

ROSH HASHANAH DAY 5769
TEMPLE EMANUEL OF BEVERLY HILLS
RABBI JONATHAN AARON

To Cantor Yonah Kliger: “You know, we’re behind now. That piece just took a long time. We’re about five minutes off, and now everyone’s going to think it’s because of my sermon. They’ll be like ‘He really spoke a long time.’ I mean, really, it was a lot longer than you said it would be. . .”

Man. . . Wow, that was really uncomfortable. Strange energy in the air. You know what it is? It’s complaining. This the energy that goes with someone mindlessly complaining about something that couldn’t even change! What was Cantor Kliger going to say -- “I love you, man?” All he could do was sit there and feel more and more uncomfortable. It wasn’t going to solve anything at this moment. That’s what complaining does to move things forward. . . nothing.

Here’s a door – and this is a big door. This is a door, that, if you choose to go through it, can change your life. Even if you only choose to open it a crack and stick your foot in to feel the temperature, it can have an impact on your relationships, your work, your play, your outlook on living, and your enjoyment of life. I know that this sounds idealistic. If I were you, I might say, in a complaining tone, “Oh, yeah, right, can’t wait to hear this.” I hope you choose a positive tone with the same words: “Oh, yeah, right, can’t wait to hear this!” Same words, one a complaint, the other, an open door to a better life.

Before I continue, I want you to know that I didn’t make this up, and my inspiration for this came a couple of years ago from Doris Finestone, the principal of our day school, who told me about a minister in Kansas City who was trying to create a church that didn’t complain. At that time, I didn’t open the door; I didn’t even look at the door. Then, earlier in the year, Cantor Kliger told me about a book that he was reading in which a minister from Kansas City had a “don’t complain” campaign. This time, I looked at the door, jiggled the latch, turned it, and walked in. I bought the book by Reverend Will Bowen called “a complaint free world,” read it, and read several other books on this subject of complaining, and changing my thoughts from what I don’t want, to what I do want. I don’t know why I became inspired by this idea – but it spoke to me, and I believe that it can speak to you as well.

So here we are, me, and twelve hundred of you, and all of us have a history of complaining that goes back probably about three thousand years. I mentioned to someone that I was doing this sermon on complaining, and she remarked, “You want Jews to stop kvetching, we invented it!” How can a small group of Jews in this synagogue erase three thousand years of ancestral griping, kvetching, and stiffed-neckness? Our lives as the nation of Israel began with four hundred years of slavery. That’s where the complaining began. But God takes heed of that complaining. He tells Moses at the burning bush: “I have marked well the plight of My people in Egypt and have heeded their outcry because of their taskmasters; yes, I am mindful of their sufferings.”

I think we all would agree that slavery is certainly a justifiable complaint. So God saves all of the Israelites, and frees them from Egypt. No more need to complain! At the edge

of the Sea of Reeds, everyone sings in a rejoicing tone: “Who is like You, Adonai, among the gods!?” Miriam sings: “Sing to Adonai, for God has triumphed gloriously!” There would never be another reason to complain again. You know how much time went by before they complained again? Millennia? Centuries? Decades? Years? Three days... THREE DAYS. “The water here tastes terrible; WHAT WILL WE DRINK?” So God tells Moses to throw a piece of wood into the bitter waters of Marah, and they become sweet and the Israelites drink. How long ‘til they complain again? A lot longer. . . Twelve days. Next chapter, they complain again about water, and Moses strikes the rock for them and water comes pouring out. Two months later, Moses goes up to get the Ten Commandments, and is there for forty days. Complaint time: “Make us a god, because that guy Moses, we don’t know what happened to him, he’s probably never coming back.” You know what happens next, golden calf, Moses breaks the tablets – it’s not a very positive scene.

