
On a plane from Israel to London, 19 Nov 2014

You know what Orthodox Jews are good at? We're good at saying 'no'. At refusing. I say 'we'. I say it like you might say 'we' about people from your home town, even though you haven't lived there for 20 years. I'm not an Orthodox Jew anymore, but I'm good at refusing even my refusal of the ways of my ancestors. (See? Refusal is getting complicated already.)

What Orthodox Jews do is: we say 'no' to the world. The world says 'hey, here's a bunch of interesting foods, and marvellous people and fascinating journeys, and you might like to eat, or fuck, or take them'. And we say: no. No, ta. None today, thank you.¹

We find a value in this refusal. It's curious. It's still in me, still one of my default styles of being. It's not so much that we say 'ugh no', or 'your ways are hateful to us and we repudiate them', although it's easy enough to interpret no like that. It's more that we know that non-experience is a form of experience. That maybe it's interesting never to have had some rather common experiences.

(We recognise this, somehow, when we talk about art. (Here I'm using 'we' to mean 'you and I, secular people'. I know it's confusing.) We're interested in the art made by shut-ins as much as that made by experience-hounds. We want to listen to the music made by someone who's never heard Katy Perry or The Beatles.² We know that ignorance is a kind of knowledge.)

In fact, although I have now ceased to refuse television on Saturdays, or the flesh of the pig, I think they're right, there's something to it. ('They'? 'We'? Can I refuse to care?)

Guy Debord wrote about *The Society of the Spectacle* – a late capitalist homogenisation of humanity in which we're all just a lumpen mass of undifferentiated 'audience'. Capitalism strips us of our individuality, so that it can more easily sell it back to us in the form of products with which we construct identities. We might all be dutifully working our way through those *1,000 Things To Do Before You Die*, but at least we can express our uniqueness by the precise combination of brands and services we enjoy.

Looked at like this, there's something almost heroic about refusal. Something really affirming of human potential. I'll give you an example: sex. We're all having sex now. ('We' the secular, of course.) In loads of positions, with all the different genders. Or at least before marriage, without marriage. Just because it's natural and nice and normal. (It. Is. And it is. And yes, it is).

Listen, though. I know people who didn't have sex till they were married. I really do. My friend who runs an organisation for Orthodox Jewish women who are unmarried, late 30s or early 40s and decide to have a baby alone – she knows women who've had to have their hymens broken before they give birth. Really. We really mean it about the not-having-sex-before-marriage thing. We're honestly serious about the possibility of refusal. The human ability to just not. The calm and consistent power of saying: 'yeah, there's nothing wrong with what you're doing, but I politely but firmly decline. Thanks'.

I think it's one of the things I value most about myself, you know. Not celibacy – I'm not. But the knowledge, right through me, written in the sinew and the fat, the muscle and the bone, that I know now to say 'no'. To not do what everyone seems to think is inevitable and unavoidable.

You have to practice this, I think, in small ways, to keep your hand in. No, I won't celebrate Christmas. No, I'm not drinking the wine. No, I don't wear high heels. It's helpful. It means you're in practice when it comes to: no, I don't agree. No, I think this is wrong. No, I won't stand by while you take them.

I mean, I don't have to spell it out, right? Why this is important for Jews. We all know.

It can get a bit addictive of course, refusing. From *Bartleby the Scrivener*³ to anorexia nervosa, one can take refusal too far. But you can also not take it far enough. Because I think you have to be sure you'll be OK if you do it. So it's worth picking something just to practice.

It's all right. Probably the situation will never arise in which your capacity to refuse will be tested. But just in case. Might as well give a go to saying no.

¹ A short sample of things proscribed by Orthodox Judaism, provided by the writer: using anything electrical on the Sabbath (sunset Friday to sunset Saturday); eating milk and meat together, or milk three hours after meat; wearing clothing that's a mixture of linen and wool; spreading gossip of any sort, even nice things about people; putting books which contain God's name on the floor; saying God's name in Hebrew out loud, ever; travel between sunset Friday and sunset Saturday, except on foot; singing in front of men, if you're a woman; masturbating, if you're a man (and maybe if you're a woman – the sources are contradictory on this point); sex before marriage (but sex after marriage is enthusiastically encouraged); eating food which has been cooked in utensils ever used for non-kosher food, or is served on plates that have ever been used for non-kosher food; eating shellfish, pig, eel, monkfish, rabbit, animal gelatine, cochineal.

² Katy Perry is a popular singer of the early 21st century, familiar to the older members of the editorial staff for her debut single, 'I Kissed A Girl' (2008). The Beatles were a popular skiffle band of the mid-20th century, known for the long-playing records *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, *Revolver*, and *The White Album*.

³ *Bartleby the Scrivener: A Tale of Wall Street* is a short story by Herman Melville, in which the eponymous scrivener declines requests to perform his duties with the apparently reasonable but unrelenting phrase: 'I would prefer not to'.

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