

Anger

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"Adonai Adonai el rachum v'chanun, erech apayim v'rav chesed v'emet, notzer chesed la'ala'fim no'seh avon v'feh'shah v'chata'ah v'nakeh."

"Adonai, Adonai, God, compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, loving, and true; showing mercy to the thousandth generation, forgiving evil, defiance and wrongdoing; granting pardon..."¹

We sing this over and over again during the High Holy Days. Originally found in the Book of Exodus, these words make God sound...pretty great. Who came up with this beautiful description of God? According to the text, it was God. God said this about God-self.

This compassionate, loving, forgiving God is the God we appeal to during this season, but let's consider the context in which these words appear.

God, in the Torah, gets very angry. In fact, in addition to today being the day of atonement, our tradition teaches that today is the anniversary of the day that Moses descended from Mt Sinai with the second set of tablets. His descent is the conclusion of a story infused with anger.

Moses went up Mount Sinai to get the ten commandments. In Moses' absence, the Israelites got nervous and built the Golden Calf. God became so angry when the Israelites created the Golden Calf, that God threatened to destroy all of the Israelites. God said, "Let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them."²

Moses said, "Woah, God, calm down, get it together...what would the Egyptians say? What about the promise You made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." Then Moses came down the mountain, saw the Golden Calf, and Moses became enraged...Moses smashed the tablets. He ground the Golden Calf into a powder, mixed it with water and forced the Israelites to drink it. Then Moses asked anyone who was *for* God to come forward, and told them to kill everyone in the camp who had offered sacrifices to another God. They killed 3000 people.

¹ Exodus 34:6-7

² Exodus 32:10

Then Moses tried to get God to forgive them all and God sent a plague for dessert. And THEN Moses made a second set of tablets, and God wrote that short bio that we know from the Yom Kippur liturgy. "*Adonai Adonai el rachum v'chanun...*" Happy Yom Kippur!

God in the Torah is angry. A lot. God punishes and destroys and sends plagues and causes the earth to open and swallow rebels into its fiery core. We don't generally cover those parts in Hebrew school. But maybe we should.

God is angry, because we are angry too. When we talk about *btzelem elohim*, the idea that we are created in God's image, we usually think about the good side. The holiness, the sanctity, the need to treat each other as Divine vessels– but we don't consider the darker side. We are created in God's image, anger and all. Or perhaps, God was created in our image, and we just couldn't image a deity, a being, a force, a main character, devoid of anger.

Anger is human. Anger is Divine. Anger is necessary. Anger is destructive. Anger is dehumanizing and anger is a sign of love. This morning, I want to tell you that we are too angry and we are not angry enough. During this day of introspection, I want to invite you to consider your anger.

Anger is important.

Audre Lorde, in her piece on anger and women responding to racism, wrote, "Anger is loaded with information and energy."³

On the morning of January 21, 2017, 11 school buses lined Military Road, while Temple Sinai members and their guests, many carrying clever signs, and wearing pink hats, boarded our fleet. We drove downtown where the streets of Washington were filled with hundreds of thousands of people.

For a gathering of that size, it was remarkably peaceful, with singing, and chanting. People of all ages, and genders admired each other's clever signs and costumes. But underlying the kindness, the camaraderie, the crippling posterboard shortage in Washington DC...there was anger. The Women's March in 2017 was a primal scream heard across the country. A mass protest that emerged as an expression of resistance and rage.

What followed was more anger...We spewed dissent across the streets of Washington, on the Capitol Steps, outside the supreme court, in airport arrival terminals. Anger propelled

³ "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," Audre Lorde. Keynote presentation at the National Women's Studies Association Conference, Storrs, Connecticut, June 1981.

us forward, to stand up against racism, against threats to reproductive freedom, to share stories of sexual harassment, and to run for office.