Probably the most egregious moment of complaining came when the Israelites were just about to enter the promised land in the book of Numbers. There they are, right about to go in. It had taken two years to traverse the desert, not forty, and God asked Moses to send in scouts to check out the land. Ten of the twelve scouts come back complaining: “The cities are fortified, the people are so big, we felt like grasshoppers and we must have looked that way to them, too, we can’t make it.” Because of this complaint, they never go into the land. God punishes them with forty years more of wandering without a home (and you thought it was because Moses couldn’t ask directions), but their children would be the ones who enter. Complaining kept all of them from what was right there for them; that’s the kind of impact complaining can have on one’s future. It doesn’t allow us to move forward; it keeps us where we are, or where we had been. For the Israelites it was the desert – where is it for you?

Let’s move ahead about three thousand years to 2008. We’re still kvetching. We’re still spending a good amount of our speaking-time thinking and speaking about things we don’t want, or don’t like, and criticizing and gossiping about others. Yes, I’m sorry to tell you this, but this whole complaining thing includes criticizing others and gossiping. It’s all one. Complaining, criticizing, gossiping – it’s all looking for the negative. And if the negative is where you spend your talking-time, then you will be looking out for the negative. You will seek the negative, because it’s being programmed into you. Imagine if what came out of your mouth was things that you DO want, statements that move things forward. When there are problems, they become opportunities, or challenges. When you see something you don’t feel is right – you find possible solutions instead of just griping, which can never lead to change.

Will Bowen puts it this way: “Our thoughts create our lives, and our words indicate what we are thinking.” Listen to the way others have put this:

Buddha: “We are shaped by our thoughts, we become what we think.”

James Allen: “You are today where your thoughts have brought you; you will be tomorrow where your thoughts take you.”

Charles Darwin: “The highest possible stage in moral culture is when we recognize that we ought to control our thoughts.”

Not complaining is really about understanding that our words are how we put our thoughts out into the world. And just as we are given the choice of blessing and curse, or life and death in this past week’s Torah portion – the same one we will read on Yom Kippur – we are also given the choice of thinking positively or negatively. Over the last month or so I have been talking to a number of people about this subject, and most everyone has had the same answer: “I’m a positive person; I don’t complain very much.” I’ve always thought of myself as that kind of person, too, and that’s the good news. The reason why so many of us say that we consider ourselves positive is because we want to be – most of us recognize that being a positive, upbeat person is a desirable way to be.

Here’s Webster Dictionary’s definition of complaint: “To express grief, pain, or discontent.” There are moments when we feel true grief, true pain, true discomfort, but for most of us, when we look back upon our lives, those moments are few and far between. (Of course there are exceptions.) For the most part, our griping is about the weather, the Dodgers, other drivers, our bodies, our jobs, bosses, friends, spouses, kids, the economy, the candidates for president.

By complaining about these parts of our lives, do we change anything? Do we move our lives ahead by kvetching about another driver on the road, or that we can’t stand our work? That driver who cut you off, he’s just going to continue to drive, and that job. . . If you’re really, truly unhappy, take action and get a new job. Complaining about it is going to keep you in it, unhappily. And surely griping about the weather, or the Dodgers, isn’t going to change anything.

There are benefits from complaining: we get sympathy and recognition and approval, and in some cases, avoid doing something we don’t really want to do. There isn’t anything inherently negative about that, but if we’re looking for these benefits by putting something else down, it doesn’t seem as productive as the alternative. We found early on, what kind of complaining will bring about what kind of response, and it has been ingrained in us from an early age. Children learn that if they cry, they will get the bottle; if they complain loud enough in the line at the grocery store (like in the Berenstain Bears book, “the Gimmies”), we will give them the gum in the check-out line. Complaining brings about results, attention, sympathy, and recognition.

One of our favorite gripes is about our health. Imagine that in a 1996 study, doctors estimate that almost two-thirds of their time is spent treating patients whose illnesses have psychological origins. What the mind believes and thinks is your life – it is manifest in your body. How else can we explain how placebos work? If the mind believes that something can cure what we perceive ails us, then it will. All of us have heard the incredible stories of those struck with cancer who were able to buck the odds and live their lives well beyond their prognosis, because of their positive outlook and attitude about the treatment. If it works for illnesses, then it can also work for our regular lives as well.

