1. WELCOME

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

- **Accountability:** I’ll show up for eight meetings over the next eight months. Or I’ll let the host know the (good) reason I will be absent. I will also be punctual and respect everyone’s time. Which means that meetings will start and end on time, no matter how good the schmoozing.
- **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.
- **Double Confidentiality:** I’ll maintain complete confidentiality. What I hear and say stays here. That means that even when I see group member in another context, like at Central or in the neighborhood, I won’t bring up what has been shared in our group unless you open the conversation.
- **Vulnerability:** I’ll stretch myself to be as open and honest as I can with my perspectives and experiences to create a safe environment that might encourage others to take risks, too.
- **Respect:** I will remember that all of us are here for a common purpose and I will respect and acknowledge everyone in my group.
- **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.
- **Listening:** I understand that some of us are talkers and some of us are quieter, so I’ll be aware to not dominate discussions or always leave the weight of it to others.
- **Curiosity:** Judaism is a religion of exploration; of questions more than answers. I will get the most out of my group by being open to our discussions and the people around me.
Ownership: This is our group. 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.

2. ASK AND 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.

3. LEARN

We have lots of different opportunities in our lives. Some of them are social—the chance to join friends at a movie or go to a party, or even just meet someone for a cup of tea. Some are about our academic or professional lives—the possibility of taking on new responsibilities, changing jobs, taking an intriguing class or adding a second major or minor. And we have a lot of opportunities to decide how to spend our time generally—what hobbies to invest in, how to spend our leisure time, who we want to have in our lives. We can’t say yes to everything—so how do you decide when to say no?

Sometimes saying no can shut down a relationship or opportunity; sometimes it’s a way to set a healthy boundary, to assert our own needs when others may not be looking out for them. As the author Gertrude Stein once said, “Let me listen to me, and not to them.” Sometimes a “no” to something is necessary to protect our own needs or vision for our lives, uncomfortable as it can feel in the moment.

Of course, there are plenty of times when saying no has even bigger stakes—times it’s connected to issues of sexual consent or assault, of standing up to racism, homophobia, or another kind of oppression, of engaging moral or ethical questions with integrity. While there’s room here, of course, to talk about all these things, it’s also important to make space to unpack some of the smaller nos and yeses that, in many ways, build and shape our lives. (Our discussion guides on When do you take a stand? And What do you choose to ignore? also investigate some of these farther-reaching questions.)
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.
Interpretive questions

• What does Nye say no to in this poem? Why?
• What is Nye saying about socializing and relationships? Is she against all forms of socializing? Why or why not?
• 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?
4. PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION

How do these questions look through a Jewish lens? Here are several texts—Biblical, Rabbinic, a contemporary commentary and a contemporary explanation of 16th century Kabbalistic concepts—to consider. You need not discuss all of the texts; feel free to choose those that speak to you. These texts are merely 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?
- Have you ever been in a situation like Moses’? What did you do?
- When are you tempted to take on too much by yourself?

On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he ordered Mehuman, Bizzetha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven eunuchs in attendance on King Ahasuerus, 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.

--Esther 1:10-12
Vashti demonstrates the true meaning of gevurah—strength, justice, and the willingness to impose limits. She is gevurah’s essence—strength within strength, the inner will that allows us to say “no” to something that hurts or degrades.

--Rabbi Jill Hammer

• Why did Vashti refuse to appear before Ahasuerus?
• What were the consequences of that decision?
• Do you think she was aware of the consequences ahead of time?
• When have you taken a risk and said no, knowing that there may be consequences for you? What happened?

[ Rav Tarfon] would say: You are not required to complete the task, no are you free to abandon it.

--Pirkei Avot 2:21

• What does Rabbi Tarfon mean when he says that we can’t give up a task, but don’t have to finish it?
• Does establishing healthy boundaries always require saying no completely?
  When was a time when you said no to certain expectations without opting out fully from an experience?

Once there was a non-Jew who came before Shammai, and said to him: Convert me on the condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot. Shammai chased him away with the measuring stick he was holding. The same fellow came before Hillel, and Hillel converted him, saying: That which is despicable to you, do not do to your fellow, this is the whole Torah, and the rest is commentary, go and learn it.

--Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31a

• Why does Shammai chase the non-Jew away with a stick?
• What do you think the non-Jew’s intention was in coming to Shammai, and then to Hillel?
• Why does Hillel choose to respond to his request?
• How much does the requester’s intention matter in deciding whether to say yes or no to a request?
In contrast to... early Kabbalah, [the 16th century thinker Isaac] Luria describes the first action of divinity as an inward one. \textit{Tzimtzum} refers to the process by which the Godhead contracts its essence, so to speak, by retreating ”from Himself into Himself,” abandoning a space in order to create an “empty” region.

[The explanation of this] step inward sought to solve the question of how the existence of the world is possible if divinity, which is Infinite, fills all space. The answer which Lurianic Kabbalah provides is that by an act of withdrawal, a space—infinitesimally small in comparison to God’s infinity—is created in which all dimensions of existence can unfold.

--Dr. Lawrence Fine

• What is \textit{tzimtzum}, according to Fine?
• Why, according to Lurianic Kabbalah, did God need to contract or withdraw Godself in order to create the universe?
• What does it look like when you intentionally contract yourself, take up less space?
• When do you need to step back in order to make space for something important to come into being?

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

\section*{5. Do}

The writer and historian Hanne Blank once wrote, ”The truth is, saying ‘no’ often makes room for ‘yes.’ Or just for something that isn’t ‘no,’ which is every bit as good as ‘yes’ a lot of the time.” Not taking on an obligation that we don’t want in our lives can, indeed, sometimes be just as good as finding something that we really do want.

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. Please join our conversation online at AskBigQuestions.org.

Central Synagogue works tirelessly toward a world in which Judaism is central to the lives of Jews everywhere and is a profound and positive force for humanity. We are relentless in our pursuit of that goal — constantly evolving and always seeking new ways to be “more excellent.” We reach far beyond the walls of our synagogue to learn, worship, serve, and continually redefine what it means to be Jewish today.

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