If that's not where you were, literally or ideologically, you were likely still angry. Anger is an American tradition. From the Tea Party to the Tea Party, everyone has been mad at someone or something. You've been angry at Joe Biden, or at Columbia University. At taxes or tan suits. At opioid companies or factories that moved overseas. You're angry at the media, or at your uncle, or at...Ed Sheeran.⁴

While painful and unpleasant, anger is a powerful tool. Our anger is a sign that something feels wrong, that an injustice has occurred. Our anger inspires us to act.

Our anger can call us to righteous fights, a tool that motivates and inspires. It can also be a sign that you didn't get enough sleep, you didn't drink your coffee yet, and your kids are taking too long getting dressed for school.

Anger is a tool in our traditional text. God was angry because the Israelites built the Golden Calf, God was angry because Korach and his followers challenged Moses and Aaron's leadership. When the Israelites were in the wrong, God got angry and punished them. God was angry at our enemies. God closed the sea on the Egyptian soldiers. Often, God's anger is a sign that God has our back.

This theme continues into the Prophets. The prophets' anger was inspired by moral outrage, their anger a tool to inspire the people to change. Of the prophet's anger, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "The situation of a person immersed in the prophets' words is one of being exposed to a ceaseless shattering of indifference, and one needs a skull of stone to remain callous to such blows."⁵

Our Biblical texts are awash in examples of anger used as a tool to shatter indifference. It is the fuel that powers movements, that makes change, that calls us to account. Anger is important.

But, anger is also dangerous.

Rebecca Traister, author of an excellent book on women's anger, wrote, "Anger at injustice and inequality is in many ways exactly like fuel. A necessary accelerant, it can drive— on

⁴ A solid overview of the Ed Sheeran situation can be found [here](#).

⁵ *The Prophets*, Abraham J. Heschel. p vxi.

some level must drive— noble and difficult crusades. But it is also combustible, explosive; its power can be unpredictable and it can burn.”⁶

Certainly, anger can be useful, and anger can be frightening. The rabbis didn’t celebrate our angry God, if anything, they tried to minimize God’s anger. Anger is scary, anger is out of control. The rabbis loved nothing more than writing pages and pages trying to bring order to things that seemed scary and out of control (See: The 3rd order of the Mishnah...called...Women)

The rabbis teach that anger is akin to worshipping idols. That anger is something to avoid, and to control. Maimonides teaches that while most emotions demand maintaining a healthy balance, when it comes to anger, there’s no “middle way,” any amount of anger is too much.⁷

While minimizing and vilifying anger has been a tool of those in power to maintain power, anger can, in fact, be a threatening force. Anger can be directed in ways that are dangerous and destructive. Displaced anger can result in violence and vigilante justice. Lynchings, and pogroms, seething anger that is mis-directed or manipulated can do tremendous harm. And it has.

Conveniently directing anger and hate toward vulnerable members of society is a driving force behind antisemitism. We’ve seen that same playbook directed toward immigrants and refugees, toward people who are transgender. Scapegoating, or blaming the sins of society on one particular group comes from the original Yom Kippur ritual. When we are commanded to symbolically pass our sins on to a goat, and then cast that goat out.⁸ When we do this with groups of people, it is an outlet for our anger, and it is dangerous and harmful.

The Gemara is a bit more specific than Maimonides when it comes to anger. The Gemara explains, “One who tears his garment, breaks his vessels, or scatters his money from anger — should be viewed as if he worships idols.”⁹ Its not the anger itself that is the problem, its these rash displays of anger, acting out in ways that demonstrate a loss of control. That is what is akin to worshipping idols.

Anger can drive us to act irrationally. In ways that are horrific and harmful and abusive. And, anger can make us mean and hurtful. It can cause us to forget that there’s a person on

⁶ *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger*, Rebecca Traister. p xliii.

⁷ Hilchot Deot 2:3, Rambam

⁸ Leviticus 16:7-22

⁹ Shabbat 105b

the other side of that email. That being terse and rude will not solve the problem. That yelling probably won't make your kids get dressed any faster. Anger is an unavoidable part of our lives. But we cannot let ourselves lose control of our behavior, and allow its fuel to burn down cherished relationships.

