

Our Anger

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About a month ago, I was driving back from a rabbinic retreat when I noticed a large red billboard by the side of the road. Being from SC I'm not used to seeing billboards and this one was particularly noticeable. It said, "Kick the bums out". At first I didn't know exactly what it meant but then I looked at the bottom of the sign and it said "Sponsored by the Tea Party". That's all it said. My first reaction was, well, in the political arena, that's a slogan that's been used before. But given the media coverage of the Tea Party and the kind of anger being expressed by that movement, it was clear who the bums were. In a way, this sign came to represent my growing concern over the disintegration of civil discourse in our culture and the ever-increasing pitch of disagreement. The level of anger and rage in our society is rising. It is in our families, in our schools and in our synagogues and other manifestations of public life. We see it on the television, we hear it on the radio and we read it in the newspapers. And it gets all over us.

How have we have become angry. Why? What are we angry about? And what are we going to do about it? Fortunately for us, Jewish tradition has a lot of useful things to say about this powerful human emotion-

The Torah contains a core story that teaches us about anger. During the 40 days between the first of Ellul (the month before Rosh Hashanah) and the end of Yom Kippur, Moses was up on Mount Sinai, with the Holy One for the second time. The first 40 days were the days surrounding the giving of the 10 commandments, now known as the time we celebrate Shavuot. The 40 days we're looking at during this season come right after the Israelites built the Golden

Calf. They had already heard that God didn't want them making any idols but they were finding it intolerable to wait for Moses to return from the mountain. In their desperation, they built a Golden Calf that was like their security blanket. They were used to idols from their time in Egypt and without their leader Moses around; they must have felt a bit of relief to have a physical representation of God.

When God learns what the people have done, God becomes furious. God is so angry that he tells Moses to go back down the mountain because God is going to destroy the Israelites. Moses too is furious. But he has to put his own reaction aside and prevent God from destroying the people, or the whole project is finished. We are done. Moses has dedicated his life to leading Israel from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Land of Israel and now God is planning to kill the entire nation. How does Moses react to God's anger? And why do we have this story of a God that gets so angry?

Moses becomes God's therapist. And an advocate for his people. First Moses reminds the holy one that God has invested a lot of time in the Israelites. Moses says, wasn't it you who worked so hard to bring the people out of Egypt? That was no easy task. Then Moses convinces God that it wouldn't reflect well on God if God killed all the Israelites, the Egyptians would say that this Israelite God must not be too great if right after liberating the people, God destroys them. That was the plan all along. This God meant them harm all along. Then Moses reminds God that God made promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and it would be a very bad idea to go back on those promises. In the end, God agrees with Moses and calms down. Moses was able to talk with God and helped God to see that destroying the Jewish people as a result of this anger would be wrong. We can read this story on another level as well. Maybe God is testing Moses. We have other stories where we find God threatening and even following through with a plan to destroy human

life. When God told Noah about the flood, Noah just took care of himself and his family. When God told Abraham about God's plan to destroy Sodom & Gemorah, Abraham tried to negotiate with God, but was unsuccessful. Here, God feigns anger and Moses doesn't back down, proving himself the true advocate of the people.

I've always related to this story. In all of the ways God is described in the Torah this feels the most human. We all get angry and at times our anger has tempted us to behave in ways that don't serve our own interests. When we get angry, just like God in this story, it's hard to see the big picture and remember what we might be sacrificing if we act upon our anger. We might say or do things that damage relationships we have formed over many years. We are tempted to sever relationships completely. In our anger we break promises and renege on commitments that we have made. Commitments that we have made to ourselves and to others. This interaction between God and Moses instructs us about anger. Just like God, we are intolerant of imperfection (our own and others), judgmental, quick to anger, and prone to react destructively. But just like God, we are able to choose a different course with the guidance and wisdom of a Moshe Rabainu in our corner.

Let's go beyond the holy text to our rich commentary. What do we find there on the subject of our own anger? The Koretzer Rebbe, a famous Hassidic sage, wrote "Long ago I conquered my anger and placed it in my pocket. When I have need of it, I take it out." I understand this to mean that anger is a passionate emotion and that passion is not always a horrible thing if we are able to restrain ourselves and use this passion constructively.

Anger can be a dangerous thing. It can tear families and communities apart. How can we work with anger so that we can use it constructively instead of destructively?

I have found it helpful to learn about why anger can take control of our behavior. As we continue to understand more about how our brains and our emotions are intertwined, we can better explain why feelings of anger can tend to take control of our behavior. Anger challenges us to look deeply into ourselves. Most of the time, anger is self-defensive. It arises from unresolved fears or when we feel threatened. Anger can help us identify what's wrong with a situation or a relationship. Often times our anger stems from fear, and it manifests in the primitive "fight or flight" response. If when I am angry I can stop and ask myself, "Where and how do I hurt? What am I afraid of?" I may be able to clarify things and modulate my strong reaction.

In her book, My Flash of Insight, neuroscientist Dr Jill Bolte Taylor discusses anger as one of our programmed responses. Dr Taylor writes that it takes less than ninety seconds for these programmed responses to be triggered, surge through our bodies and then get flushed out of our bloodstream. Ninety seconds is not a long period of time for that whole process to occur. Taylor says that if we remain angry, it's because we've chosen to let that anger continue to run. In her book she writes, "It is so easy to get caught up in the wiring of our pre-programmed reactivity (what is called our limbic system) that we live our lives cruising on automatic pilot. By paying attention to the choices my automatic circuitry is making, I own my power and make more choices consciously."

