

SERMON FOR JUNE 11, 1999 Kavetching RABBI ARYEH AZRIEL

How many people here like to complain? I know I do. Kvetching is one of the singular pleasures of modern life. When Elyce and I come home in the evening after a hard day at our respective offices, we often kvetch to one another about all the trials and tribulations of our day. She kvetches at me. I kvetch at her. Neither even knows the other is talking. After 15 minutes or so, however, we will generally look up at one another, laugh at ourselves, and realize that we have been partaking in one of our favorite pastimes: kvetch-catching. I will catch your kvetches if you will catch mine.

I will not ever forget Sally Fields in her role as the poor southern factory worker, Norma Rae. Norma Rae had never so much as met a Jew, until she hooked up with a Jewish intellectual Union organizer from up north. Norma Rae works with this newcomer, day and night in an effort to organize her factory, and in the process she becomes quite taken with him. At one point in the movie they have a fight however, and he begins picking on all the little things she has not done right. Furious, Norma Rae comes to him and yells in her best southern accent “kvetch, kvetch, kvetch!”

Kvetching is not a modern phenomenon, however. In our Torah, the people of Israel have been saved by Moses from the ravages of Egyptian slavery. They have had the waters of the Red Sea parted before them. They have been given manna to eat in the desert, but now they are getting bored of manna. They want some prime rib or a hamburger at least. “If only we had meat” they complained to Moses. “We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. Now our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manah to look to!” Isn’t it amazing how nostalgia makes the good old days always seem better? “Give us the good old days,” the children of Israel were saying. Give us the fish and the cucumbers. The slavery, the oppression, the killing of our children, they were not really so bad. Forget this freedom business. We want chicken nuggets.

And according to our Torah text, the complaint of the people of Israel was indeed answered by God. They got exactly what they asked for, “wind from the Lord started up and swept quail from the sea and strewed them over the camp, and the people set to gathering quail all the day and night and all the next day.” But the text continues, “While the meat was still between their teeth, not yet chewed, the anger of the Lord blazed forth against the people. And the Lord struck the people with a very severe plague,” which had been carried no doubt by the precarious quail. “Be careful what you ask for”, the Lord seemed to be saying, “You just might get it.”

One would guess that after this traumatic event, the children of Israel would have learned their lesson, but not so. Soon, we are told, how Miriam and Aaron began to speak against Moses because of the Cushite woman he had married. “He married a _____ Cushite woman!” They would whisper to all who would

listen. For this complaint Miriam was stricken with a temporary case of leprosy. But still the children of Israel did not learn their lesson for, as we will see also in this week's portion, they rebel against Moses once again.

But is complaining always wrong? Should it always be punished? Of course not. After all, Moses would not have gotten very far if he had not brought his complaint against Pharaoh. Rebellion is sometimes necessary. We have to be "assertive," we are told in all of our modern self-help courses, express our feelings. But how do we make a distinction? How do we tell the difference between Kvetching and assertiveness, between complaining and standing up for ourselves? I've been struggling with this issue for the last few months, and I humbly wish to submit to you my guide-lines for kvetching. Otherwise known as my kvetchometer, or five guidelines for telling the difference between assertiveness and complaining.

First, we must realize that rebellion is indeed sometimes necessary. Rebellion is an important part of becoming free. After all, there would have been no *Declaration of Independence* without a Boston Tea Party, no Sinai without the plagues. Breaking away often brings pain, and that is not always bad. Now this may or may not be reassuring to those of you out there who are parents of teenagers, but believe it or not rebellion is not always bad in a teenager. As painful as their rebellion feels to you their parents, would you really want a teenager who had never rebelled, who had never broken away to find his own way, her own independence?

But you teenagers out there do not take this as a license to kvetch. Every complaint is not necessarily freeing and this, I believe, is the first guideline of kvetching. When the children of Israel were complaining about manna, they were not moving toward freedom, but rather away from it; they wanted to go back to slavery. Assertiveness will lead you towards freedom. Kvetching will lead away from it.

Secondly, assertiveness is a productive activity. We are assertive when we complain in such a way as to help affect a positive change. We are kvetching when we do so only out of our own need to be heard – when we are not making any positive contribution to the situation.

Third, we are being assertive when we are striving to be objective, and to take the feelings of others into account. We are kvetching when we hear none but the sound of our own hunger, our own discomfort, our own feelings.

Fourth, we also know that we are kvetching when we do not want to take responsibility for that which we are trying to change. On the other hand, we are being assertive if given the opportunity we are willing to make a positive contribution to the situation. In other words, be careful what you kvetch about, they put you in charge.

Finally, contrary to popular belief these days, we are not necessarily being assertive when we express our feelings. We should absolutely feel free to sense our emotions. But once they are put into words they are no longer ours alone; they

have an affect on the entire community, on those around us. Therefore, expressing our feelings is only assertive when it meets requirements one, two, three and four; otherwise, it is kvetching.

You see, very often we do not realize our own power, the extent to which our actions, our attitudes, affect those around us.

It has been said that we are what we eat, but I believe that more profoundly we are what we say. What we say deeply affects those around us. When things are not going well and we begin to kvetch, it may be that we are contributing to the negativity more than we are victims of it. Conversely, when we are positive, even in the face of our insecurity and fears, we are creating a better, more positive world for ourselves and for all those around us.

On this Shabbat, therefore, a time of inner reflection, let us all be blessed with the wisdom to discern between assertiveness and kvetching, and may we thus become a positive force in our families, in our schools, in our Temples and in the world around us.