Please don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that there are not real things to complain about. I understand that illness and physical pain are serious and real; I get that the political landscape is uncertain with the presidential election a month away; I know that our economy is incredibly fragile right now, and we are all anxious about our future. I'm there, but I'm choosing not to talk about these issues directly, because you can find experts with much more knowledge than I have – on the internet, on TV, in the newspaper and magazines every day. I'm sure that every one of us has complained over the last several weeks a lot about these important issues in our society today, and we all feel they are justifiable complaints. Maybe they are; these are real problems. . . but does your complaining make you any less anxious than you were before? Does complaining about it solve anything in any way? If our minds weren't tied up with complaining about any of it, might they be instead filled with possible solutions? Even if those solutions are how we're going to dig deep into our souls to deal with the pressure that we feel.

One of the biggest differences between Judaism and other religions is that Judaism is about actions. All of the Mitzvot are actions that we do to bring ourselves closer to the divine. Actions speak louder than words, than faith, than prayer. Even the idea of doors and keys that are the overall theme of our High Holy Days this year involves opening a door, going through it. . . not just waiting for something to come to you. So with that in mind, here's the action that we can all take to open the door to being complaint-free:

I have these bracelets, thirty-five hundred of them, to be exact, and you will receive one as you leave this service. On the top of the bracelet is written "Be Complaint Free"; on the other side is "One Key," to reiterate that this is merely one key, and there are so many other doors within Temple Emanuel that you can open to live a fulfilling life. And our website is written on the inside, so that you can find those doors. These bracelets mimic the purple bracelets that are given out by the Kansas City church with "a complaint-free world.com" written on them. They have given out (as of the printing of the book) over six million bracelets to people in eighty countries throughout the world.

The challenge is to make it through twenty-one days without complaining. You put the bracelet on one wrist, and when (not if) you find yourself complaining or criticizing or gossiping, you switch wrists. The challenge is to keep the bracelet on one wrist for twenty-one days. Why twenty-one? The first research seems to have been by a cosmetic surgeon, Dr. Maxwell Maltz, in his book *Psycho-Cybernetics* written in 1960. Since then, it has generally been understood that one can break a habit, or begin a new habit, if it is done for twenty-one consecutive days. It also is the amount of time it takes a chicken to hatch an egg. Now that's the goal, twenty-one days, and it's a lofty one. In Will Bowen's book, he estimates that it takes the average person between four and eight months to accomplish being complaint-free for twenty-one days – and if that's the average, many of us might take a little longer. And it is a real challenge. I received the bracelets about two weeks ago – Cantor Kliger, my wife Michelle, and I put them on that day. It's not easy. I was changing it at least seven to ten times a day at first, and then, when we even suspected ourselves or the other person of a complaint, the conversation turned to why it was one, and how we could have said it another way. I want to tell you,

I feel different – I was told that I’m actually a little softer. And what’s interesting to me (I don’t know if you experience this), do you ever get those pangs of “ugh” or tension in your body when things aren’t going the way you expected? I don’t feel those as much. At this point, the whole thing feels like a sound wave. It’s almost as if I can feel the energy that’s going out of my body is different than it used to be.

Now since we’re all here for Rosh Hashanah, I’m presenting a Jewish beginning to this process. There are many of you here who may not want to do this, and by the way, I would never force this upon you, or judge you if you don’t want to, because that would mean that I find something lacking in you, and that I’m complaining about you. So, believe me when I tell you that as far as I’m concerned, you gotta do what you gotta do. However, there are ten days between now and Yom Kippur. As part of our synagogue’s ritual for this year, try it during that time. See if you can go just ONE day complaint-free. See what it feels like. If all of us in this room held back from even one complaint each day during this time, then 12,000 complaints will never make it into the airwaves, into the hidden consciousness of the world. See how you can do; begin with just one day out of the next ten.