Another scientist who has helped us understand more about the brain and anger is Matt Lieberman. He has found that in the brain there is a "breaking system", which is located behind the left and right temple. When this breaking system is working, our emotions tend to become less intense, which is a good thing because this gives us the ability to use our critical thinking skills and make clear decisions. Studies have shown that one way we can activate this breaking

system is through naming our emotion in simple words. We all know that there is a tendency to avoid talking about strong emotions, including anger, and try to suppress these feelings. But suppressing anger usually backfires and often creates a negative response in others. Anger needs to be tolerated, not sublimated and expressed in ways that can lead to positive instead of negative outcomes. What we are talking about here is not anger management but transforming anger. We can control our impulses without sublimating our emotions because it's not our emotions we're controlling but our actions. We can "put the brakes on" and choose how best to respond to a situation that get us angry.

In some situations, once we've been able to feel and express anger, we find a way to transform it. When we have given ourselves time to work through the situation that provokes our anger, we may be able to see a bigger picture. To ask ourselves what would be best in the long term and how we can find our way through the difficult feelings and repair what needs to be fixed. If we're angry with an individual we might find a way to express our feelings without causing further damage. In the words of Aristotle *"Anyone can become angry – that is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way – that is not easy."*

I have the greatest success working with my anger when I share my angry feelings with someone I trust. My Moses equivalents. Once I know that I can't see my way out of my anger on my own I reach out and share my story with a confidant. I have a short list of people I can call upon to talk me down before I do something I'll regret later on. I have found that once another person has listened to my long list of reasons for my I'm angry, the anger starts to dissipate and I become open to hearing constructive ideas about how to move forward.

The rabbis were aware of this dynamic and they created a narrative to accompany our story of God and Moses on the mountain after the Golden Calf incident. According to a rabbinic text, from the Midrash, Moses actually becomes a trusted advisor to God.

The midrash begins when God tells Moses to go down from the mountain. The rabbis ask, "Why does God tell Moses to go down? Rabbi Eliezer says, God said Moses; go down from your ego, because I didn't make you great to elevate you, I made you great to serve the people. Now, Israel has sinned. Why are you standing here with me? Moses became weak and didn't even have the strength to speak. But once God said, let go of me, leave me alone, and I'll destroy them. Then suddenly, Moses said, wow, this is up to me, God just said, leave me alone so that I can do what I want to do, indulge my anger. Until I let him alone, God can't destroy them. So, Moses immediately regained his strength and pleaded with God for mercy." (Talmud B'rachot) Once Moses realized he had power in the situation, and that he was the only one who could help God see the consequences of acting upon the anger, Moses knew what to do. This interaction between God and Moshe Rabainu is a message to all of us about what we can do when we find ourselves filled with anger. We can identify the people in our lives who serve as our Moses when we are angry. This story also helps us understand the importance of standing up to another's anger, even God's. In the face of God's anger, Moses is clear, calm and rational.

The Jewish perspective on anger ultimately boils down to free will; we have the ability to control our behavior. In our quote from the Koretzer Rebbe he describes anger as an emotion that is so malleable that he could contract it and put it in his pocket. He moved anger; it did not move him. The Koretzer also understood that there are times when anger is permissible. As he said, about his anger, "When I have need of it, I take it out." He would decide when to take

his anger out of his pocket and use it for an appropriate purpose. For example, we may need to show anger to a child so that the child learns not to touch fire or run into the road. We may need to exhibit appropriate anger when people around us – friends and family – don't behave kindly. But, in these cases, our anger must always be highly monitored, so that at any minute, we can contain it. It must be a tool that we learn to use purposefully. Nahmanides, the 13th century Bible commentator, wrote a letter to his son and asked him to read it regularly. The whole letter is about anger. Nahmanides wrote "And let your words be said with fear and awe like a servant who stands before his master – and act with timidity before all men. And if a person calls you do not answer with a loud voice – just respond with calm as if you are standing before your mentor."

When we are angry we put ourselves – our fear and hurt first. We might yell loudly or even use language we might come to regret. Nahmanides recommends that when we're angry, we use a gentle and calm voice that reflects fear and awe, as if we are speaking to someone we highly respect. Not only are we then placing ourselves as equals to those who give us displeasure, we are humbling ourselves before others. Nahmanides describes how liberating it is when we have learned to transform our anger. He writes, "And when you free yourself from anger, the trait of humility will enter your heart – for this is the finest quality of all favorable traits. Anger stifles our capacity for generosity. Humility gives us a greater capacity for love."

While writing this sermon, I have become much more aware of how often I get angry. And, I have made a commitment to remember what I have learned about how our brains process anger and the tools I have found in our sacred texts and rabbinic teachings. During these ten days, as we move toward Yom Kippur, I invite all of you to think about the ways in which you may be dealing with your anger, and to notice the ways in which our communities are threatened by the

destructive capacity of this powerful emotion. May we have the strength and insight to grow in our generosity, humility and love so that our anger helps us grow, not destroy. May we find the tools to heal the damage we may have caused in our relationships with our family and friends. And may we expand our capacity to express ourselves in ways that deepen the relationships in our community.

That is my prayer for us, Eiloheinu v'aloheai avotainu v'eimateiu: ta'tzil otanu min ha'ca'as. Ta'tzil otanu min ha'ca'as. God of our ancestors, save us from our anger, save us from our anger.

Amen.