

No Kvetching – Be Happy

Likely, you have heard the story about the Jewish grandmothers sitting by the pool and complaining about various things. The first begins with a heartfelt “Gevalt.” Before she can explain, the lady next to her sighs, “Oy, tatenyu.” Then the woman to her left exclaims, “Oy vey.” and then the fourth woman cuts things short. “OK, ladies, enough about the children. Whose dealing?”

With all the other possible forms of amusement available in our lives, why is it that so many people today choose kvetching as their preferred recreation. In recent years Kvetching has actually become a field of academic study. Barbara Held, a psychology professor at Bowdoin College, wrote a book called *“Stop Smiling, Start Kvetching,”* subtitled ‘*A five step guide to creative complaining.*’ The text includes chapters such as “Obstacles to Creative Kvetching,” “The Tyranny of the Positive Attitude,” and “Famous Creative and Non-creative Kvetchers.”

Despite the fact that we Americans enjoy kvetching, research suggests it does not make us happier. A World Health Organization study conducted by the Harvard Medical School concluded that Americans have a higher percentage of depressed people than war-torn Lebanon, or job-starved Mexico. We even have a higher rate of depression than Nigeria, with its desperate poverty and violent tribal conflicts. How is this possible? When this study was reported in the Wall Street Journal the reporter suggested, *“Maybe if your life is a struggle for clean water and adequate food, you don’t have time to indulge in being unhappy over luxuries.”*

In truth, we Jews come by kvetching naturally. It seems to be is in our DNA. Think back to the stories in the Torah about our ancestors as they wandered for forty years in the wilderness. Their conversations weren’t dominated by gratitude for freedom, or daily sustenance, or protection from the desert sun but by a long series of complaints. The one that always stands out in my mind is the yearning for the fish and cucumbers they had eaten when they were slaves in Egypt. Stop and think for a second. In the desert they wanted to have fish. Now that is professional kvetching.

And we still do it today. We complain about our work, about our parents, about our children, about our neighbors. And of course – never about our clergy!

Why do we spend so much time complaining? Our liturgy today tells us that we should be happy. This is Yom Simchateinu. Stop Kvetching, Be Happy. So, is happy really what we should be looking for? Perhaps I will surprise you by saying saying, “Why not?”

Prior to COVID, I visited Senior Homes and convalescent centers and I have visited with people who are virtual prisoners in their homes. These are not places you would expect to find happiness or satisfaction in life. And yet, I think you’d often be amazed! Meeting with many of those people is often inspiring! For example, there is the woman well into her nineties who loves to share the books she has finished reading. Or the woman who has passed her 100th birthday, has lost her vision, but still weaves products that go to support a charitable organization. There is a man whose knees won’t carry him anymore but feels tremendous gratitude that otherwise his life is good. In every case, the issue is perspective. Whether we kvetch or kvell largely depends on how we view things.

If you go to the self-help section of any book store you will find a myriad of books on finding happiness. I did the next best thing, I went to Amazon.com. In a search for books on finding happiness, I got 33,883 hits! Titles came up like: “Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life’s Most Important Skill”, “Secrets of True Happiness,” and “The Happiness Hypothesis.” There appeared to be no end to books about happiness. That vast market is evidence that there must be a lot of people desperate to find this elusive benefit in life.

A famous Chassidic maxim (there’s even a song) tells us, “*Mitzvah gedolah l’hiyot b’simcha tamid*” - “It is a mitzvah to be joyful at all times. This saying, particularly in the Hebrew, is very instructive because it combines the notion of happiness and longer-term satisfaction. You may be familiar with the term *Simcha*. We often use it to refer to a particular event such as a Bar Mitzvah or a wedding. On the holidays we wish each other “Chag Sameach,” a holiday of simcha, of joy. But in that Chasidic adage the word ‘Simcha’ is followed by ‘Tamid,’ ‘always’, which changes it from ephemeral happiness – as in a ‘happy hour,’ to joy in life, a sense of satisfaction and pleasure that lasts much longer.

And where can we find that? The first word in that maxim gives us the answer: Mitzvah. Technically, and most correctly, a mitzvah is a commandment and can refer both to what we do with other people and how we relate with God through rituals. But just for now, I want to use the word Mitzvah in the colloquial sense; the way it is most often used in Yiddish, the way my mom used it: things we do to help others.

And that really gives us the answer to how we can find meaning in life. All the professionals tell us that the best way to help yourself is to help others. When you think of experts on happiness, the name Nicholas Kristoff likely will not be the first one to come mind. He spends much more time writing about starvation and disease in third world countries. But he wrote a fascinating column on basic human pleasures, which he listed as food, sex and giving. The three elements don't seem to go together, but he reported that Dr. Jorge Moll of the National Institutes of Health found that when a research subject was encouraged to think of giving money to a charity, parts of the brain lit up that are normally associated with traditionally defined selfish pleasures like eating or sex. He quotes another expert as saying, "*The most selfish thing you can do is to help other people.*" I have often framed it as a divine gift that when we help others, we have a built-in reward system.

That is a key lesson in achieving happiness: strive to be a contributing human being. That effort will go far toward lessening your sense of dissatisfaction in life and the likelihood that you will want to kvetch about it.

I want to conclude by returning to the theme of finding happiness in unexpected places. This story takes place in a nursing home.

Two men, both seriously ill, occupied the same room. One man was permitted to sit up in his bed for an hour each afternoon and his bed was next to the room's only window. The other man had to spend all his time flat on his back.

Every day the men talked for hours on end. They spoke of their wives and families, their homes, their jobs, where they had been on vacation. And every afternoon, when the man in the bed by the window could sit up, he would pass the time by describing to his roommate all the things he could see outside the window.'

The man in the other bed began to live for those one-hour periods where his world would be broadened and enlivened by all the activity and color of the world outside. The man next to the window did a spectacular job of describing what he saw. The window overlooked a park with a lovely lake. Ducks and swans played on the water while children sailed their model boats. Young lovers walked arm in arm amidst flowers of every color and a fine view of the city skyline could be seen in the distance.

As the man by the window described all this in exquisite details, the man on the other side of the room would close his eyes and imagine this picturesque scene. One warm afternoon, the man by the window described a parade passing by. Although the other man could not hear the band – he could see it in his mind’s eye as the gentleman by the window portrayed it vividly. Days and weeks passed.

One morning, the day nurse arrived only to find the lifeless body of the man by the window who had died peacefully in his sleep. The roommate was devastated with grief, and asked if he could be moved next to the window. The nurse was happy to make the switch, and after making sure he was comfortable, she left him alone. Slowly, painfully, he propped himself up on one elbow to take his first look at the real world outside. He strained to slowly turn to look out the window besides the bed. It faced a nondescript brick wall.

The man turned to the nurse in total confusion. “Your roommate was blind,” she told him. “His pleasure in life seems to have been giving you the view.”

Stop Kvetching, Be Happy. Reach out to others. Chag Sameiach.