



Yom Kippur Sermon – 5779 Kvetching

By Rabbi Lifshitz

Once upon a time, a man named Morty takes his dog to a vet saying, “My dog has a problem.”

The vet replies, “Tell me about it.”

“First,” says Morty, “ you should know he’s a Jewish dog. His name is Irving and he can talk.”

“He can talk?” The vet responds with amazement.

“Watch this!” Morty then points to the dog, throws a ball toward the door, and commands: “Irving, **Fetch!**”

The dog immediately goes toward the door, turns around and demands, “So why are you talking to me like that? You order me around like I’m nothing. And you only call me when you want something. And then you make me sleep on the floor, with my arthritis. You give me this horrible food with so much salt and fat. It tastes awful! You should eat it yourself! And do you ever take me for a decent walk? No, it’s out of the house, a short pee, and right back home. Maybe if I could stretch out a little, my sciatica wouldn’t kill me so much! I should roll over and play dead for real for all that you care!”

The vet is amazed and asks. “This is remarkable! So what’s the problem?”

Morty says, “Obviously, he has a hearing problem! I said ‘**Fetch,**’ not **kvetch!**”

We do like to kvetch. For example, at this time of year at our holiday services the men complain it is too hot, the women complain it is too cold. The mahzor is too heavy, the pages too thin. The rabbi should talk louder, the sermon should be shorter. The seats are too close and the lighting is poor. With so many complaints, it is a wonder that so many come for so many hours. We Jews do seem to have a propensity for kvetching. So it is not surprising that at a big Jewish community celebration the caterer, as he walked among the tables, stopped and asked, “Is anything ok?”

Everyone complains, that is true. While complaining momentarily feels purposeful, it can make us passive, turn us into victims, and soon cause us to feel powerless to do anything to change situations. Kvetching without acting too often leads us to see our lives negatively and as being without hope. When pessimism and complaining become our default stance, the danger is that we come to doubt our own capacities, we may give up too easily, and we become blind to the blessings that are around us. Too much complaining and we become bitter, and constant

kvetching makes us a pain and burden to others. On the other hand **if** some kvetching is a *motivator*, if it turns us into actors, if it prods us to join with others to solve problems, it can empower us and help us find strength we did not realize we possessed.

Rabbi Yitzhak Hunter, a halachic authority of the last century, wrote that kvetching is a great sin, that it is *forbidden to complain too much*. He basis his opinion on what the Torah says about God creating the world. Toward the end of the sixth day, when the world was complete, God looked at all that He had made and said, “Behold, *tov m’od*, it was very good “— not just good but *very* good. Then a midrash teaches that it was on this same sixth day that Cain killed Abel— an awful tragedy, the first death, the first murder. Still, in spite of that horror, God does not to complain. He chooses to see the world from a broader perspective and at the end of the day, “ [still] Gd saw all that He created and behold, *v’hiney tov m’od*, it was exceedingly good!”

God turns from the negative. He does not deny that something terrible happened, he does not complain or blame, but rather takes a view with a wider perspective, proclaiming that this world, including human beings who sometimes commit great wrongs, is indeed very good. Changing His focus, He could move forward and so could humanity.

Consider the prayer *Unetaneh Tokef*. Its words remind us that life is contingent and capricious, that there are things we cannot control. It makes us realize that there are forces that we cannot bend to our will, that at any moment something bad can occur, from minor to major,— from internet service going down to an appliance breaking, from losing a job to having a major accident or having to confront death. We cannot make these things un-happen, but we can determine how we will respond to them.

Let me tell you about a person I long admired. In college I began to subscribe to the New Republic magazine, continuing to read it for literally decades. My favorite columnist was Charles Krauthammer whose ideas were simulating and whose writing was as elegant as it was profound. With clear reasoning and astounding insight, his columns influenced my thinking and helped me gain a deeper understand of events and ideas. Even when he left the New Republic as he became a staunch conservative, I read his words eagerly, both for his craft as a writer and to benefit from a different understanding of issues about which he and I did not agree.

Years later when he spoke at a conference I attended, it surprised me to see that he was in a wheelchair, paralyzed from the neck down. When he was 22, attending Harvard Medical School, he had a diving accident in a pool that left him paralyzed. With the help of friends and professors, he finished his training and became a talented psychiatrist, and contributed to the third edition of the Manual of Mental Disorders. After some years in practice, he went to work in Washington, and then devoted more and more of his time writing columns analyzing national and international issues with clear reasoning and with calm, thoughtful and respectful rhetoric in the Washington Post and on Fox News.

Certainly after his accident Krauthammer could have given in to endless complaining and viewed his life with pessimism and bitterness. But he made the choice to live with optimism, determined to make the best of his situation. He could not undo the accident, but he would not complain. Instead he could do what would bring him joy and fulfillment — he married, had children, influenced public opinion and made a difference in the world. His death this summer moved me deeply. I was moved that this man, just days away from dying, could write in a final

public letter to his readers, “I leave this life with no regrets. It was a wonderful life, a life worth living.”

