

Yes-And... Improv Tools for Jewish Leadership and Community Life

Join Serena Eisenberg, Fred Klein and Joe Kanofsky for a playful, practical exploration of how improv can strengthen presence, adaptability, and connection in Jewish professional life. Together we'll draw on both comedy exercises and applied improv to spark creativity, deepen teamwork, and enhance our leadership and educational practice. No expertise required—just curiosity and a willingness to say “yes-and” as we build on last year’s joyful open-space energy.

WELCOME & FRAMING: Some possible notes: In Jewish tradition, leadership often happens *in real time*—in the moment between text and people, plan and reality. Improv gives us tools for that liminal space. Whether you’re teaching students, leading an organization, or cultivating donors, your work depends on reading the room, responding in real time, and building trust. This session is about *practice*, not performance. We’re here less to make comedy and more to build skills with being present, responsive, and in relationship. If you’ve ever facilitated a meeting, taught a class, mediated tension, or responded to the unexpected—you’re already improvising.

WARM UPS

1. **Name + Gesture:** (One by one, participants say their name with a simple gesture. Group repeats name and gesture together.)
2. **One-Word Check-In: opening and closing** (Prompt: “One word for how you’re arriving. No commentary—just listening.)
3. **Group Game: Transformation Circle:** (standing in a circle) Leader begins by passing a gesture to next person in circle. That person receives it, then turns and heightens the gesture to the next person around the circle, continuing as the gesture heightens and transforms...

Pass the Energy: One person sends a sound + gesture in pairs. The receiver mirrors it, then transforms it and sends it back...

Frame it for mixed roles: “This is what happens in classrooms, board rooms, and donor meetings—energy is always moving. Leadership means noticing it before trying to manage it.”

“YES, AND” GAME OPTIONS

4. **Group “Yes, Let’s!”** **How it works:** One person calls out an action: Everyone responds: “Yes, let’s!” and does it fully.

- “Let’s hop on one foot!”
- “Let’s all make jazz hands...!”
- “Let’s teach Torah like it’s a dance!”

(Joe will think of a few to follow up...)

Framing: Joy, buy-in, embodied affirmation, help group (could be staff or another lay leadership group) to break through resistance, try innovation with a more playful, creative spirit.

5. **No-But versus Yes-And Program Planning (In Pairs)** **How it works:** Participants are tasked with planning an upcoming Purim program / party. Round one: Each partner must respond, “NO, BUT.” – for about 3-4 minutes – ask everyone what they came up with. Round two: Repeat, using “Yes, And...” Everyone reports:

Debrief: Did this feel different than typical planning? Where did energy increase or drop?

Brief teaching : **Yes** = I hear you / I accept what’s here. **And** = I add, builds momentum, flexibility to move forward.

Reframe for Jewish leadership: “Yes” doesn’t mean agreement—it means *relationship*. “And” allows growth without negation

GROUP IMPROV GAMES

6. **Fortunately, Unfortunately ...** **How it works:** Story passes around the group with one brief phrase: “Fortunately...” (a phrase or sentence to advance the story). Followed by “Unfortunately...” Until story comes to a natural end...

Debrief: *Curious what you might think of as a leadership takeaway from this exercise?*

Frame it: “This mirrors Jewish communal life—hope and challenge in constant dialogue.”

7. **The Unexpected Turn: Applied Improv**

How it works: Three people volunteer to improv. The facilitator suggests a scene prompt:

- Synagogue President, Rabbi, Donor who wants to make a significant gift - but with a ridiculous condition
- Synagogue committee discussing innovative ideas to increase attendance at high holidays. Rabbi, longtime synagogue member. New member.
- Wedding planning meeting with a quirky couple
- Federation, JCC, and synagogue reps are at a community coordination meeting: Realize that everyone planned their “signature community event” on the same Sunday in May.

- Teen retreat: one teen wants to have a deep theological discussion at midnight at the campfire...
- Federation social media strategy session. Marketing director, intern, influential volunteer. (If needed, best post so far is a bowl of soup.)

Scene starts, and facilitator shouts out (every minute or two) things like, **“Emotional shift!”**, **“Time pressure!”**, **“New Information!”**, **“Different accents!”**, **“Switch roles!”** Group must adapt *without stopping the scene*. As they get the hang of it, audience should also shout out ideas..

Debrief prompts: *What was that like for you? Where did flexibility help?*

Frame it: “This is Jewish professional life—Torah meets reality, plan meets people.”

CLOSING INTEGRATION

Integration Reflection (5 min)

- Where do you already improvise in your work?
- What’s one place you could practice “yes-and” this month?
- What was one unexpected play for you in the past years, and how did you pivot, play with it?
- Where could playfulness lower defensiveness?
- Where are you on the curiosity / control spectrum (time permitting)

Repeat one-word Check-In: opening and closing (Prompt: “One word for how you’re leaving. No commentary—just listening.)

Time Permitting.... The Press Conference How it works: One volunteer leaves the room. Group decides on a **press-worthy event** (and the organization holding the press conference...) Volunteer returns as the spokesperson. Group asks *silly but pointed* questions. Spokesperson must answer confidently and guess the event.

Debrief: *What are some insights from this exercise? How do we balance confidence with not knowing?*

Frame it: “This mirrors moments when leaders must project clarity before they actually have it—while staying curious, calm, and connected.”