

Be'ha'alotkha 5771 - Are We There Yet?
Rabbi David Lerner

Shabbat Shalom. Let's sing (sitting on chair and slapping knees to the beat).

*There's a train and it goes from the town to the countryside,
And where it goes, nobody knows, but it always comes out here!
And the whistle blows: "Toot, toot."
And the conductor says, "All aboard."
And the children say: "Are we there yet?!?"
And the rabbi says "Is it time for Shabbat yet?"
And the hazzan says, "I love to sing"
And sometimes the parents say, the teachers say & even Shelley says "Oy vey,
what a day!"*

Now, you might be wondering what our one of our Friday morning Shabbat songs in our Pre-school has to do with this moment.

Well, it is a fun song!

And our pre-school has started many of our young people on their Jewish educational journeys for the last two decades, including our Bat-Mitzvah: Joelle.

But, no, there's something else. This little song is full of basic stereotypes – like the rabbi being concerned about when Shabbat starts (like that happens!), and simple ideas that our youngest students can access.

Interestingly, the children are described as complaining – they are whining: "*Are we there yet?!?"*"

When we sing this together, our students love opening their hands and some make an exasperated facial expression.

"Are we there yet?!?"

Strange as it may sound, there is something enjoyable about complaining.

Even fun.

I know in my home, there is a fair amount of complaining: "When is dinner? What?!!? What's for dinner? That's what for dinner!. Eh. Why do I have to go? When will it be over?? Why can't we watch TV?!"

And for the sake of peace, I am leaving out all the adults complaints!

Psychologists offer a number of explanations for why people complain. First, it helps people share their feelings which can elicit sympathy and compassion. Second, it

connects people to others – especially to others who may share the same complaints, creating a community of complainers. Third, many people get anxious when things do not work out the way they want and when that happens, complaining helps them vent this frustration. Last, often people who frequently complain are focused on themselves.

The reality is that complaining does not always help yield the results the complainer wants. Since the complaints can be negative or relayed in a harsh way, they lead to hurt feelings and defensive reactions which serve only to stifle change and repair.

But, one thing is for certain: complaining has always been a part of the human experience. From young children to our most senior adults, for some, complaining is simply part of the way people communicate their feelings.

Complaining has certainly been a part of our people's experience in the world. From the Torah until today, Jews have been champion complainers. In *Annie Hall*, Woody Allen tells a Jewish joke that he believes summarizes life: "Two elderly women are at a Catskills mountain resort, and one of them says, 'Boy, the food at this place is really terrible.' The other one says, 'Yeah, I know, and such small portions.'"

Woody Allen's points out that Jews will complain about everything, even if they want more of it!

So, let's see how this plays out in this morning's parashah and if there are some lessons we can learn from it. As Joelle shared with us earlier, *Parashat Be'ha'alotkha* contains another famous narrative about the Israelites kvetching. Like the episode in the book of Exodus, the people are hungry and kvetchy!

While the *parashah* begins well – the *Menorah* is lit, the final preparations for the *Mishkan*, the temporary sanctuary in the wilderness, are made; the people are given a second opportunity for *Pesah*, and the people set out on their journey, things deteriorate quickly.

"The people took to complaining bitterly before Adonai." (Numbers 11:1). God hears and fire breaks out in the camp against the people; Moshe prays and the fire subsides.

But then, the *asafsuf* – the riffraff (you got to love it when Hebrew and English have similar onomatopoeias!), they felt a gluttonous craving.

"If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. Now our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all! All we can see is this manna!" (Numbers 11:4-6)

Hearing this again, God is not happy and neither is Moshe. In a classic response to complaining, Moshe passes on the negativity by complaining to God: "Why have you

laid the burden of these people on me?!? [...] Did I conceive all these people? [...] I cannot carry all these people myself, for it is too much for me..... “ (Numbers 11: 11-14)

Breaking this repeating cycle of complaining, the Holy One suggests that Moshe convene a council of 70 elders who can help him with the challenges of leadership.

After that, God provides an abundance of quail to satisfy the people’s hunger.

