

**The Whine Spectator  
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Are your friends making you fat? This was the question posed in the headline of an article in the New York Times magazine on September 13, 2009, which described what is known as the Framingham Heart Study. In 1948, researchers recruited 5,209 men and women between the ages of 30 and 62 from the town of Framingham, Massachusetts, and began conducting extensive physical examinations and lifestyle interviews, looking for common patterns related to the development of cardiovascular disease. The study continued with the next generation, and has now spanned a period of over six decades, yielding a wealth of information about risk factors for this illness. But two years ago, two social scientists named Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler began mining the data from this study, making an unrelated powerful discovery: good health behaviors can pass from one person to another in the same manner as contagious viruses do, and bad behaviors- like smoking, obesity and unhappiness- have the same effect. Already since the 1930's, social scientists have been studying what is known as Social Contagion, in which behaviors and emotions experienced by one person in a group rapidly spread to an entire group or community. In point of fact, however, this is not something new discovered by psychologists; we have an excellent example right in this morning's Torah reading.

The tone of the Torah's narrative of the travels of the Jewish people suddenly turns dark, introduced with the ominous words

**במדבר פרק יא**

(א) ויהי העם כמתאננים רע באזני יקוק

The people were looking to complain, and it was evil in the ears of Hashem. Hashem heard and His anger flared, and a fire from Hashem burned among them, consuming the periphery of the camp. The Torah does not specify what exactly their complaint was, but the context seems to be instructive. Immediately after this episode, demonstrating the social contagion of discontent, the **אספסוף**, the rabble rousers of the Jewish people, began to voice their own complaints:

**במדבר פרק יא**

(ד) והאספסוף אשר בקרבנו התאוה וישבו ויבכו גם בני ישראל ויאמרו מי יאכלנו בשר:  
(ה) זכרנו את הדגה אשר נאכל במצרים חנם את הקשאים ואת האבטחים ואת החציר ואת הבצלים ואת השומים:  
(ו) ועתה נפשנו יבשה אין כל בלתי אל המן עינינו:

But the multitude among them began to have strong cravings. Then even the children of Israel once again began to cry, and they said, "Who will feed us meat? We remember the fish that we ate in Egypt free of charge, the cucumbers, the watermelons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now, our bodies are dried out, for there is nothing at all; we have nothing but manna to look at."

Reading this narrative, there is one question that always strikes me. What on earth did anyone have to complain about? Everything they needed was provided for them; their clothes never frayed, they never lacked for food, as the *man* was always available to them, and they never had to worry about asking direction as the Clouds of Glory acted as their spiritual GPS. There was nothing they should have wanted for; why were they complaining? And furthermore, in the next episode, of all the things the **אספסוף** asked for, why did they complain about meat? It is perhaps understandable that they might have felt nostalgia Egyptian foods, but who said they ever had meat in Egypt?

The Sforno explains that in fact, the Jewish people recognized that living a life in which God himself took care of their every need was a rare privilege- but there was one downside: They had nothing to complain about, so they complained anyway, just for the sake of it. Listen to the way the Sfas Emes and a number of other Chassidic masters interpret the claims of the אספסוף. All the Torah tells us about the impetus for their claims was the nebulous statement that they התאוו תאוה, they experienced a consuming hunger. What was the object of their hunger? The Sfas Emes and others use the redundant wording to explain that they had everything, so they complained about the only thing they could- they had a תאוה for תאוה- they complained that they had nothing to want!

Imagine; having everything provided to you, and still complaining just for the sake of it- and complaining precisely *because* everything is provided. It sounds ludicrous to us; if *we* had everything we wanted, we would *never* complain. But if we are honest with ourselves, we are not that much different- complaining is hard to resist, and understandably so:

First of all, complaining is enticing because it is a form of sharing. When we phrase our own discomfort and unhappiness as categorical statements about a what we view as negative situation, we shift some of the psychological burden from ourselves to others. The British psychoanalyst Melanie Klein coined the term “projective identification” to describe this condition, in which the individual deals with emotional conflict or internal or external stressors by falsely attributing them to another person or situation. When we complain, it’s not longer our issue- it’s a problem everyone should be aware of. The best part is that by framing our issues as problems, we remove the pressure of seeking solutions. And there is another, related benefit of complaining. We all have annoyances and stressors in our lives to

complain about. Sometimes, they are major, like illness, death, financial issues or other personal problems. Others are less severe, such as being kicked out of our seat in shul or having difficulty gaining access to Kiddush. When people are bound together by a common complaint, it creates a sense of community. This is particularly true when complaining takes the form of reminiscences, in which our negative perception of the present is colored by shared memories of the past. It was this technique that the **הַסַּפְסַפִּים** used to great effect in fomenting mayhem. By crying for something they knew everyone would want, and invoking mutually shared, sepia-toned memories of the “good old days” in Egypt, they used the power of social contagion to spread discontent, thus creating a community of complaint.

But complaining is not just enticing because it allows us to share; it's enticing because *it feels good*- and because not complaining may induce a sense of withdrawal, almost as though part of our identity is missing. In an article in Slate magazine's women's feature called Double X in October of last year, managing editor Jessica Grose (unrelated to our dinner co-chair by the same name) and founding editor Hanna Rosin conducted an experiment in which they attempted to go for an entire month without complaining. Jessica Grose described the epiphany that led to this experiment:

“It was sunset and I was being ferried by my future uncle-in-law around Lake Superior in Northern Minnesota while a warm breeze wafted into the rental car window. My longtime boyfriend, who had just proposed, was sitting in front of me, turning around every few minutes to beam in my general direction. We were on our way to get pies...*Life is pretty good right now*, I thought. *I don't have anything to complain about*. Which led to a twinge of panic: *I have nothing to complain about*. This shining moment of whine-free living made me realize how much kvetching I do on a daily

basis. If I am honest with myself, I would estimate that about 70 percent of the things that come out of my mouth are gripes...”

This is exactly what Bnei Yisrael did in the desert. They enjoyed complaining so much that when there was nothing to complain about, they still found a way, as do we- even if our life is good on the balance, and there is no real reason for us to do so.

Finally, complaining is a way of seeking validation, sometimes through competitive griping. If we can show that our lives are more stressful, or somehow worse, others will feel for us and give us the validation and sympathy we crave. Psychologists have identified competitive complaining as especially common among couples, often being used as a weapon to get out of household and child rearing tasks. Perhaps that was what was going on in the desert as well; The **מתאווננים** began complaining, and not to be outdone, the **אספסוף** started complaining as well.

Of course, complaining is not always inappropriate. When we complain over an injustice, or when we offer constructive solutions for that which bothers us, this is not the corrosive, narcissistic, projective complaining in which we engage too often- it is productive and positive, and can lead to lasting and meaningful change. .

Our challenge is to be self aware; to recognize the manifold ways in which we have been blessed by Hashem, making sure we don't squander our happiness by seeking misery ourselves, and creating it in others. Let us learn from the cautionary tale of the **מתאווננים** and

the **אספסוף** and harness the power of social contagion to create a positive community of happiness and joy.