

Pioneering the Road to Yes

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About 9 years ago, shortly after my nephew was born, I was at my parent's home in Boston, and I needed to get onto the net.

"Dad," I asked, "What's the WiFi?" Dad gave me a series of numbers followed by, "SashaBen." Sasha, you see, is the name of my niece, and Ben is the name of my Nephew.

But dad continued, "*Mom and I are hoping to make it longer.*"

I didn't understand what he meant at first. But it dawned on me within seconds that this was dad's way of saying, "Mom and I want more grandchildren"!

At the time, I laughed it off. After all, I was 40 years old and, well, what can I say Ron and I had been unable to conceive.

But it wasn't for a lack of wanting children. We had been talking about raising kids since we first met, 22 years ago. But it was never the right time. I needed to be anchored in my rabbinate. Ron needed to pursue his political aspirations. There were places to visit and people to see. And let's face it, both outside of as well as within our bubble, two men raising children was not all that common. So there was a lot standing in our way. Some internal excuses. Some external.

Now, while our story is quite personal, it is hardly unique. You see - each of us here faces hurdles to maneuver. Some we create. Others are placed by society. The big question as we enter this New Year is therefore: how do we face a monumental word of "*no's*" and **pioneer the road to yes?**

How do we do it emotionally? How do we do it psychologically? How do we do it spiritually? My God, there are so many roadblocks every day. How do we turn the roadblocks into opportunities? How do we pioneer the road to yes?

There's a text from the book of Genesis I have found particularly meaningful when wrestling with these questions. It's about our ancestors, Jacob and Rachel. Jacob has just arrived in the land where Laban, Rachel's father, was living. Jacob notices there are sheep lying in a field with a large stone covering the mouth of a fresh water well. Jacob asks the local shepherds, "Why aren't you allowing the sheep to drink?" The shepherds answer that they needed to wait for additional men to arrive, as the stone blocking the fresh water was too heavy.

But then Jacob sees Rachel approaching with her sheep. Struck by her presence, he doesn't want to miss the opportunity to meet her by having to wait around for other shepherds. What happens next is a biblical superhero story. Jacob approaches the stone and singlehandedly rolls it away from the well's mouth, allowing the sheep to drink. And while Rachel's sheep partake of the water, Jacob and Rachel lock eyes.

This is the kind of story we might pass over fairly quickly. It's only a few lines of text. But when a few lines reveals such detail, Rabbis are intrigued! So we ask questions: What does the stone represent, and what does the well represent? One of the great Jewish commentators of 19th century Poland was known as the *Sfat Emet*. In his commentary to the book of Genesis, he wrote about this incident between Jacob and Rachel: "*Yesh **b'chol** davar **nekudah** hanotenet **hayyim**, v'zeh be'er basadeh* – In **everything** there is a **small** element that gives **life**, and this is a **well** in the field."

Contemporary scholar, Rabbi Harold Kushner, explains the analysis of the Sfat Emet with regard to the stone and the well:

*“the well is **not** simply a well. It represents the source of **everything** that makes life **possible** and **worth** living. And the stone is **not** just a stone. It represents **all** things that **block** our access to those **life-giving** waters. Our challenge is to **do** what Jacob did, to summon **all** of our strength and remove those stones that **block** the wells; the stones that clog our hearts from **fully** drinking from the well of life.¹*

Friends, there are so many opportunities before us. But there are so often stones that block our access to fully embracing life. Sometimes we don't even dare to dream because those stones are so huge, so intimidating. We learn to live without being able to drink from the well of life.

And perhaps that's just fine.

But perhaps we are just convincing ourselves.

What would happen if we faced life daring to move the stones - **pioneering a road to yes** when facing a resounding “no”? Imagine, just imagine what our lives would look like if we could harness the strength to transform defeat into opportunity.

I want to share three stories about heroes, three trailblazers, who saw possibilities where others may have retreated.

1.

¹ Kushner/ Sfat Emet “The Stone that blocks the Well”

The first is the story of young Ben (not to be confused with my nephew) who at the age of 12 worked for his older brother, Jim as a journalist in Boston. Jim was horribly cruel to his younger brother, and used to beat him often. Ben eventually went away to start a life. Impoverished, he faced the world and slowly, slowly gained a reputation of honesty and integrity. He eventually borrowed money to buy his own newspaper business, and before long he turned it into one of the most successful papers in the region. In his memoir, he reflected on the beatings of his brother. He learned an important lifelong lesson - an *aversion to arbitrary power*². Just as he got out from under his brother's horrible treatment, so too would the early colonies become free of the oppressive King George. You see, Ben was more formally known as Benjamin Franklin. This insight nourished the nascent colonies with a vision that independence was possible and that freedom from the most powerful force at the time - was not a miracle. It happened because Franklin and others like him recognized that in order for our nation realize the dream, they had to **pioneer the road to yes** by removing the stones that blocked their full potential.

2.

