

Gratitude from the Torah

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Parashat Vayigash

How do We Deal With our Natural Tendency to Complain?

Sharing Negative Emotions in a Balanced Purposeful Way

I don't want to be a complainer, but sometimes words of complaint do catch me off guard and slither slyly into my colloquy. It happens mostly with my husband. He has been very tolerant about allowing me to use him to get frustration out of my system, by discussing all the difficulties of my day. Venting my feelings not only helps take the edge off distressing emotions, it also really helps me work through all these challenges, by talking them out with an empathic listening ear or two. It is a basic need to occasionally express frustrations. People need to talk to loved ones about feelings, both positive and negative. We need to seek the opinions of those we trust when facing difficult choices or situations. Yet sometimes processing challenging emotions turns into unproductive complaints. Once we start venting, it can be difficult to stop. Excessive complaining can worsen our mood, make us feel helpless, and lead to a negative outlook on life. It can be a slippery slope that may even turn into lashon hara and gossip. While venting emotions is sometimes seen as a way to achieve catharsis, it often makes negative emotions even worse. A healthier form of complaining includes brainstorming solutions. If what we are going to share may include negative comments about others, halacha demands that we paraphrase our conversation with, "I want to share this for a *to'elet* (constructive purpose) ..." (Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, *Hilchot Lashon Hara*, 4:11). Include the specific purpose you aim to achieve such as, "I need help making a decision how to deal with x..." or "I need to process my emotions to be able to release them..." etc. In my experience, this paraphrasing actually helps us to stay focused on solution-oriented sharing.

Start with Gratitude Before Pouring Out the Pain of Your Heart

In a study published in the *Journal of Social Psychology*, researchers found that when people complain in order to achieve a certain result, they are happier than people who complain simply for the sake of complaining. (Kowalski RM, Allison B, Giumetti GW, et al. [Pet peeves and happiness: How do happy people complain?](#) *J Soc Psychol.* 2014;154(4):278-282. doi:10.1080/00224545.2014.906380). If our intent in sharing something negative is to remove the worry from our heart, it is considered intending for a *to'elet* for the future, for which the following Torah verse applies:

סֵפֶר מִשְׁלֵי פֶרֶק יב פְּסוּק כה דְאָגָה כֹּה דְאִישׁ יִשְׁחַנָּה וְדָבַר טוֹב יִשְׂמַחֶנָּה:

"If there is concern in a person's heart, let him speak about it, and a good word will make it cheerful" (*Mishlei* 12:25).

"...He should tell it to others," this is [the meaning of] the end of the verse: And a good word with which his friend consoles him will turn the worry into joy (Rashi, *ibid.*). Yet it is important to choose the people with whom we share our emotional challenges. If we are dealing with severe emotional hardships a therapist may be necessary. I believe in the Chabad custom initiated by Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who strongly encouraged everyone to have their own personal spiritual mentor. Every one of us needs a spiritual teacher and mentor, or a *mashpiach*.

We need both a mentor and a friend as it states, "Make for yourself a Rabbi and acquire a friend" (*Ethics of Our Fathers* 1:6). The most important "friend" and mentor is no one but the Almighty. As Rabbi Nachman teaches "Speak to Hashem as you would to a close friend" (*Sefer Likkutei Eitzot, Hitbodedut* 20). According to the guidelines of *hitbodedut* (speaking with Hashem in our own words), we always start our conversation by expressing gratitude and thanks.

Why Did the Torah Mention how Ya'acov was Complaining to Pharaoh?

ספר בראשית פרק מז פסוק ז וַיָּבֵא יוֹסֵף אֶת יַעֲקֹב אָבִיו וַיַּעֲמְדֵהוּ לְפָנָיו פָּרְעֹה וַיְבָרֶךְ יַעֲקֹב אֶת פָּרְעֹה:
(ח) וַיֹּאמֶר פָּרְעֹה אֶל יַעֲקֹב כַּמָּה יָמֵי שָׁנֶיךָ חַיִּי: (ט) וַיֹּאמֶר יַעֲקֹב אֶל פָּרְעֹה יָמֵי שָׁנַי מְגוּרֵי שְׁלֹשִׁים וּמֵאָת:
שָׁנָה מְעַט וְרַעִים הָיוּ יָמֵי שָׁנַי חַיִּי וְלֹא הִשְׁיִגוּ אֶת יָמֵי שָׁנַי חַיִּי אֲבֹתַי בְּיָמֵי מְגוּרֵיהֶם:

"So, Yosef brought his father Ya'acov and stood him before Pharaoh, and Ya'acov greeted Pharaoh. Then Pharaoh said to Ya'acov, 'How many are the days of the years of your life?'

Ya'acov answered Pharaoh, 'The days of the years of my sojourning are one hundred thirty years. The days of the years of my life have been few and miserable, and they have not reached the days of the years of the lives of my forefathers in the days of their sojourning'" (Bereishit 47:7-9).

