing something new,” sing a new song. You’re afraid of the global economy slowing? You’re petrified of presidential pundits? Sing something different. After reading the news, all you want to do is hide under your bed? Our prayer book says *hitnaari meiafar kumi* - get up, shake off the dirt of despair, and find some new way to live again.

Those of us who have faced devastating loss, the unimaginable heartbreak, we are reminded our collective history bears within it shadows of utter darkness. And so we pray the *Aleinu*, which audaciously ends acknowledging that so long as our own lives and world are fractured, so too is God shattered. Yes, we are broken, and yes, God is broken with us. And yes, we yearn that tomorrow will be better than today. Yes we face our impossible horrors and tragedies, and yes we take another breath, yes we reach for another day, yes we put one foot in front of the other.

For a year and half after her sister Delorse offered a mirror to her life of saying no, Shonda Rhimes worked to bring yes into her life. With each week, she would notice the closed and locked doors in her life, the ways she excused herself, the ways she allowed limitation to rule, the ways “no” had left her complacent and alone and unhappy. And with each locked door forced open, she discovered herself. She would eventually agree to the photo shoot she had avoided for a year, and as the photographer snapped shot after shot, these are the final words of her reflection:

“Keep dancing,” [James the photographer] orders. “You will not believe what I am seeing!”

And so I dance it out. I dance it out on my mountain in my sun as if my life depends on it. Because it does...Staring at those photos, I know now that is what my Year of Yes has always been about...I cannot wait to find out who I will be when next Thanksgiving rolls around. Whoever I will be, I will be beautiful...I will be happy. I will be worth it...Always a work in progress. Always dancing. Always in the sun. Yes. Always dancing in the sun. Yes. Yes. Yes.”¹²

Two years ago, the poet and cantor Ron Fischman published a book of poetry reflecting on the essence of this High Holy Day season. Just two weeks after its publication, Cantor Fischman was murdered, a life violently cut short.¹³ These words were some of the last he left the world:

thinking back to the derailment I
search for switches thrown, tracks mislaid
gross mistakes not evident
fine errors that tilted track downward
faith that a promise made,
however inconvenient,
is kept
or it wasn’t a promise

¹² pp. 299-300

¹³ <http://jewishexponent.com/headlines/2014/10/cantor-mishkan-shalom-member-murdered>

how I long for the chance to say yes
and have it matter
yes to equity, yes to offering,
yes to custody, yes to commitments
yes when my children ask
if they can tell the truth to mama
no, maybe her lawyer will use it in court
like she did my other poem
yes to openness without
evisceration
can I say yes to life again
can I go to synagogue and sing Kol Nidrei
take my place as a treasured member
knowing that I have a place
can I say yes when offered
the chance to work for no reward
except for the sense that the world
looks fondly on my toil and smiles
can I say yes to my children
yes to my writing yes to my [clergy] rabbis
yes to commitment, yes to leadership
yes to my ex, yes to her lawyer, yes to my children
I pray
I pray
I pray¹⁴
Yes and yes and yes.

We, the keepers of the great Davidic Psalms, are pushed toward possibility, towards yes, at every turn.
To reach for utopia in a time of dystopia.

We are here now as rebels and misfits, those defying the trends of the world around us. We are being
called to say yes and yes and yes. As a Jewish community, we say “yes” not merely in words. We say
“yes” in action.

Yes to the person beside us tonight, yes to our disgruntled friend, yes to our annoying sibling, yes to our
struggling spirit.

Yes to disease and diagnosis, and yes to the life we have left to live.

Yes to our broken world, and yes to the chance to heal it with every kind word and act of connection.

Yes there is such hatred, and yes there is such possibility for love.

Yes we have misery, and yes we may have joy.

Yes we have failed, and yes we may be more.

¹⁴ “Say Yes” in *My Book of Days*, 2014.

Yes we have more than we deserve, and yes we deserve more than we have.

Yes we are so alone, and yes we can stand together.

Yes we have lost so much, and yes we are so blessed.

Yes to our homeless shelter, yes to our passions, yes to our responsibilities.

Yes we have so much for which we can and should cry, and yes we can lift up our voices and sing gratitude to God.

We are called to make ourselves anew this year. This is our season of turning, our season of moving away from stagnancy, away from fear, of audaciously clinging to hope and faith and belief.

Yes to our pain and yes to our crushing disappointments, and yes, we will sing a new song.

This is the time when we are asked to find the “no” in our lives, the locked door that bars our path again and again and again.

Yes we will lift ourselves up and shake off the dust of despair.

At this season we are asked to say yes to all our past; and we are also asked to say yes to our grandest of aspirations. We stand on the brink, looking backwards and holding the remnants of our challenges and failures, and yes, holding with them the brilliant dreams of our future. And with every terrible fall, yes we rise.

We face heartbreak, and embrace hope. We face shattered dreams, and yes, we hear the whispers of deeper dreams calling to be realized. We open our eyes in the darkness of night, and yes muster the courage to keep our eyes open so we may merit the sunrise. We hold all we have carried, all our joy and all our pain. We say yes to the possibility of all that may come.

Like the mighty river, we are asked to rise, and rise, and rise again. To let the waters of our spirit churn and lift. We will spill around the boulders and break apart the barriers. And in time, whether that door and its rusty lock finally bursts open, or we simply find a new way around it, we will pour forth into this new year.

Yes we can grow.

Yes we can change.

Yes and yes and yes.