The second story is about Dr. Shaden Salameh, the first Arab women to head an Emergency Room in Israel. Dr. Salameh was raised in a tiny village near Nazareth in northern Israel. She, along with her four younger siblings, all thrived, due in part to the love and guidance of their parents. But Dr. Salameh's success goes beyond that of her brothers and sister. Throughout life, she had to move multiple stones. The stigma of coming from a small village. The difficulty in learning Hebrew. The cultural difference between Jews and Arabs. She faced roadblocks at every corner. Some were societal. Some were personal. Dr. Salameh shared recently with the Jewish Journal: "the greater the challenge, the greater I'm motivated. I love challenges. ... I look at the threats, or at the

² <https://www.learningliftoff.com/overcoming-obstacles-ben-franklin/>

challenges or the barriers or the obstacles, as an opportunity.³ Imagine if we could do the same.... For many people, “No” is a dead end. But for others, hearing “No” is the invitation to look at possibilities. Dr. Salameh’s perseverance inspires us all find the path to “yes” - to move the stones away.

3.

The third story is a very person one. It’s about a member of Akiba, David Weiselman. But it’s connected to my narrative about having children. When Ron and I seriously began talking about kids, neither of us was in our twenties anymore, nor in our 30’s to boot. At one point, Ron looked at me and said, “People will think we are the grandparents, not the parents. They will laugh.”

Now, a good husband is a good listener. He uses empathy, and he refrains from responding with condescending judgement. So I looked at Ron in the eyes and I said, “You’re being ridiculous.”

The very next day, I was at Akiba during pick up for our Early Childhood Center. I noticed one adult - probably around 65 years old, whom I hadn’t met before. I walked up and introduced myself. “You must be here to pick up your grandchild. My name is Rabbi Shapiro.”

The gentleman then said, “My name is David. Actually, I’m the daddy.”

“Could the timing have been planned any better,” I thought. I then said, “Excuse me, can I just take my foot out of my mouth so I can apologize?”

³ <https://jewishjournal.com/analysis/302056/woman-arab-doctor-defies-odds-running-an-emergency-room-in-israel/>

David then shared with me his story. His first wife died years earlier of breast cancer. They had no children. David, whose family survived Nazi atrocities, has lived his life embracing Jewish causes. On her deathbed, David's wife made him promise he would not be the end of the line.

And so, years later, David and his current wife, Monika, brought a little boy and later a little girl into the world. They nurture their kids with Jewish culture from a bygone era. But they also fill their children with dreams of tomorrow. David is truly an inspiration of what it means to pioneer the road to yes.

David's story and my story ... We are not the first people who brought children into the world despite compromising circumstances. Our Torah has multiple narratives of those who had children well into advanced age. Our matriarch, Sarah, laughed when she learned that at the age of 90, she was to conceive.

What was her laughter about? Our Rabbis offer different explanations:

In the Midrash, there is a dispute whether she laughed to herself or out loud or among friends.

Rashi suggests that God made joyous laughter for Sarah so that everyone that heard her would laugh *with* her.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, a 19th century scholar suggests that God made Sarah into a laughing-stock, and that all who heard her would laugh *at* her."

Contemporary scholar, Rabbi Vanessa Ochs, PhD shares a beautiful reflection in her book, "Sarah Laughed": She writes:

You'll never know what it's like to want a child your whole life, and then, like Sarah, discover you are expecting at the age of ninety. But you may know what it's like to spend many years wanting something very much, so much that the desire defines you or depletes you. It could be the dream of having a child; it could be a goal that had to be put on hold, or one that remained outside your reach. Like Sarah, you may have had the experience of belatedly getting what you've yearned for and not knowing quite how to react. ...

If at forty-two you finally get pregnant, or at forty-seven you finally get a job in the field you've trained in, or at fifty-three you finally meet your life partner, you're happy, but you may not be dancing the same jig you would have danced years before. Others may not understand your muddled feelings. You don't want to present yourself as hardened or embittered, so you keep your complicated feelings to yourself. ... Sarah models how we can respond to dreams that become belatedly fulfilled. We can laugh. And what a complicated, bittersweet laugh it is, reminding us that it's very human to feel joy and sorrow at the same time.⁴

Friends, **Pioneering the Road to Yes** comes with joy, pain, complications, mockery, opposition, exhilaration, and tenacity. It is an act of **Holy Chutzpah** to look the world in the face and move forward despite the stones that block the well. We will make many excuses along the way:

- 1) We are waiting for the right time.
- 2) We are not satisfied with 80 percent because we want 100 percent - and we therefore accomplish zero percent
- 3) We are afraid of taking risks
- 4) We close our minds to new ideas

⁴Sarah Laughed. Rabbi Vanessa Ochs, Ph.d.

- 5) We fear failure
- 6) We allow negative feedback to overwhelm us

This New Year is the time for our dreams to resurface, to summon the strength to do what we once thought impossible, and to drink from the wellspring of the future - facing the challenges that unfold.

Be a Pioneer on the Incredible Road to Yes - so that next year, when we gather, you can look back and recognize that:

As Barbara Axelband taught us earlier: Now is the right time

We **can** be satisfied with 80 percent - or 50 percent - so long as we try

We **took** that risk

We **listened** to new ideas

We **filter** negative feedback for what's it's worth

And with failure?: Well, we rarely regret the things we tried and failed. But we often regret the things we failed to try.

Jacob - who moved that stone, wasn't really a biblical superhero. He was you and me - and was motivated - and he showed others that all it takes is focus and vision. As my mother in law, Yael taught me: *Lo va-coach, eleh ba-mo-ach!* It's not about strength, it's about mindset."

Mom and dad, you will now have to change your Wifi password to a few numbers followed by "Sasha - Ben - Maya - Eli." If you need help, give the twins a couple of years and they will surely surpass us all with technology!