



Let's try not to whinge in the New Year!

Sue and I went to a film a couple of months ago, that we both thought was great. It was called Red Joan and starred Judi Dench in the title role. The plot, based on a true story, was gripping and made you reflect on what you would do in similar circumstances. Given that tonight, as the New Year starts, we commence our new theme for this year of Justice, Justice shall you pursue, it is worth pointing out that it grappled with questions of international justice, deterrence and peace keeping. The parking was easy, the tickets were a fair price. We could hear, we could see, the seats were comfortable, the cinema was the right temperature, we were not too close to the screen, nor too far away – no one was talking or using their phone or crinkling their chip packets. In short – we had nothing to complain about. We didn't need to say 'it was good but...' and I remember feeling mildly surprised at this slightly unusual response!

My friend and colleague Rabbi Jackie Ninio wrote one of the Elul reflections a couple of weeks ago, to help us get into the right frame of mind for the New Year period, commencing this evening.

A friend of hers had drawn her attention to the Reverend Will Bowen and his "21 day no complaint challenge." Reverend Bowen is the minister of a small church in Kansas and he was running a series about prosperity, when he realised that everyone felt that they were not prosperous enough, that they wanted more. Yet despite this, all they did was complain about what they actually did have. So he decided to do

something about it. He knew that doing an action for 21 days straight changes behaviour. This is rather more than Jewish tradition states – but perhaps we're just quick learners. According to the Rabbis, if you do something just three times you make it into a regular obligation. But anyway Reverend Bowen ordered 500 silicone bracelets and handed them out to his congregation and set them a challenge: See if you can go for 21 days without making a complaint. Put the wristband on and every time you complain, criticize or gossip, move it to the other wrist and start the count again.

Will also took up the challenge himself, and he found it was much harder than he expected. It took him months before he went for 21 days in a row without a complaint. His congregation were similarly challenged but the word spread and before long, Will had started a revolution.

Apparently, 11 million people in 106 countries have taken the challenge (which must be good for the silicone bracelet manufacturers, so it's worth remembering that silicone is made mainly from sand!).

It seems that it takes the average person between 4 and 8 months to go for 21 days in a row without complaining. It is estimated that on average, we make 15-30 complaints a day and 30-40% of our conversations consist of complaining. Will notes that complaining has become a competitive sport - we try to outdo one another with our list of complaints. And when we complain, our brain activity is rewired, we find it harder to identify the positive, and we dwell more on the negative parts of our lives. Unchecked, this can spiral and place us in a world of unhappiness and dissatisfaction. But when we remove the complaints and negativity the opposite happens: we are happier, more content with our lives and find gratitude in what we do have, rather than focusing on

what we don't. So, since this period is about changing ourselves, this sounds like an excellent place to start, and this is my challenge tonight.

Jews, we should acknowledge, do have a bit of a reputation for complaining. After all, it didn't take long for the Israelites to start moaning to Moses about the lack of water and food – saying it would have been better if they'd never left slavery in Egypt! Even when they got manna, they complained that it was not succulent, until God sent quail, and they ate so much that it reportedly came out of their nostrils! Then they complain about Moses' leadership, and on it goes.

We also have a goal of Tikkun Olam – of healing or improving the world. In the interest of 'continuous product improvement' and recognising that the world is not yet perfect, I think it is still important to leave room to make suggestions for improvement – but we need to be very careful to be positive, appreciative, kind, gentle and helpful when doing so.

Rabbi Ninio, who was our Sydney team member on the editorial committee for our new machzor, remembered reading about a woman who wanted to compliment someone for the service she received at a department store. She called the store and asked for the place where she could lodge her praise. The operator did not know where to send her call. There was a complaints department but nowhere to direct a call of satisfaction and gratitude. Rabbi Jackie suggests that sometimes we are a little like the department store - we have lots of outlets for lodging our complaints, lots of ways to find the negative, which obstructs our ability to find the good and to express satisfaction and appreciation.

Actually, our tradition does have many ways of saying thank-you, of appreciating how lucky we are – perhaps we just miss them or take them for granted. Every service contains the T'filah, and that contains the Modim prayer – meaning thanks! And we thank God for the produce of the earth and the fruit of the vines and trees before we eat, and the food and the land that produces it when we say Birkat Hamazon after eating.

So as Rosh Hashanah is the time for us to commit to changing ourselves, let's join the revolution and take up the "21 day no complaint challenge" and see how we go – and try to say blessings and show gratitude for what we do have and too readily take for granted. Tonight, let's try to enter into the new year from the perspective of gratitude and positivity rather than grumbles and complaints and negativity. We know it won't be easy or immediate, but we can imagine that it can be done, and that we'd be happier, and make those we interact with happier, if we could make this transition in ourselves, and we can easily understand how it could influence the world around us for good. We already have some models around us to emulate, and we call them mensches.

So let's set the goal to complete the challenge, and change ourselves before next Rosh Hashanah! Good luck, and may your year ahead be filled with happiness and appreciation, joy, blessings and gratitude. Join us at the end for a quick kiddush with honey cake – and do pick up a bracelet on the way out! L'shanah Tovah