

1st day RH sermon – Saying Yes – Sept. 15, 2015 – 1 tishrei 5776
Rabbi Stephen Wise – Shaarei Beth El Congregation

As I settled into my seat on the Chicago subway this past summer, I figured it was so late that we should just head back to our hotel and call it a night. I couldn't have been more wrong.

We had just had an incredible time watching the Toronto Blue Jays fight it out with the Chicago White Sox. It was fun watching Chris Sale up against our team's Mark Buehrle, both of them on their game, and both teams tied one to one going into the 9th. A pitching masterpiece. And being with my son and his entire Thornhill Reds baseball team at the tail end of an epic 7 day road trip through the Midwest was true baseball heaven, not to mention our little side trip to the Field of Dreams in Iowa. The Jays game was especially fun as we met RA Dickey before the game and heard from friends and family back in Ontario that they kept seeing us on TV cheering for the Jays.

As the skies darkened and it began to rain, the game also turned dark for me as the White Sox scraped out a late run and beat our Blue Jays. This didn't dampen our enthusiasm though as we headed out of the stadium and ran for the subway to escape the downpour. We found our way into the last subway car and sat down exhausted. The man across from us, noticing our Blue Jay hats, asked if we were Jays fan from Toronto and added, "I bet you like Josh Donaldson". We all replied, "Of course"! "Well", he said, "Josh is an old friend of mine from high school". "No way" we hollered. Then he brought us in closer. "Josh is a good friend and in fact I'm going to meet him right now at the hotel where the Jays are staying".

"And what hotel is that", I quietly asked.

"The Peninsula, right down on magnificent mile", he replied.

We continued discussing baseball while I kept that nugget of information to myself. When the team met up in the lobby of the hotel half an hour later, I told everyone that the Jays were staying not too far from us. "Who wants to go see if we can meet some players," I asked them.

By now it was around 10:30 pm and most of the dads were tired and not planning to walk out in the rain to go see if some Jays might possibly be in that hotel. I however am not most people. I learned from my father a long time ago to always say yes, especially to an adventure like this. Great things can happen when you go out and try new things and take what we in the clergy call "a leap of faith". As Wayne Gretzky once said, "You miss 100% of the shots you don't take". So I said I'm going. Then about 8 kids said they would go too. The remaining dads said "Hey if you want to go, go ahead". So I did. Guess what? We did find the Jays at the hotel just as the guy on the subway said. We got some autographs, some hugs, and some high fives and went back to the hotel with some great stories for the remaining dads. So what do we learn from this?

In life there is always a balance between risks and regret. Speaking personally I usually lean toward the risk side, leaving my comfort zone even if I'm not sure what the future will bring. Each person has to find their own way. But as we approach the high holydays we are each forced to take a look at our life.

Were there times when you wanted to take a chance and didn't?

What held you back?

How might you be open to new possibilities in the coming year?

The Yamim Noraim force us to examine the promises we made but didn't fulfill. We get a clean slate to try again, get out of our comfort zone and drink fully from the cup of life. As the old cliché reminds us, if you don't try, you can't achieve. It might not work out perfectly the way you hoped but there is so much upside to trying. If you miss the mark, then adjust and keep trying. Failure is just a step to getting it right. You definitely can't succeed if you never even take the first shot. Whether its aiming for a new career, a new school, a new company, a new home, a new partner – aim to do what you love and go for it. There's only one way to find out. Take the leap of faith. Try saying yes whenever you can.

Being here today is a Jewish leap of faith. Whether you believe in God or a higher power or something beyond our understanding, we are here today because we are following the traditions of our people. We are following God's commandments. Why do we follow them when there is no hard evidence that God is watching. It's because we are saying yes. We're taking a risk. We're taking the day off work or school for a higher purpose. There are many things in our mahzor that we pray about that are hard to accept and hard to believe but we take the risk. We say yes.

I remember once my son Jacob asked me about Jesus and how he died and came back to life 3 days later. He seemed skeptical that Jesus rose from the dead. I said, "Well, our founding story is that God split the Red Sea in two, I bet people are skeptical of that moment, but we Jews believe it". He nodded his head slowly.

