

# STOP COMPLAINING !

Leo Michel Abrami

Some people are always in a mood to complain. When they do not do so publicly but often feel that way in their heart. Many have learned to hide their feelings and have resolved not to answer questions about personal matters.

An anecdote is told about an Iranian Jew who escaped illegally from Iran and arrived in Israel. He was interviewed by Israeli reporters who asked him some sensitive questions.

“Mr. Sulemani, please tell us, how was life for you in Iran?”

“No complaint,” answered the new immigrant.

“How is the Jewish community maintaining itself?”

“As well as it can.” answered the man.

“Can you describe for us the nature of your relations with your fellow Iranians?”

“No complaint. Just like all human relations, some are better than others,” replied the Iranian man.

Getting impatient with their interviewee, a reporter then asked him a pointed question:

“Why then, did you leave Iran to come to Israel?”

“Now, you are asking,” said the man, “I came to Israel because here one may complain, without the fear of being arrested by the police...”

Indeed, in a totalitarian state, one is not allowed to complain about anything, because the authorities might consider your complaint a form of criticism of

the government and that would be tantamount to committing an act of subversion. In the free world, one can express his dissatisfaction whenever we feel we have been treated unfairly. That is an axiom of freedom in a democratic country.

Some people, however, have a tendency to complain whatever happens to them. There are dissatisfied with the way their doctors are treating them, the way their children are growing up, the way their neighbors behave and the way Destiny is treating them.

The philosopher Maimonides<sup>1</sup> aptly describes this attitude in his Commentary to the Mishnah,

*There are people who complain that life is too short, that it ends before a person is done preparing for it. The truth, however, is that many of them live as though they had eternity at their disposal and they waste much of it. Our lifetime, if we used it properly, should be sufficient to accomplish great achievements. But if we squander our life, we feel as though our years are flying by, and as if we had no time to achieve anything.*

*The problem, then, is not that we are allotted a short life, but rather that we are extravagant in spending it. Thus a careless son or daughter can quickly dissipate the inheritance left by their parents, while a meagre estate may flourish in the hands of a wise and thrifty person. Of what, then, might we justifiably complain? Should it not be that we often lack the wisdom to make the most of the years allotted to us?*

Maimonides' insight into the nature of the human personality was certainly correct. Some people are whining for days no end. Friends, there is no need

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<sup>1</sup> Maimonides (1135-1204), rabbi, physician and philosopher; Cairo, Egypt

to keep complaining, when all that is required is the courage to confront our worries and seek a solution to our problems.

Dr Laura Schlesinger, the noted radio personality, has examined these concerns in her book *'Stop Whining, Start Living.'*<sup>2</sup> In an amazing way, she basically re-affirms what Maimonides was saying:

*No matter what you've suffered or continue to suffer, you should be able to say: I'm going to do my best to help myself get over that bump. I am going to look for a solution. Even if you don't like your life, stop talking about your unhappiness and try to fix it, no matter how difficult or impossible your situation may be.*

*While it is healthy to vent occasionally, endless rumination on the negative only keeps you paralyzed in misery, it reinforces the feeling of hopelessness, and demoralizes those around you who feel helpless to bring any happiness into your life. Instead, you should Stop Whining and Start Living."*

The author encourages "whiners" to shift perspectives and reject negative thoughts and emotions. They should instead show appreciation and gratitude for what is good in their life, and start loving dear ones and the world around them. If they were to do so, they would soon feel better about themselves and uplift their interactions with family, friends, colleagues, in incredible ways, instead of moaning about why they can't fulfill their responsibilities.

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<sup>2</sup> Dr Laura Schlesinger, *Stop Whining and Start Living*, Harper Perennial, 2008

*Much of our complaining, says Dr Laura, is meant to get other people to feel sorry for us, and to take care of us in the hope to be babied by them because it feels so good to be nurtured. Whining may provide some degree of comfort, but it will soon dissipate and you will resume your whining.*

*We must not always focus on the negative and ignore the positive. Instead of whining and complaining about our lot, we should learn to count our blessings and remember that hardships are part of life. We must then decide how we will handle them.*

Dr. Laura tells us that most people will eventually stop whining when they reach the point of getting tired of being unhappy. They will then recognize their problems and realize that certain things can't be changed. At that stage, they will stop fighting them and they will start looking for constructive ways of fulfilling their vocation.

The Maggid of Zlotchow, one of the disciples of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, suggested that all must realize our calling in life; we must acknowledge our uniqueness and act accordingly.