As a rabbi, I have seen many who have had to face major crises. For a while they may feel pessimistic, complaining “Why me? Why now?” and they might wonder how they could ever move on. However, amazingly, many refuse to remain in that state. With inner strength and courage, they slowly find the power and perspective to say about their life, v’hiney tov m’od, behold it is very good.

How can we kvetch less and more often say about our lives, they are very good? We can **re-frame** what we have experienced, finding something positive from that which was negative and painful. We can think of blunders and crises, of wrongs done to us and of misfortunes that we have suffered, as opportunities for reordering our life, for finding new paths to walk. Knowing what we have felt — anguish, confusion, a deep sense of loss — we can more readily reach out to others with sympathy and empathy. Indeed the best medicine for heart-ache may be to open our own hearts more widely to others. Then our own kvetching or pessimism will diminish and our resiliency and optimism will increase.

Another way to become less of a kvetcher is to be **grateful**, to make a conscious effort to be aware of how good our life is. According to Jewish tradition, the morning service begins with blessing for the simplest of things: for waking up and for being able to think; for bodily parts that work, and for being a free, autonomous, human being; for having eyes with which to see, for being able to walk; for being a man or a woman, and for being a Jew. Putting these blessings on our lips and in our minds each day, makes us mindful of and grateful for what is good in our life and warns us not to take for granted the blessings present in our lives. Reciting them trains us to excel in expressing gratitude throughout the day and throughout all our years.

Instead of comparing our self to others or dwelling on what we are missing, our days will be far more satisfying if we take a survey of what is going well in our life. Looking at our spouse, our family, our friends, we have a choice to make. If we focus on faults, on expectations unmet, or on exasperating moments, we will complain far too much. But if we set our mind on what they add to our lives, how they bring us pleasure, how our sense of fulfillment grows with their presence, then we will appreciate that our life is good. And expressing our gratitude to others not only lifts their spirits, it also will makes us more happy. Words of appreciation sincerely expressed add to our own inner peace while increasing the goodness in our world.

It is easy to find that about which to kvetch, but when we remove the cataracts of self-centeredness, we become more aware of how fortunate we are. After all, we have clothes, food and shelter; we have people who care about us and help us; we have a country in which, for many, though not all, freedom and opportunity grow; we enjoy more affluence and security than do most people in the world. Yes, the traffic could be better and waiting in lines can be annoying, incomes could rise more steadily and violence and strife could decline, but nonetheless let us be more grateful for the good fortune that is ours, for in that way we can be happier with our self and with others.

Mark Twain said that the two most important dates in your life are the day you are born -- and the day you figure out **why** [you were born]. Thinking about that, we can understand that the third way to void kvetching so much, is to find a **fulfilling purpose** in our lives.

John McCain found purpose, in spite of many setbacks, by devoting himself to serving his country and his final words of gratitude revealed that this devotion brought him great fulfillment and joy. The early kibbutzniks found meaning as they committed themselves to recreating a Jewish homeland in a place some thought desolate and then they rejoiced as it blossomed. Fifty years ago the founders of Beth Judea derived purpose by establishing a synagogue way out in the country. Many of us discover meaning in enabling our children to fulfill their potential. Some find their lives more purposeful because they are in the military or because they give of themselves to protect the environment, to teach, to heal or to serve the public. Such people have discovered the reason for which they were born, and comprehend that such purpose has brought them dignity.

So, why were we born? To what purpose will we connect our very existence? Which relationships will be our priority? What kind of legacy do we want to leave? Is there volunteer work we can do? Will we do something to insure the survival of Judaism and the Jewish people? Can we go beyond kvetching about what is wrong in our society and instead improve it by engaging in civic pursuits, and by doing our part to move the arc of the moral universe and of history upward toward justice? Finding causes to which we can give our self, partnering in communities dedicated to improving the world, and recognizing the divine within all our fellow human beings, will give purpose to our efforts and will ennoble us.

Let me close with something the Lubavitcher Rebbe said. Even though many of his followers refrained from celebrating secular events, one day a man came and asked if it was permitted, to celebrate his own birthday according to the secular calendar. "Absolutely!" said the Rebbe, "because that is the day that *God decided that the world could not live without you.*"

Throughout the coming year remember **that**. Hear this message loudly and clearly: God has decided that this world could not exist without you. He knows that you are important to the world and to Him, And you should know that too. Believe that there is a purpose to which you can give yourself and from which you will derive soul-stirring meaning and deep joy.

During our worship together may we discern the reason the world needs us. Instead of kvetching we will testify to the goodness all around us, and we will become more adept at being grateful and more skilled at expressing gratitude. Then, through lives of purpose, may we know many blessings and bring great blessing into the world. Amen