

WHEN DO YOU SAY NO?

A GUIDED CONVERSATION



WELCOME

Before we begin, let's review the brit—the covenant—that animates our time together:

1. **Accountability:** I'll show up to our agreed-upon meetings. I'll let the host know the (good) reason I will be absent. I will also be punctual and respect everyone's time.
2. **Presence:** When we're together, I'll be present and mindful. I will listen and share. Life (and our mobile devices) offer many distractions, but I will stay present and engaged.
3. **Double Confidentiality:** What I hear and say stays here. If I see another group member in a different context, I will not bring up anything they said here unless they do first.
4. **Vulnerability:** I'll stretch myself to be as open and honest as possible with my perspectives and experiences in order to create a safe environment that might encourage others to take risks as well.
5. **Respect:** I will remember that all of us are here for a common purpose and I will respect and acknowledge everyone in my group.
6. **No Fixing, Advising, Saving or Setting Straight:** I will give each person the gift of true attention without trying to "solve their problem." No advice unless it's asked.
7. **Stepping Up & Stepping Back:** I understand that some of us are natural talkers while others are quieter. I'll pay attention to how much I am contributing, and will seek to balance how much I am talking with how much I'm listening.
8. **Curiosity:** Judaism is a religion of exploration; of big questions more than answers. I will get the most out of my group by being open to our discussions and the people around me.
9. **Ownership:** This is our community to create. While we have guidelines and suggestions, it is ours to shape and form. We will get out of it what we put into it.

ASK & SHARE

Welcome to our conversation. Please tell us, in a sentence or so, about something that you've recently said no to—a social invitation, a chance to take on a new project or move in a new direction, or something else. We'll take a moment to allow everyone to gather their thoughts before beginning; you can use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

LEARN

The contemporary poet Naomi Shahib Nye muses on the way saying “no” informs her daily life in her poem, “The Art of Disappearing.” Please read it out loud as a group.

The Art of Disappearing
Naomi Shihab Nye

When they say Don't I know you? say no.

When they invite you to the party remember what parties are like before answering.
Someone telling you in a loud voice they once wrote a poem.
Greasy sausage balls on a paper plate. Then reply.

If they say We should get together say why?

It's not that you don't love them anymore.
You're trying to remember something too important to forget.
Trees. The monastery bell at twilight. Tell them you have a new project.
It will never be finished.

When someone recognizes you in a grocery store nod briefly and become a cabbage.
When someone you haven't seen in ten years appears at the door,
don't start singing him all your new songs. You will never catch up.

Walk around feeling like a leaf. Know you could tumble any second.
Then decide what to do with your time.

As we reflect on this text, here are a few questions to consider:

Interpretive Questions

- What does Nye say no to in this poem? Why?
- What is Nye saying about socializing and relationships?
- What is she trying to say yes to? Why?

Reflective Questions

- When was a time that you said no to something because you needed space for something else that was “too important to forget?”
- How do you decide what social engagements, academic or professional opportunities, or extracurriculars to say yes to, and which to say no to?
- When is saying no risky, or challenging?
- What happens when you say no? How do you feel?

You can use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION

How do these questions look through a Jewish lens? Consider these texts as tools for reflecting on your own stories and experiences. Please use them in a way that organically continues or deepens the conversation you have been having so far.

Next day, Moses sat as magistrate among the people while the people stood about Moses, from morning until evening. But when Moses' father-in-law saw how much he had to do for the people, he said, "What is this thing that you are doing to the people? Why do you act alone, while all the people stand about you from morning until evening?" Moses replied to his father-in-law, "It is because the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have a dispute, it comes before me, and I decide between one person and another, and I make known the laws and teachings of God." But Moses' father-in-law said to him, "The thing you are doing is not right; you will surely wear yourself out, and these people as well. For the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you! You represent the people before God: you bring the disputes before God, and enjoin upon them the laws and the teachings, and make known to them the way they are to go and the practices they are to follow. You shall also seek out from among all the people capable men who fear God, trustworthy men who spurn ill-gotten gain. Set these over them as chiefs of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens, and let them judge the people at all times. Have them bring every major dispute to you, but let them decide every minor dispute themselves. Make it easier for yourself by letting them share the burden with you. If you do this--and God so commands you-- you will be able to bear up; and all these people too will go home unwearied." Moses heeded his father-in-law and did just as he had said. Moses chose capable men out of all Israel, and appointed them heads over the people--chiefs of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens; and they judged the people at all times: the difficult matters they would bring to Moses, and all the minor matters they would decide themselves. Then Moses bade his father-in-law farewell, and he went his way to his own land.

--Exodus 18:13 - 19:1

- What is the problem that Moses and the Israelites are experiencing in the beginning of the passage?
- How does Moses' father-in-law (whose name is Yitro) help him to say no?
- When are you tempted to take on too much by yourself?

In addition, Queen Vashti gave a banquet for women, in the royal palace of King Ahasuerus. On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he ordered [his attendants] to bring Queen Vashti before the king wearing a royal diadem, to display her beauty to the peoples and the officials; for she was a beautiful woman. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command conveyed by the eunuchs. The king was greatly incensed, and his fury burned within him. Then the king consulted the sages learned in procedure. (For it was the royal practice [to turn] to all who were versed in law and precedent. . . . "What," [he asked,] "shall be done, according to law, to Queen Vashti for failing to obey the command of King Ahasuerus conveyed by the eunuchs?" [One of his advisors, named Memucan, answered]: "Queen Vashti has committed an offense not only against Your Majesty but also against all the officials and against all the peoples in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. For the queen's behavior will make all wives despise their husbands, as they reflect that King Ahasuerus himself ordered Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come. This very day the ladies of Persia and Media, who have heard of the queen's behavior, will cite it to all Your Majesty's officials, and there will be no end of scorn and provocation! If it please Your Majesty, let a royal edict be issued by you, and let it be written into the laws of Persia and Media, so that it cannot be abrogated, that Vashti shall never enter the presence of King Ahasuerus. And let Your Majesty bestow her royal state upon another who is more worthy than she. Then will the judgment executed by Your Majesty resound throughout your realm, vast though it is; and all wives will treat their husbands with respect, high and low alike." The proposal was approved by the king and the ministers, and the king did as Memucan proposed.

- Why did Vashti refuse to appear before the King?
- What were the stakes for Vashti? For the king and his advisors? For other men of the kingdom?
- Do you think Vashti was aware of the likely consequence of her decision?
- When have you said “no,” knowing that your answer carried a risk of negative consequences for yourself or others? What happened?
- How is the “no” in this story like or unlike the “no” in the story of Moses and Yitro?
- What connection, if any, do you see between these biblical texts and the opening poem?

Use the space below to write some notes to yourself if you'd like.

DO

As we conclude the conversation, here are a few final questions to consider:

- What's one insight that you've gained from this conversation?
- What is one thing you want to change in your life based on this conversation?
- What's one obstacle to you making that change, and how can you overcome it? Who might you need help from in order to make this change?
- What could we do together as a community based on what we talked about today?

Feel free to use the space below to note your response to these questions.

Thank you for being part of this conversation.

Portions of this guide were originally developed by Rabbi Nicole Auerbach for Central Synagogue.



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