But the narrative continues with the incident of Eldad and Medad and the episode of Miriam and Aaron speaking out against Moshe because of his choice of a wife. Two vignettes demonstrate Moshe’s thoughtful leadership abilities.

In one episode, Miriam, Moshe’s own sister complains that Moshe has married a Cushite woman. But Moshe does not respond, he does not take his sister’s bait and turn her complaint into something worse. And, not only that, but when she takes ill immediately thereafter, Moshe prays for her with the words we sing each Shabbat as part of our prayer for the ill: “*El na refa na la* – God, please, heal her, please!” (Numbers 12:13)

And in the other incident, God comes down in a cloud, speaking to Moshe; God draws upon the spirit that was on Moshe and places it upon the seventy elders. And when the spirit rested upon them in the Tent of Meeting, they prophesied and didn’t get carried away.

Two men, one named Eldad and the other Medad, had remained in camp; and the spirit rested upon them - and while they were invited among the 70 elders, they had not gone out to the Tent - and they prophesied in the camp. A youth ran out and told Moses, saying, ‘Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp!’

And Joshua son of Nun, attendant to Moses from his youth, spoke up and said, ‘My lord Moses, restrain them!’ But Moses said to him, ‘Are you jealous on my account? Would that all God’s people were prophets, that Adonai place the Divine spirit upon them!’” (*Numbers* 11:25-29).

What was so egregious about what Eldad and Medad did? According to the Talmud, they were complaining and undermining Moshe’s leadership; they said, 'Moses shall die and Joshua shall bring Israel into the Land.'" (*Sanhedrin* 17a).

It is fascinating to see Moshe’s growth as a leader – when the people complain about the food at the beginning of the parashah, he is overwhelmed. But, now, when Eldad and Medad complain against him, he offers a different response. Now, he is able to separate himself from the complaint. His humble response is a model of leadership in action.

Similarly, when his sister gets even more personal – criticizing him and his wife, he does not let her critical words overwhelm him. He is able to remain her brother, not allowing her harsh critique push him away. And when she becomes ill, Moshe does not

her complaint affect his response. He prays for her health. Moshe does not become trapped by a cycle of negativity; as a gifted leader, he knows how to stop negative energy – transforming it into something positive.

While this is a parashah of complaints and critiques, we can learn much from the responses and from Moshe's own growth. Moshe develops from a figure exasperated when the people want to eat meat to one who is able to hear complaints and not allow them to overwhelm him.

The Torah teaches us that complaining is part and parcel of the human experience, but, we do not have to let it drag us down. Like Moshe, we should listen to complaints, determine if they have merit and respond thoughtfully and appropriately. Sometimes the best response is silence.

Another valuable resource is a sounding board. One key difference between the complaints about food and the incidents with Eldad and Medad and Miriam is that Moshe has his council of 70 elders in place around the Tent of Meeting. For helpful advice, Moshe merely had to walk outside the tent and speak with these experienced leaders.

Two clear lessons emerge – one for the inclination to complain and the other, for receiving complaints.

First, we should all use our filters more. We have them; we don't always use them. When we want to complain, we should run it by an internal screen – and ask: “is this complaint really important? Must it be shared? Right now?” And, if it is, how can I share it in a way that is not simply a complaint, but opens up the possibility of sharing in the solution and healthy problem-solving. And, most importantly, how can I share it in a way that is not blaming or hurtful to those who are on the other side of a complaint, since often complaints can become personal attacks.

Second, when hearing a complaint, we should try to respond sensitively, and not defensively. We should try to ask thoughtful questions that understand where a complaint is coming from. Often it is helpful to identify the feelings that lie behind the presenting issue. Sometimes they are related; sometimes they are not. With that approach and that information, we can transform a complaining moment into one of growth and shared vision.

There will always be moments and days when we say: “*Oy vey, what a day!*”

But we should decide carefully about how we say: “*Are we there yet?!?*”

And how we listen and respond to it.

With these ideas, we can help move a frustrating “*Are we there yet?!?*” to a step forward on our journey.

Shabbat Shalom.