

Observing a three year-old child experience a temper tantrum can be a fearsome sight. Every limb is in motion, each muscle in high gear. The contorted face, the hysteria, the tears, the high-pitched scream. Recently, one of my children -- to protect his good name I won't tell you which -- engaged in a temper tantrum of epic proportions. At its climax, he spat out the worst epithet he could think of, calling his own mother (dare I say it?), "a bad boy." "Imma, you are a bad boy."

The gender confusion was not the main issue. Rather it was the expression of the depth of his anger at the removal of a toy from his grasp as a consequence of inappropriate behavior. For young children, who are unable to match levels of emotion to the context of particular situations, the denial of dessert or the loss of video privileges constitutes a catastrophe tantamount to the world's destruction. It is only with time and judgment that children develop the skill to calibrate their reactions in a more proportionate way.

Nevertheless, from the time we are born there is a generic quality that defines the rage of infants, children and adults of all ages, for anger is the way we express resentment at our helplessness. You are late for an important meeting, or are fearful of missing a flight. You sit in stop-and-go traffic. Your pulse races, your blood pressure soars. The fellow behind you honks, and you are tempted to raise a particular finger in greeting. Even if you haven't seen Michael Douglas' performance in the film *Falling Down*, a tale of road-rage run amuck, I'm sure all of us have had the experience of feeling fury in the midst of a traffic jam that we neither caused nor are able to resolve on our own.

A child becomes angry when she is punished; she resents her inability to restore the privilege denied her through punishment. Families are angry when they lose loved ones, for they do not possess the power to change the inexorable decree of fate. All of us experience resentment when others do not live up to our expectations, when, beyond our control, their behavior or actions impact negatively on us. The reason for losing one's temper may be profound or petty, the circumstance wrenching or ridiculous, lifechanging or laughable, yet anger remains an elemental human reaction to the unpleasant facts of life beyond control. Indeed, even God

becomes enraged when human beings exercise their free-will to do evil -- השמרו לכם פן יפתה -- "Take heed lest you be tempted to stray, and worship false gods, for then Adonai's wrath will be directed against you. . . ." Morning and evening we recite these words from the Torah in the second paragraph of the *Sh'ma*. How telling that God's ultimate source of vexation is the choices people make on their own to embrace transgression, as if to suggest that even the Almighty feels a certain helplessness in the face of the human prerogative to embrace evil. Having granted us the privilege of free-will with no strings attached, the good Lord fumes when we decide to abuse that gift.

In the face of intense complaint about the people's thirst found in this morning's *sedra*, God directs Moses to draw forth water from a rock by talking to the stone. The prophet, however, does something rather different. ויקהלו משה ואהרן את הקהל אל פני הסלע ויאמר להם שמעו נא המורים המן הסלע הזה נוציא לכם מים. וירם משה את ידו ויך את הסלע במטוהו . . . -- "Moses and Aaron assembled the congregation in front of the rock; and he said to them, 'Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?' And Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod. Out came copious water . . ." (*Numbers* 20:10-11). Subsequently, Moses and Aaron are stripped of the privilege to enter the Promised Land, . . . יען לא האמנתם בי להקדישני לעיני בני ישראל . . . -- "Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm My sanctity in the eyes of the Israelite people . . ." (*Numbers* 20:12).

The punishment seems so grossly disproportionate to the sin; indeed, it is unclear what the sin is! Was it because Moshe hit the rock instead of speaking to it as commanded? Would God punish Moses, who had served so long and loyally in the most trying of circumstances, with such harshness for what appears to be a minor infraction? Within the fertile landscape of rabbinic imagination, there are no fewer than ten explanations offered regarding the precise character of Moshe's transgression.

Perhaps the most persuasive interpretation is that offered by Maimonides of the 12th century. In his *Sh'moneh P'raqim*, an introduction to *Pirkei Avot*, RaMBaM writes, "נטע . . .

לצד הרגזנות באמרו 'שמעו נא המורים.' דקדק עליו הש"י: שיהיה אדם כמוהו כועס לפני עדת ישראל במקום שאין ראוי בו הכעס . . . חלול ה' הוא. -- "Moses' sin lay in erring on the side of wrath when he castigated the people, saying, "Listen now, you rebels." The Holy One censured him for this, because a man of his stature vented anger in front of the people of Israel, at a time when no anger was called for. In a man of standing such behavior constituted a desecration of God's name" (*Sh'moneh Praqim*, chap. 4).