*Every person born into this world represents a new entity, that never existed before, an original entity that has no equal. It is therefore the duty of every person to realize that he/she is unique in the world, in his particular character, and that there has never been someone like him in the world before, for if there had been someone like him, there would have been no need for him to exist.*

*Every single person is a new being who is called upon to fulfill his particular vocation in this world. Every human being's foremost task is the actualization of his unique, unprecedented and never recurring potentialities, and not the repetition of something that another, be it even the greatest, has already achieved.*<sup>3</sup>

Since every one seems to have a specific task to fulfill in this lifetime, there would be no sense refusing to accept it in order to do somebody else's task. We might keep complaining about it for the rest of our life. Teviah of the Fiddler on the Roof knew that truth too well. "If I were a rich man, people might think I am also wise..." And what did Teviah the Milkman do? He developed his own wisdom and did not complain about his poverty.

(We must assume our calling with love and humility because we cannot escape it. Zusiah said to his disciples some time before his death: In the world to come, they will not ask me why I was not like Moses or King David, they will ask me "why were you not Zusiah?")

Even a person that is deprived of some of the abilities which are granted to most people, like Hellen Keller, did not complain about her condition. She just went on to discover a new dimension of her personality and she was able to work for the welfare of humanity by using the faculties of her mind.

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Buber, *The Way of Man*, The Citadel Press, Secaucus, NJ, 1963, p.16

Some ‘whiners’ have gone so far as to blame Providence itself for all their woes. They keep accusing God of not giving heed to their prayers, while failing to recognize the many marks of God’s caring for them. There is a poignant anecdote which beautifully illustrate this predicament.

It happened a few years ago. A terrible hurricane devastated Louisiana. Heavy rains and strong winds damaged several dams and as a result, the water was rising dangerously in the whole area. Many people drowned as their houses were swept away by the raging tide. The chairman of the Society for the Protection of Cruelty took upon himself to save the animals that were stranded without any possibility of escape. He was carrying cats and dogs and taking them to a safe place.

After a day of laborious work, one of his neighbors came by in a row boat and told him: “Let me take you to safe grounds, for you cannot continue this work anymore with water reaching your neck.” But the man refused saying: “There are still many animals to be rescued; I cannot leave now. Don’t worry: the Almighty will watch over me.”

A moment later, a rescuer in a motor boat approached him and begged him to get aboard because the water was rising dangerously, but he refused again because he wanted to continue rescuing more animals.

“Don’t worry about me,” he said, “God will protect me.”

Soon after, the Federal Guards flying in a helicopter, spotted him, lowered a rescue rope and spoke through a loud speaker, “Good man, we have come to rescue you. Please sit in the basket and hold on to the rope and we will take you to a safe place.”

“No thanks,” he said, “I cannot leave as yet. Don’t worry about me, God will surely help me finish my work.”

And then, the inevitable happened. The man was carried away by a powerful stream of water and drowned.

When his soul appeared in the Heavenly court, he said,

“Dear God, why did you let me down? I was trying to do Your work on earth by saving your creatures in distress and bringing them to safety. Why did you abandon me to the raging waters?”

And God answered,

“You dare complain, you, foolish man, when I sent three people to save you, including a motor boat and a helicopter, but you refused their help!”

Do we have the right to blame God for the faults we commit ourselves. We are indeed responsible for many of the woes that befall us and we often cause ourselves more harm than the cataclysms of nature, over which we have no control.

“*Tamim tihyeh im Hashem Eloheykha*” “You must act with integrity toward God.”<sup>4</sup> says the Torah. The Rabbi of Kotzk interpreted this verse:

“Not only must we not deceive God, but we must not deceive ourselves either, by denying the obvious.” We have an obligation to

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<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy, !8:13

assess the faculties and potentialities that lay hidden in our personality. We may still have a chance to make a valuable contribution to the welfare of the community in which we live and help “*straighten that which is crooked*”<sup>5</sup> as Isaiah said “*ve-haya he-akov le-mishor*”. For that is the task we must fulfill without relying on Providence to do it for us.

What we need, then, is less complaining, less whining and more action: we must change what can be changed and accept that which cannot be changed. This motto is not reserved for the members of Alcoholics Anonymous only, it should be part of our plan of action too. What we need is more courage to face our problems and find the solution they require.

Helen Keller, deaf and blind, managed to teach and educate a whole generation. She did not hesitate to write:

*The world is full of suffering but also full of people who are overcoming it.*

All around us, there are people struggling with disease, infirmity, loneliness, hunger, and hopelessness. Yet many of those same people are paragons of goodness, of giving of themselves and of love. This attitude does not erase the obstacles in life, but it enables us to overcome them.

On this Day of Remembrance, we pray that we may assume our moral obligations with resolution, so that we may not have to complain about life or about our destiny but express our gratitude to God for all the bounties he is providing for us every day. Amen

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<sup>5</sup> Isaiah, 40:4