Ya'acov's first conversation with Pharaoh sounds like complaining mentioning how his life has been short and miserable. Ya'acov moreover expressed his feeling dissatisfied that his life didn't measure up to the lives of his forefathers. Although it is natural to compare ourselves with others, this may engender unrealistic expectations which are not helpful when it comes to overcoming negativity. We complain when we feel there is a significant gap between an expectation and reality, according to Dr. Guy Winch, author of the book "[The Squeaky Wheel: Complaining the Right Way to Get Results, Improve Your Relationships, and Enhance Self-Esteem.](#)" Although Ya'acov's life had been filled with challenges, he also did experience relief from each of them. Ya'acov managed to assuage and make peace with Esav, his brother, who attempted to kill him. His only daughter Dina was violated and taken captive, but she was soon returned to the family. Although he was separated from his favorite son for 22 years, he was now reunited with Yosef. Then why was Ya'acov still complaining? And what is the point of the Torah mentioning the complaint of our holy patriarch?

The Consequences of Complaint

Perhaps the Torah wants us to learn a lesson from Ya'acov about how to avoid negativity and complaint. Is it ethical for a person to complain to the king? And what sense is there in saying, "...and they [my days] have not attained unto the days of the years of the life of my fathers?" Ya'acov is still alive and may yet possibly attain them and live even longer than his fathers did! Our father Ya'acov may have turned gray, and he appeared very old. Pharaoh wondered about his age, for most people of his time did not live very long as the lifespan of mankind had already been shortened. He therefore asked him, "*How many are the days of the years of your life, as I have not seen a man as aged as you in my entire kingdom?*" Ya'acov's answer to Pharaoh contains 33 words of complaint, on his level, he is punished that his life was shortened to 147 exactly 33 years less than the life of his father Yitzchak who lived 180 years. When Ya'acov said, "...they were few and bad," the Holy One, blessed be He, said, "I saved you from Esav and Lavan and returned both Dina and Yosef to you, and you complain that the days of your life are "few and bad"? I swear that like the number of words from "and he said" until "in the days of their sojourning" - that number will be lacking from your years, that you will not live as long as your father, Yitzchak." They are 33 words, and this

number is missing from his life, for behold, Yitzchak lived 180 years and Ya'acov only lived 147 (Da'at Zekenim, *Bereishit* 47:8). When the midrash says to count the words from "vayomer" ("and he said"), it doesn't refer to Ya'acov's response. The only way to arrive at the number 33 is if you start earlier, from when Pharaoh "said." The midrash holds Ya'acov responsible from the moment Pharaoh opens his mouth to ask the question; Ya'acov is criticized, even punished, not only for complaining but also for just looking like he had something to complain about!

Those Living Lives of Purpose Become a Blessing to the World

Our Sages tell us that sometimes from our patriarchs we learn what not to do. Malbim interprets the exchange between Ya'acov and Pharaoh differently. He explains: You want to know the days of my years, Pharaoh? I've lived on this earth for one hundred and thirty years, but the years in which I've been able to fulfill my potential as a human being in this world, my destiny, have been limited because of my challenges. Yet, I have struggled to make sure that I can always achieve my greatness despite my challenges. Because ultimately, we are not judged by the years we live in this world, but by what we have done, even when there are obstacles in the way. The trick is not only to live, it's not only to breathe and occupy space in this world, but it's the ability to live with moments that matter, despite the challenges. The ability for us to create a destiny and be an aspiration, even when there are obstacles. Ultimately, the next verse really defines it, because at that point, Pharaoh asks Ya'acov to bless him, and we're told: "Ya'acov blesses Pharaoh" (*Bereishit* 47:10). Indeed, it is people who have obstacles in their way but are able to overcome them, that become blessings to us. They are blessings because they show us how to live our lives, not just occupying space in this world, but living lives of purpose and meaning.

Gratitude Focus for the Week of Parashat Vayigash

It's normal to notice that some of your daily communication involves dwelling on grievances or complaints. But if you notice a pattern that many of your words are focused on negativity, it may be a sign that you need to find a way to address your complaints. The first step is to become aware of complaining too much or slipping into rumination. The next step is to try something new. These proven strategies can help:

- **Practice Gratitude** – Counting your blessings can be a great way to get out of a bad mood or switch your focus away from your frustrations. It's hard to complain when you're thinking about how blessed you are.
- **Journaling** – Writing in a journal brings many health and wellness-related benefits. The trick to effective journaling is to write about the problem and your feelings about it, then brainstorm solutions and see the positives in your situation.
- **Reaching out to Mentors and Supportive Loved Ones** – Social support is a great stress reliever, and if you're blessed, you have some supportive and wise people in your life to talk to when you're down. Instead of complaining to them, laugh with them. If you face a more significant challenge, tell them how you're feeling, get their thoughts (and maybe a hug), and move on to happier topics. No complaining is necessary.
- **Taking Steps to Solve the Problem** – The urge to complain comes from dissatisfaction with something going on in life (often coupled with a feeling of inability to change it). Complaints

can be a signal that action is needed. When you do need to complain, try doing it in a way that helps forward your goals (instead of just complaining for the sake of complaining).

- **Cultivating Optimism and Replacing Negative Thoughts With Positive Ones** - It's much easier to drop negative habits by replacing them with positive ones. Replacing negative thoughts and words with optimistic ones brings so many benefits. When that negative voice inside starts to complain, invent a counter-voice that topples it. When you focus more on minimizing your complaining and maximizing your gratitude and excitement about life, you will likely feel a difference in your stress levels and your overall life satisfaction.