

Yom Kippur Morning 2009

Stop Kvetching & Start Living

A young monk joined a religious order which required total silence. After five years his superior allowed him to speak two words. The monk frowned and said “hard bed.” His superior apologized and said, “I’m so sorry. We will try to get you a more comfortable one.”

Five years later, his superior told him that he may speak two more words.” The young monk grimaced and said “cold food.”

“I’m sorry,” said his superior. “I’ll see what we can do.”

On his 15th anniversary, the monk’s superior said, “you may speak two more words.”

The monk rolled his eyes and said “I quit.”

“Its probably for the best,” replied his superior. “You’ve done nothing but complain ever since you got here.”

On this holy day, we examine our attitude toward life and the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Do we spend our time bemoaning our problems, our challenges, all those things we lack, everything that is wrong in our lives, or do we feel grateful for all the ways in which we are blessed? Do we allow our circumstances to dictate the quality of our lives? Have we quit trying to impact the world because of the impact the world has had upon us?

None of us is immune from life’s challenges: the death of loved ones, insecurity about jobs, illness, aging, less than perfect marriages, issues with our children, our parents, feuds with friends or relatives, rejection, insecurity about our ability to succeed, financial stability, an unknown future.

We all face the daily annoyances of dealing with the imperfections of others: activities that weren’t well organized, our spouse coming home late from work, a friend didn’t follow through on a promise, a parent, teacher, or friend treated us unfairly, another kid made fun of our child, we had to wait a half hour for an appointment, the traffic made us late for work, the other kids have the latest ipod and I don’t.

Its enough for us to say “I quit. I can’t be happy. I can’t feel fulfilled. No one likes me. Life stinks. I’m a loser.”

But in spite of it all, today we stand before God and commit ourselves to choosing life. What does that mean...to “choose life?” Do we have control over the kind of life we want for ourselves? Can we choose to be happy? Or do we allow our circumstances to dictate the quality of our existence?

The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot, the sayings of the ancestors, Chapter 4 answers these questions by teaching, “Ayzehu ashir? Who is rich? Hasameach b’helko. One who is happy with his portion.” We have the ability to choose a life of fulfillment and happiness for ourselves and others if we appreciate recognize our own ability to improve our situations, if we harness our misfortunes to make us stronger, if we use our resources to help others.

Hasameach b’helko – One who is happy with his portion is one who takes charge of finding fulfillment in life.

Two construction workers sit down to eat lunch together. The first day one opens his lunch box and says, “Yuck. A meatloaf sandwich. I hate meatloaf sandwiches.” The second day he opens his lunchbox and says “meatloaf again? I’m sick and tired of meatloaf sandwiches.” The third day he opens his lunchbox and says “I’ve had it. Day after day I get nothing but meatloaf. I want something else for a change.” His coworker, trying to be helpful, says “well maybe you could ask your wife to pack you something else?” The man looks at him in bewilderment and says “what are you talking about? I make my own lunch.”

In a book called “A Complaint Free World” author Will Bowen tells us that we can enjoy the life we always wanted if we just stop complaining, criticizing and gossiping. He claims we can relieve ourselves of chronic pain, heal relationships, improve our careers and become an overall happier person (and make a better lunch) just by changing our attitude.

Robert Kennedy said, “There are those who look at things the way they are and ask why? I dream of things that never were and ask why not?”

Instead of complaining about racism, segregation and the oppression of his people, Martin Luther King said “I have a dream.”

Barak Obama empowered his followers with the slogan “Yes We Can.”

The Talmud teaches that when the Israelites were in the desert on their way to the Promised Land, God gave them exactly as much manna as they needed to survive. The lesson was that “what someone possesses at any given moment is the true and precise measure of what that person needs to move closer to fulfilling their true purpose in creation.”

We have all the tools we need to make the best of our situations.

Hasameach b'helko – We can be happy with our portion when we use our circumstances to propel us to a better place. Will Bowen talks about a slingshot. The further you pull it back, the closer to the breaking point you stretch it, the farther it will fling the projectile forward once you let it go. When we have been stretched to our limits, pulled back to an uncomfortable place against our will, we have the power to soar in life once we let go of the pain.

Two of the three past presidents of our country grew up in single parent homes. The father of both Bill Clinton and Barak Obama left them when they were young. Barak Obama was raised in a poor, mixed racial family. His mother also died at a young age. He had all the cards stacked against him except for his intelligence, his ambition, his courage and his desire to rise above his circumstances. Last week we spoke of Ted Kennedy who experienced so many tragedies in his life that no one would have blamed him for snapping, giving up and wallowing in self-pity. But they used life's harshest lessons to catapult them to the greatest heights of achievement. Their adversities gave them courage and the strength to overcome obstacles less daunting than the loss of a loved one. They harnessed life's bitter lessons for the good. They used their inner strength to move themselves and everyone around them to a better place.

It is a fact of nature that when one grape ripens, it sends out a signal to the other grapes around it to ripen as well. Because we have many members who are sameach b'helko, happy with their portion as Jews and members of our community, they inspire others to choose life for our temple.

We not only survive, but thrive as a synagogue community because so many share their personal strengths, from cleaning and fixing the building, to reaching out to potential members, to teaching our children, to working on our finances, to raising money. It would be so easy to just sit back and complain that we could have a better building, that a program could have been better organized or publicized, that problem could have been solved in a better way. Just this week one of our newest members said he noticed that our website wasn't totally up to date. Instead of complaining about it, he volunteered to fix it. We continue to exist because we are sameach b'helkaynu, happy with who we are and what we have to offer and that positive energy inspires us to choose life for our congregation.

Ayzehu Ashir? Who is wealthy? Another way to translate Hasameach B'helko, one who is happy with his portion is one who uses his portion for happiness. The rabbis teach that wealth comes from happiness, not the other way around. Money only has value insofar as one can spend it on holy purposes, such as giving

tzedakah, using it to improve the life of someone else. One rabbi taught - what good does it do to walk by a beggar with \$10 in my pocket if the beggar needs the money to eat? Is the purpose of the money to sit in my pocket or to be put to the use for which it was intended?

In a Globe article entitled Can money buy happiness? Researchers found that money actually makes people happy only when they spend it on others, give donations to charities or spend it on experiences which they can enjoy with others. When we use our money as a tool to choose life for others, it makes us happy with our own portion.

Who among us is wealthy? Anyone who has the ability to see themselves as victors instead of victims, by turning problems into opportunities, setbacks into challenges, struggles into journeys.

This is God's challenge to us today. Not to choose a life of silent misery like the monk or be stuck with the same old meatloaf sandwich, but to use our voice, our creativity, our inner strength and our time on this earth to make a difference.

We end our holy day services with the wish that our days and years will increase. My wish for all of us is that we not only increase the days of our lives, but the life in our days.