

Shabbat Emor 5782-No Always Means Yes to Something Else
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Shabbat Shalom.

Jews have questions, rabbis have answers.
Am I allowed to eat this on Passover?
Can I get married on this date?
Can I do this on Shabbat?

Sometimes it seems the answer is always No. Has that happened to you?
It's happened to me. Sometimes it seems like Judaism is like this Capital One Bank commercial from years ago starring David Spade.

Here it goes:

A voice on the phone says: Hi, I'd like to redeem my credit card miles for someplace warm.

David Spade is an employee working in the call center. He
answers: No.

Voice: But I'm in Chicago; it's freezing!

Spade: Ooh, I predict a NO-storm.

Voice: Can my miles get me to Mexico?

Spade: No way, Jose.

Voice: St. Thomas?

Spade: S-aint Happening.

Voice: Hawaii?

Spade: A-NO-ha.

Voice: Cabo?

Spade: Cab-NO, maybe.

Voice: LA?

Spade: N.O.

Voice: Who's in charge over there?

Spade: That would be our C.E.No.

Then they do a voiceover, "We turn No into No-hassle.
What's in your wallet?"

Solid commercial. Thank you, YouTube.

Does Judaism reflexively say No to everything, like David Spade? No! Though I

understand that sometimes it seems that way.

We have a lot of No's in our religion. When we consider all 613 commandments, we end up with more No's than Yes's. There are 365 prohibitions - in Hebrew called Mitzvot Lo Taaseh - and 248 obligations - called Mitzvot Aseh.

People don't like to hear No. Kids don't. Adults don't. I don't. But sometimes, even though we don't like to hear No, it's better for us.

In the Jewish tradition, a No is always really a Yes for something else. A No is always really a Yes for something else.

This idea is actually quite intuitive, especially if you have raised or worked with children. Let me give you some examples of when I was a counselor at Camp Ramah in Wisconsin. Here are some answers I gave my campers:

"No, you can't leave the cabin to run to the soda machine now. It's 12:30 AM."

"No, you can't jump from one top bunk to the next around the cabin. Also, it's 1 AM. Go to bed."

My campers heard, "No, no, no," and they put up a fight. I would try to reframe each No into a Yes, a positive reason:

You can't get a soda now because you need to sleep well in order to enjoy tomorrow. You can't jump from top bunks because I need you and everybody else to be safe.

Needless to say, these semantics did nothing to assuage my teenage campers. Like many parents who aren't being listened to, I put my foot down and said No! It's not what the kids wanted to hear, but they needed to hear it. *The "You can't" was more effective than "You should."* Parents, am I right? (Sometimes as a parent I feel like a C.E.No.!)

At camp - or really, any society - every rule with a No exists for a positive reason. No using cell phones - because we want the kids to connect primarily with each other. No loud talking in beds after lights out - because others are trying to sleep.

Let's now transition back to the Jewish tradition. One of our foundational pillars is Shabbat, the weekly day of rest, which we read about today. This day is really a gift to the world.

Our Shabbat deserves partial credit for introducing the weekend to American life, as it

led to a five-day workweek in the 1920's. Without a break, people burn out.

The book of Genesis reminds us that we are to rest because G-d "rested" on the seventh day. That's the positive value. To rest. To relax. To recharge. To be with people. To be instead of to do. To slow down instead of speed up. To say, "I will enjoy what I have," instead of, "I must work for more." To have face time instead of Facetime.

How do we create a community that actually lives out this value in practice? Where Shabbat is a reality instead of an abstract idea?

Values must be translated to actions in order to come alive, and often the first word is No. So in order to rest, the Torah says, No work. In order to take a break, the tradition says, No creating. These No's really equal a Yes, to take a break. As the late Abraham Joshua Heschel writes in his towering book The Sabbath, "It's a day to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world."

Almost every commandment comes with a reason attached. Sometimes the Torah explains why we do or don't do something. Other times, the rabbis of the Talmud take up the task of answering our natural question, "Why can't we do this?" When you hear of a Mitzvah, I encourage you to ask the question, "Why do we do that?" Curiosity is not heresy, but genuine interest. Ask your friend, ask your rabbi at Kiddush.

Many people wonder "Why not?" when reminded of an aspect of Shabbat observance here at Beth El, to use one example. It is understood that we don't take photos on Shabbat. It's why the Bnai Mitzvah photographer isn't here now but arranged their photo session ahead of time.

I want us to move from a place of No to understanding the Yes behind it - because it facilitates a day of rest, a day that feels different in many ways.

Let me offer two reasons for the prohibition, one I'll call the letter of the law, while the other is the spirit of the law.

The Torah in Exodus 35 says that Jews may not perform "work - Melacha" on Shabbat. Immediately afterward we read of the specific construction involved in building the Mishkan, Tabernacle, portable sanctuary. The construction work is given the same name - Melacha. The rabbis of the Talmud note this juxtaposition of the same word and conclude, those same categories of work that were done to build the Mishkan are the identical categories of work that may not be performed on Shabbat.

So “work” is not just about doing activities that make you shfritz, break a sweat. A better translation of the phrase “don’t work on Shabbat” is “don’t do conscious creative activities on Shabbat.” It’s not about physical labor but actions that create something else. It all goes back to G-d ceasing from creating the world in six days.

One of the 39 categories of work for the Mishkan was Ketivah, writing. They would write letters on the beams and sockets for the purposes of simplifying reassembly. I myself did this with my Sukkah, in order to match all the pieces quickly. Therefore, we do not write on Shabbat, because it is a Melacha, an activity that was part of constructing the Mishkan. Even in the absence of the Mishka, writing still creates.

The Talmud expands this into a category. To write, define the ancient Rabbis, means to record in a permanent manner. And today we can record not just with pens and pencils, but with cameras and phones. A digital recording is still a recording, so we don’t use cameras today on Shabbat. Crucially, our synagogue livestream cameras - which enable people who can’t physically be here today to watch - run but do not record the service, for that would be considered Ketivah, an act of writing.

But what about the spirit of the law?

Ahad HaAm once famously said: “more than the Jews have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews.” Shabbat brings the community together in a way nothing else does. Why? People appreciate the family time of a Friday night dinner with everybody around the table. People enjoy seeing friends at shul or in each other’s home. Shabbat is the occasion to celebrate a Simcha with others, as we celebrate several today.

If there were a photographer on the Bimah today taking photos of the Bat Mitzvah, it would distract the congregation. It might distract the Torah readers. When we think about how to *record* the moment, it takes us out of *living* in the moment. Shabbat has a whole catalog of No’s that move us to a Yes: to be present in the moment. To be instead of to do. Shabbat is about *making* memories instead of *recording* them.

Shabbat Shalom.