

Kol Nidrei 5787
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Congregation Shir Shalom
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“Making Our Kvetches Count”

As a garden of stars bloom overhead in our Yom Kippur sky on this beautiful Kol Nidrei night, the melodies of the High Holy Days fill our room, and we gather as friends, family and community for the Day of Atonement, I want you to know that there is still time for us to get in one final kvetch.

That’s right, let it out, all of the things you’ve been storing up over the past year.

It is easy for all of us to feel a little grumpy not only going into Yom Kippur, but on Yom Kippur itself. Deprived of food and drink, long services, long sermons, hours spent in contemplation—eventually even the hardest among us may find ourselves wondering, like a child on a long car ride, “Are we there yet?”

But this is Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, a day when we make peace with ourselves, with our friends and family, and with God. Can we really complain on this day of all days?

The short answer is yes.

In Judaism, there is never a bad day to get in a good kvetch.

The harder question is: **When is a complaint actually worth making?**

Complain too much and people stop listening. Complain too little and we begin to internalize what is bothering us. Problems that should be identified and fixed are allowed to fester.

So perhaps the Jewish question isn't whether we should complain.

Perhaps the question is whether we know **what is worth complaining about.**

The Torah is full of complaints. Every major character from Adam and Eve to Moses and Miriam has an opportunity to kvetch—and God is one of the worst offenders.

I think the complaints in the Torah fall into two categories.

The first I call **Holy Kvetches**: moments when speaking up is not only appropriate, but necessary.

Think about Abraham and Sodom and Gomorrah. God tells Abraham that the cities are going to be destroyed, and Abraham has the audacity to ask: “Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?”

Abraham sees something he believes is wrong, and he speaks up—even to God.

These are Holy Kvetches. Something is wrong, and someone has the courage to say so.

But then there are what I call **Murmurs About Manna.**

The Israelites have been given manna in the wilderness, food that miraculously appears every day and can apparently taste however they want. And yet they still complain:

“If only we had meat to eat!,” the People of Israel cry out in Numbers 11, “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 manna to look to!” supposedly enjoyed back in Egypt.” (Talk about a kvetch!)

God responds by giving them so much meat that it literally sticks to their teeth.

The Torah seems to be telling us that not every complaint deserves our attention.

And then there are the most troubling stories—the stories in which our ancestors **don't** complain at all. These stories are the ones the rabbis reserve for our High Holy Days.

On Rosh Hashanah, we read about Abraham being told to sacrifice Isaac. He never even bothers to ask why.

In our Yom Kippur Torah portion, Aaron witnesses the horrific deaths of his sons Nadav and Abihu. And the Torah tells us simply:

“Vayidom Aharon.”

Aaron was silent.

These stories are maddening. We want to scream at the Torah: **Speak up! Say something! Anything!**

Perhaps that is exactly the point.

The Torah gives us these stories because sometimes the person who needs to speak up is us.

This summer, I was reminded of just how important that can be.

A beloved cook at my kids' overnight camp, Gery Unter, was suddenly rushed to the hospital.

Gery was in his sixties, fit and energetic, and had been running the food service at Camp Havaya for sixteen years. He was one of those people who seemed to radiate quiet joy. He and I had a special bond because, when I was serving as the camp rabbi, we spent our off hours playing fierce games of tennis and basketball.

The only time I ever heard Gery curse was when a tennis or basketball ball went awry, causing him to lose a point or a game.

One morning this summer, as we were joking before breakfast, Gery told me that a recent illness had been very difficult for him. He didn't seem like himself.

The next day, an ambulance arrived behind the dining hall.

Forty-eight hours later, Gery was gone.

As bad as he had apparently been feeling, he didn't reach out to the camp nurse until the morning he went to the hospital—when it was already too late to save him.

Gery's death was a stark reminder of the importance of kvetching.

Sometimes we don't speak up because we don't want to be difficult.

Sometimes we don't speak up because we're afraid.

And sometimes we don't speak up because we aren't sure whether anyone will really listen.

That brings me to us, as a Jewish community.

We encounter antisemitism and hostility in ways that can leave us wondering: **Should I say something? Should I let this go? Am I overreacting?**

Seemingly every day we encounter microaggressions against us.

Perhaps it is a “Globalize the Intifada” poster at the Pride Parade.

Or the large Rosh Hashanah meal at a Chabad Center in Thailand that had to be canceled due to the threat of violence.

Or the burned out shell of Montreal’s Kosher elite kosher restaurant, Noam, my family and witnessed this summer.

Or the nearly 25 minute standing ovation the movie NAZA received at its opening at the Venice Film Festival.

Or the Ed Sheeran concert, where his opening act Macklemore called out “Free Palestine” at his concert.

We Jews are always in the news.

And almost always for the wrong reasons.

As the rabbinic advisor to the Community Relations Council of the Buffalo Jewish Federation, I hear regularly from community members about antisemitic incidents they have experienced.

School musicals with anti-Jewish overtones. Swastikas carved into the wall of Jewish spaces. Anti-Israel comments in our children's classrooms.

So, yes, we have things to kvetch about.

But we also need to know how.

Here are three pieces of advice.

Number One: When something actually happens to you, speak up.

If someone makes an antisemitic remark, commits a hostile act, or does something that makes you feel unsafe or less than, tell someone. Come to me. Come to our leadership. Tell someone in the Jewish community who can help.

Your voice matters.

Number Two: When you encounter offensive speech, don't escalate it yourself.

We live in a country that protects free speech, even speech we find abhorrent. If something is dangerous, we may need to respond—but don't turn an individual confrontation into a tit-for-tat battle.

Tell us what you saw. Let us figure out whether and how to respond constructively.

Number Three—and this may be the hardest—don't turn every frustration into a public battle.

This is the Murmurs About Manna problem.

Not every annoyance requires our outrage. Not every offensive comment requires our response. Sometimes the most powerful thing we can do is decide that something isn't worth our energy.

And that brings me to my gift to you.

A few weeks ago, I volunteered with Jewish Federation employees at the City Mission.

While we were painting, I met the organization's CEO, Mark Jentsch. On his wrist was a bracelet from an organization called "A Complaint Free World."

Every time he complained, he moved the bracelet from one arm to the other.

He had already moved it once that morning.

So I thought: **What a perfect exercise for Yom Kippur.**

We have bracelets for each of you.

If you feel you need to complain less, move the bracelet each time you kvetch, and see if you can go a little longer between complaints.

But in honor of Gery, I want to offer another possibility.

If you are someone who tends to keep things inside, use the bracelet as a reminder to **raise our voices more.**

Because the goal isn't to become people who never raise our voices.

The goal is to become people who know **how to make our voices matter.**

This Yom Kippur, may we have the courage of Abraham to speak when something is wrong.

May we have the wisdom to recognize when something is merely a Murmur
About Manna.

And may we learn to hear the quiet voices around us—and our own—
before it is too late.

May we be written and sealed in the Book of Life.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah. An easy and meaningful fast.