According to Reverend Will, there are four stages towards becoming complaint-free. First, is Unconscious Incompetence; second, Conscious Incompetence; third, Conscious Competence; fourth, Unconscious Competence. We are all in the first, Unconscious Incompetence. Before now, we were not aware of how much we actually do complain. This is why when first hearing about this, a lot of you were thinking or saying in a whisper to the person next to you, “I don’t complain that much; I’m a positive person!” This stage has been going on the longest. For me, it’s been forty something years. Now that I’ve got this bracelet – and you, yours – we all begin our Conscious Incompetence stage. This is when you realize about how much you do complain, and you’re becoming aware of it.

Through the process of the complaint-free challenge, we can gain Conscious Competence. That’s when you realize that you’re not complaining (or complaining less), and you become acutely aware that you’re accomplishing what you thought might be impossible. That’s when you say, “I never thought I’d make it,” instead of (forlorn) “I never thought I’d make it.” Lastly, some of us may reach the point of Unconscious Competence. That’s when we will have rid ourselves of the negative impact complaining can have on our lives, and we don’t even think about it any more.

The big question is. . . how do you know when it’s a complaint? Sometimes it’s very easy to tell – it’s a direct complaint – a gripe, a kvetch that you’ll know the second it comes out of your mouth, and you won’t have much difficulty recognizing it. On other statements, I have a few clues for you. If you begin your statement with, “I’m not complaining, but. . .” you *are* complaining. You might as well move the bracelet to the other side while you’re talking. (And, by the way, don’t think you have a free pass once you move the bracelet, the new twenty-one days begins that moment. You don’t get a free day pass.) There is usually, however, a lot of subtlety to most complaints. Many times, you might think that you’re just making a statement, or you’re just describing

something, not complaining. The question then becomes, what did you want from that description? Did you want sympathy, attention? Did the description make you feel better? Was it putting something or someone down? By describing this moment or event in a derogatory manner, did it help the matter in any way? And finally, what was your tone? Many phrases can go both ways, here are some examples [do both ways]: “I knew I would do that.” “Of course!” “That is always happening to me.” “I love that.” As you can see, it’s not always the words, but the way in which the words are spoken. Part of the Conscious stages of this process involves the recognition of the *way* you complain, and in turn, you will gain valuable insight as to how you communicate with others.

Sometimes, not communicating, not speaking will be your choice – and that works. Just like our mothers used to tell us, “If you don’t have anything positive to say, don’t say it.” You can think for free – just don’t let it come out of your mouth. Remember, “Our thoughts create our lives, and our words indicate what we are thinking.” That doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t speak out when there is something really troubling going on in our lives, nor does it suggest that we shouldn’t express our feelings. The whole idea of this challenge is to help us to review the thoughts we bring out into the world. By concentrating on the words that indicate to the world that we are full of negativity and dissatisfaction, we bring on more negativity; we look for what we don’t like in the world. You may find, as I am beginning to discover, that as you begin to monitor your complaining, you won’t have as many thoughts that lead you to complain. Your mind kind of reboots to go along with the new program, and you begin to think less about the negative, and more about what you want to happen next. Or when those thoughts do come up, you are more easily able to discern whether or not it will help your situation to bring it up, or how to bring it up.

More than anything, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are about taking a hard look at the past and creating your own vision for your future. The Jewish value of review and renewal, of *t’shuvah*, returning to ourselves, is all about moving forward, leaving behind the parts of our life that keep us from fully experiencing the beauty and majesty of life itself. I believe this challenge is an opportunity for all of us, as a community and as individuals, to make positive change, to improve the world around us. There are many doors towards a fulfilling life. Let us join the millions of people who have used this key for this particular door. One door, one bracelet, one key. . . be complaint-free.

Shana Tova