It takes a lot courage and conviction to embrace our faith. It's easy to say there's no evidence, it's easy to not believe. It takes more of an effort to say yes, I do believe, to embrace this day. And when you put in the effort you get a lot more out of it, whether it's because you were forced to come here by a family member, or you just feel comfortable surrounded by your community, or you just like the music. Whatever it was, you made the choice to come here. And when we all sing the prayers and say the words together – it has power and it has meaning. It's part of saying yes, I'm part of the Jewish people.

Every Jew around the world is in shul today, just like you. We're all saying the same words, perhaps in different languages. Perhaps the men are sitting separately from the women, maybe some are in fancy pews, or on kitchen chairs or on a sandy floor. But we're all doing it together. And once you start saying the prayers and singing the music, everything comes together.

Just sitting here and thinking about our actions over this past year can make us better people. This self-reflective guilt trip can lead to more positive actions in the coming year, whether consciously or unconsciously.

The Rabbis of the past knew what they were doing when they created the customs of our high holydays. They used various methods to get us here and to help us find God in our own way. One way is fasting. When you're hungry you ask yourself, why am I punishing myself like this. Then you remember, it's because I did something this past year where I hurt another person. Everyone has done it. Maybe I could apologize and do better next year.

Another way is a blast from the shofar, a jarring loud sound that forces you to sit up and think, why are we blowing a rams horn. It's waking us up and reminding us to look at our behaviour. Another way is our reading the Torah scroll. It's wonderful to see our scroll taken from the ark and read aloud. It's the same words year after year, but guess what, it's different every year. We hear it differently, and respond to it in new ways.

It's funny to look at our customs from an outsider's point of view. Other people throw a party on the New Year. But look at us. We sit here in a room all day thinking, saying the same words and hearing the same songs, blowing a rams horn and starving. Not very exciting but certainly spiritually fulfilling. The easier way would be not to follow these customs. But we say Yes. We take the leap of faith.

Jews have been doing it for centuries. We have fought and died for the right to follow our rituals. As a people, when we say yes, we really mean it. Look at our prophets. They said yes when they were called knowing that theirs would be a difficult life.

In the book of Kings chapter 20, Elijah the prophet is told to anoint Elisha as his successor. Elijah comes upon Elisha plowing the field. He walks up to him and throws his mantle over Elisha's shoulders. Elisha simply walks away from the field saying "let me kiss my mother and father goodbye and I will follow you". Talk about taking a leap of faith. Ezekiel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, each are called in a similar fashion and say yes, some without fully understanding the consequences. Moses understood the gravity of God's request to lead the people from slavery and needed more convincing. But at some point he also had to stand up and take the risk, whether sure of the outcome or not.

Our biblical figures set a great example. But there are also more modern instances where Jewish men and women took a leap of faith and said yes to the challenge when asked of them. When an Air France airplane was

captured by terrorists and flown to Entebbe, the Israeli government had the audacity to ask Yoni Netanyahu to take his team and fly to an enemy country. His job was to pretend he was the president of Uganda, sneak into the airport terminal, kill the terrorists and save the hostages. An unprecedented act. And he said yes.

Ilan Ramon was told to fly from Israel to Iraq to destroy their nuclear power plants. He was to do this without permission from any other country. He said yes. They asked Golda Meir, from Milwaukee, Wisconsin to visit every synagogue in the United States to ask for money needed by Israel when it became a country in 1948. She said yes. Eliezer Ben Yehudah, told that the new Jewish state needed a unifying language, was asked to update the ancient language of Hebrew so that modern-day Israel could use it. He said yes. He wrote the first Hebrew dictionary and, from that day on, Hebrew became the language of the country of Israel. This summer I was asking Jill Anne about a possible trip to Israel. She said, "What do I need in order to go". I said, "a passport and a dream". She said, "I've never been on a plane before. In fact I've never even been out of Ontario before". But she said, "Yes, I'll go".

I love it when people say Yes. It was something ingrained in me in my childhood and something I try to pass on to my children. It's something I encourage each and every one of you to try, as we begin this new year of 5776. You never know when you might walk a hotel in Chicago and meet MVP Candidate Josh Donaldson in the lobby. You never know when someone might invite you to go to Israel. You never know when you might invent something that changes the world. And you'll never know until you say that one magic word... "Yes".

Shana Tova