And, though it may sound surprising, anger is also a sign of love.

Rabbi Shai Held wrote, "Anger in the face of injustice can actually be a manifestation of deep love."¹⁰

Anger is the opposite of indifference.

An old joke...a very old joke:

A young woman is sitting next to an older woman, Mrs. Plotnick, on an airplane. The young woman leaned over to Mrs. Plotnick and said, "Tell me about that beautiful diamond ring. Its gorgeous." "Ah," Mrs. Plotnick responded..."This is the Plotnick diamond...I've had it for 50 years of a loving marriage. But it comes with a curse." "How romantic! Tell me about the curse." The older woman responded..."Mr. Plotnick."¹¹

Anger is a sign that you expect more, that you are in relationship. Priya Parker begins her new book, "The Art of Fighting," reflecting on the dissolution of her own parents' marriage. It was shocking to friends and family, as they frequently repeated to her, "They never fought!" But that was exactly what was wrong. She wrote, "My parents were so terrified of the kind of heat that could burn the house down that they lost their spark."¹²

God's anger with the Israelites, evident throughout the Five Books of Moses, was a sign that God never gave up on the promise that God made to our ancestors. That we were God's chosen people, stuck in relationship, even when we messed up. Moments after liberation from Egypt, the sea parted, we walked through to freedom, and then almost immediately...we started complaining about the food. God was reasonably angry...but stuck with us, through multiple rounds of food complaints, the episode of the Golden Calf, rebellions and uncertainty, through idol worship and failed experiments with monarchy, through Temples destroyed and rituals evolved, through mistake after mistake after mistake.

To be chosen, to be loved is to be the subject of anger.

¹⁰ *Judaism Is About Love: Recovering the Heart of Jewish Life*, Shai Held. p 73.

¹¹ Rabbi Robert Goldstein, my dad, told me this joke. He knows all of the classics.

¹² *The Art of Fighting*, Priya Parker. p 2.

And, we are not just the subject of God's anger. God has been the subject of ours. A convenient target for the inexplicable pain that is an unavoidable part of living. Raging at God and asking "why" is a profound demonstration of faith. Elie Wiesel struggled with belief after his liberation from Buchenwald. But in his memoir *And The Sea Is Never Full*, he wrote, "It is because I still believe in God that I argue with Him."¹³

In preparing for today's sermon I read a great deal about anger. It turns out that there are a lot of rabbis who have given sermons about anger. They generally fall into one of two camps. The first is that Judaism teaches that anger is good. The second is that Judaism teaches that anger is bad. But what I'm trying to say to you today is...that anger is part of us.

It is the heat and the fire. It is a propulsive force that gets us out of bed to make change and it is a corrosive chemical that destroys relationships. It is powerful and inescapable and it demands our attention.

So, love your country enough, love your neighbor enough to get angry, to get mad as hell...to expect more, to demand better. Cultivate and use that anger to do meaningful work and let it fuel a belief that things can be better than they are, and we must make them so. We were created *btzelem elohim*, in God's image...and who better than God to model for us the power of righteous rage.

Love your loved ones enough to keep getting angry at them- to stay in relationship and to stick with it when they push you to your limit. Care enough about them, about who you want to be, to keep working on yourself and on your relationships. Even when they let you down. Even when they break your heart.

And, don't let that anger make you mean or hateful, love your loved ones enough to act with intention. According to the Talmud, Moses gathered up the pieces of that first set of shattered tablets, smashed in a fit of anger. Moses placed them in the holy ark. We carried them with us to remind us of what happens when we lose control. When we're too quick to anger and too quick to act.

We are all living with anger...and now is the season to set new intentions. To try to be merciful and gracious, intentional when we act on our anger, loving and honest. Merciful and forgiving, and when necessary, mad as hell.

¹³ *And the Sea is Never Full*, Elie Wiesel. p 68.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah... may you be inscribed for blessing in the book of life.