Moshe's anger estranged him from the people he had so patiently and lovingly led; at a moment of fury, an individual can become so consumed with rage as to lose all sense of proportion to reality. In an instant, the most horrific of insults can be hurled at loved ones with the calculated intent to be hurtful. Like a powerful storm cloud that swiftly blots out the sky, should anger burn hotly enough it leaves no room for anything but itself. In the moment of Moshe's rage, he could not even remember that God had told him to speak to the rock rather than strike it. Yet strike it he did, not once, but two times. And if we vocalize the Hebrew a bit differently, we can read the Hebrew word "*pa'amayim*" (meaning "twice") as "*pa'amim*" -- (meaning times, perhaps many times). It is not farfetched to imagine an enraged Moses bashing at the rock's face with pent-up fury over and over, imagining striking the Israelites bodily for their longstanding spineless, self-serving and faithless behavior. Is it any wonder that the talmudic sage, Resh Laqish, once taught: כל אדם שכועס-אם חכם הוא, חכמתו מסתלקת ממנו: -- "When a sage becomes angry, his wisdom deserts him; when a prophet grows angry, his prophecy leaves him" (*B. Pesahim* 66b).

Ours is a society seething with frustration and resentment. Talk radio is suffused with anger -- the hostile sarcasm of Rush Limbaugh, the cutting rhetoric of a Michael Savage or a Sean Hannity. Political debate in Congress lacks civility; hyperbolic sentiment is the order of the day. Bombs go off almost daily in Baghdad . . . and this week terror came to London. In a world long on violence we are very short of patience.

Anger, of course, is not always a bad thing. In Jacob's blessing of his sons Shimon and Levi, the patriarch says, -- ארור אפם כי עז ועברתם כי קשתה: אחלקם ביעקב ואפיצם בישראל,

“Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce; and their wrath, for it was cruel; I will divide them in Jacob and scatter them in Israel” (*Genesis 49:7*). Jacob alludes here to the murderous actions of Shimon and Levi in the wake of their sister Dinah’s rape when they opt to punish the rapist’s crime by wiping out his entire city. Yet if their behavior was so vile, cruel and accursed, why scatter them in Israel; would it not make more sense to shield others from their burning anger through quarantine? “Anger and temper, though undesirable qualities, may sometimes prove useful,” Yitzhak Arama, a 15th century Bible commentator once observed. “A little spread everywhere would prove useful, but when concentrated in one place is dangerous.” A modicum of resentment in the face of injustice is healthy; righteous indignation in the presence of evil a sign of moral health.

But there is a world of difference between an anger that unites us against wrongdoing and one that is self-consuming. There is a world of difference between an anger that motivates us to help others and one that lusts to see the look of hurt on another person’s face. There is a world of difference between an anger that we are willing to share in order to strengthen a relationship, and one that feeds upon itself until it is immune to reason. There is a world of difference between the rage of those who plant bombs and the anger of decent human beings at those who are maimed and killed in the instant of their explosion.

The story of Moshe Rabbeinu’s punishment for his outburst of temper is a cautionary tale, a lesson in the importance of anger management. We may wonder why a momentary lapse in judgment lead to the denial of his entry to the Holy Land with such finality. But in truth, if the Promised Land is a metaphor for harmony and balance in our lives and relationships, all it takes is one act of rage to destroy a lifetime of love and trust. With reckless abandon and no regard for long-term consequences, white hot fury can burn bridges between even the closest of relatives, friends or co-workers in a matter of minutes. If there is anyone present who had a falling-out with someone years ago, someone with whom you were once close but haven’t spoken to in many years, you surely understand the truth of this observation. An hour of intense anger can lead to a lifetime of wandering in a desert.

The poet William Blake once wrote, "I was angry with my friend I told my wrath, my wrath did end; I was angry with my foe, I told it not, my wrath did grow." To ignore the anger we feel is unhealthy, the equivalent of ignoring the shrill sound of a fire alarm. When angry it is important to confront the emotion, and in the face of fury, employ logic to counteract the hyperbole and inflation of melodrama which is often its companion. Instead of "you've ruined everything," we might substitute "It's frustrating and I'm upset, but it's not the end of the world." Anger's dirty words are more than epithets, perhaps the worst offending terms are "always" and "never." "He's always forgetting his responsibility / She never wants to compromise. . ." -- almost nothing in life is always or never, accusing people of such is more than inaccurate, it invariably breeds resentment. Counting to ten before responding is a technique as old as the hills, but an effective one. Perhaps most important is a refusal to take oneself too seriously. Anger is a serious emotion, yet often there is humor in the situation that produced the resentment in the first place -- if one is but open and able not to laugh something off, but to laugh at oneself in a positive way..

Ours is not a religion that has ever counseled peace at any price or turn the other cheek. There are legitimate reasons to be angry and appropriate way to express such sentiment. Yet if Judaism recognizes the inevitability of anger as part of the human condition and even posits value in its expression within certain contexts, it is precisely because there is no higher goal than the achievement of peace and tranquility. For us as Jews, peace is not the avoidance of conflict, it is its resolution. Said Rabbi Shimon ben Halafta: See how desirable is peace! When the Holy One sought to bless Israel, God found no term which included all possible blessing, save peace. We know this for it is written in Scripture, 'May Adonai grant His people strength; may Adonai bless His people with peace' -- May God grant us the strength to feel anger in the face of injustice; And may God grant us the strength to embrace peace when tempted by anger that is itself an injustice.