

Shefoch Chamascha – **Using Anger as a Pathway to Holiness**

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Tehillim (7:12) teaches us that "G-d is angry every day." Nowadays it's fairly easy for us to be G-d-like and get angry each day. As we struggle with a pandemic that threatens our lives and our livelihoods, it's hard to avoid. We often fear and are ashamed of our anger, partly because we are taught that it is a 'negative' middah that must somehow be eliminated from our repertoire of emotions. Indeed the Rambam (Hilchos Deos 2:3) takes a unique position in prescribing an emotional diet devoid of anger, conceding that there may be times when it is appropriate to feign it. As a physician, maybe he intuited some of the early research on anger: explosive, intense and prolonged anger is known to cause high blood pressure, heart disease, lung problems, and wound healing takes longer.

However, in light of contemporary research demonstrating the benefits of anger, I sometimes wonder if the Rambam may have altered his position. Studies show for example, that acknowledging anger can help lower stress on the heart and manage pain, while suppressing anger can worsen the experience of pain, put stress on people's cardiovascular systems, and is tied to anxiety and depression. Reacting with controlled anger rather than runaway anxiety releases less of the body's stress hormone cortisol—too much of which has been linked to bone loss and obesity. Anger can be a motivating force that may make people feel more optimistic and confident. And letting off steam as it arises (instead of bottling it up and letting it all come out in one explosive fight) has also been found to benefit interpersonal relationships.

As a career advisor for graduate programs at Yeshiva University, I meet many international students at the Katz School of Science and Health. When I enquire about their motivations to come to the US, they frequently cite limited opportunities back home, and/or the desire to gain skills here that will allow them to transform a product, service or industry when they return to their home country. Underlying this willingness to uproot themselves is anger at the status quo. Anger benefits us by alerting us that something is wrong on an individual, interpersonal, or societal scale. In addition to fueling personal choices such as leaving an unhealthy relationship, job, or country, anger has inspired and continues to fuel widespread change e.g. healthcare reform, environmental policies, and women's suffrage.

In nature, we often discover that things we thought were unequivocally unhealthy—like germs or UV rays—can sometimes be good for us. It shouldn't surprise us that the same holds true of our habits and personality quirks. In truth, nothing that G-d puts in this world is intrinsically negative – it all depends on how we deploy it. Given the considerable costs to our mental and physical

health of suppressing anger, how might we embrace a healthier less fearful attitude towards it and ensure that we aren't enslaved by our anger? I believe the seder provides an important insight to help us formulate a holistic Jewish approach to anger.

In reenacting our personal and national liberation from Mitzrayim and considering possibilities for achieving greater freedom in our own lives, our senses and emotions are heightened. After drinking our third glass of wine, we pour a cup for Eliyahu and proceed to demand that G-d pour out in a different way: Shefoch chamascha el hagoyim: "Pour out your wrath on the nations that do not know You...Pour out your fury on them...Pursue them in rage & destroy them from under the heavens of the L-rd." (Tehillim 79:6,7; 69:25; Eicha 3:66).

Like veterans re-experiencing the trauma of war, on Seder night our experience of revisiting our darkest places and times (both historical and current) can evoke powerful emotion. Before launching into Hallel and drinking our final toast to freedom, we allow for the emotion of rage. On this night we are free to express a core emotion, and perhaps it is our very ability to give expression to something so often concealed that allows us to feel fully liberated. Evidently, there are times and places where anger is appropriate or even necessary.

In fact, anger in its various forms and expressions occurs over 500 times in Tanach. Undoubtedly, it is the most prevalent Biblical emotion. Yaakov is angry with Rachel; Yonah is angry with G-d; Moshe is angry with the people; the people are angry with Moshe; Moshe is angry with his nephews; Pharoh is angry with his servants; G-d is angry with Moshe; G-d is angry with Miriam and Aharon; G-d is angry with the people; Shaul is angry with his son Yonatan; Yirmiyah is angry with G-d; Chavakuk is angry with G-d, etc., etc.

More important than simply noting the frequency with which a concept arises, the Kabbalists teach us to examine the first occurrence of the concept or emotion in Tanach. This provides a lens through which to understand and gain perspective on all future Biblical references to it, and is instructive for our own lives.

Anger first appears in the story of Kayin and Hevel (Bereishis 4:3). Kayin becomes "exceedingly angry" when Hevel's offering is found more acceptable than his. G-d asks him "why are you angry..." and, (seemingly without waiting for a response,) proceeds to tell Kayin that he still has an opportunity to harness his anger, perhaps even channel it to a constructive use. Kayin is apparently unable to rise to G-d's challenge: to identify and take control over his anger. Consumed by his anger, he kills Hevel.

G-d and our Biblical ancestors are unafraid to publicly demonstrate their anger, perhaps making them more relatable to later generations. Anger – be it G-d's or ours – seems to be an inevitable part of life. Unless we believe that we are greater than our Creator, anger would seem to be

something that we should welcome and cultivate, rather than attempt to eradicate through piety or training of the mind.

In the aftermath of our biggest betrayal of G-d, the Golden Calf, G-d self-describes as "slow to anger" (Shemos 34:6) – not devoid of anger! The gemara (Shabbos 133b) teaches us the imperative of Vehalachta Bidrachav - *Imitatio Dei* (found in Devarim 10:12 & 28:9) – to learn and follow G-d's ways. Charged with the responsibility of emulating G-d in my life, I have 'permission' – perhaps even a mitzvah – to express anger at injustices perpetuated towards myself and others. This attribute (and the maaseh haEgel in general) directs us to acknowledge our anger, just as G-d does. G-d doesn't apologize or feel shame for having and expressing this emotion. From these teachings, we can infer that G-d is challenging each of us to 'own' our anger and to take responsibility for it along with our other emotions, to confront our anger rather than avoid it.

With this in mind, we can interpret the question "Why are you angry?" that is sometimes directed at us as: "OK, you're angry. Now what are you going to do with that anger?" Will it be left unchecked, or can it be mastered just as we are enjoined to master every other object and emotion that G-d puts into our world? (Bereishis 1:28) We can also learn to emulate our neviim such as Moshe who frequently employed his anger in the service of G-d, or Torah personalities such as Pinchas who receives Heavenly acclaim for using his anger to defend G-d's honor (Bamidbar 25:11). This in turn can enhance our fulfillment of the mitzvah to love G-d. The gemara (Brachos 54a) offers an interpretation of the unusual word at the end of the pasuk 'V'ahavta es Hashem... bechol *meodecha*' as 'bechol *middah umiddah*...' with each and every characteristic that we are endowed with. Implied is our objective to love G-d with the entirety of our being and emotions – including anger.

Anger management is nothing new. Rabbi Ilai asserted that: "A person is known by (his management of) three things: his cup, his finances, and his anger" (*Eruvin* 65b). When our anger is ignited, it is our responsibility to cultivate thought-out responses that emulate G-d's attribute and directive of being "slow to anger." We can also learn to emulate our neviim such as Moshe who frequently employed his anger in the service of G-d, or Torah personalities such as Pinchas who receives Heavenly acclaim for using his anger to defend G-d's honor (Bamidbar 25:11).

Shefoch Chamascha reminds us that open – even public - display, discussion, recognition, and validation of anger, rather than avoidance, can be both healthy and necessary. A door opens to forgiveness and reconciliation, just as the door of our home opens to welcome Eliyahu and redemption. At the Seder we create a safe – and sacred - space for a wide range of emotions. May our emotional and spiritual growth through the Seder's 15 steps bring us healing and wholeness, and challenge us to embrace our passions and cultivate our Divine gifts for constructive purposes.

