Va'Era: Anger and Her Friend Hope

About ten years ago, in my mid-twenties when I was beginning to explore Judaism, I went to see a play in Milwaukee with a dear friend of mine who was Jewish and was also Israeli. I don't remember the name of the play, but it was about the history of Superman, and the character's Jewish roots. The plot of the play contained two parallel narratives, one, of the Jewish cartoonist wrestling to come to terms with the horrors of the Holocaust and resisting in one of the only ways he knew how-- through art. And the other narrative was that of a Jew in a Nazi-controlled country during the Shoah.

Note that I didn't say that the second narrative was of a Jewish survivor. It wasn't. In fact, the final scene of the play, which is seared in my memory, took place inside of a gas chamber. The actors, completely naked, huddled together in the middle of the stage. A mist was released from offstage and engulfed them. They fought. They choked. Then they each fell to the floor, unmoving, and the stage went black. And I shake even as I describe it, because that's how it felt.

There was silence in that auditorium. Then there were some sobs. The lights came back on, and I looked at my friend expecting to see grief on his face.

But instead, what I saw was fury. As we emerged from the theatre, all my friend could speak about-- all he could rail against-- was how awful the play was, how inappropriate it was, how gratuitous it was, about how DARE they depict something so awful, and then, suddenly, he stopped and sat down at a table in the food court and he began to cry.

It wasn't until hours later that he was able to put into words what had happened: that the Holocaust, its horror, what it had done to his family, how millions had been slaughtered, it was so, so painful to think about that his mind, instead of letting him feel that pain, had flown into a rage at the play he had seen, the play that had brought forth those feelings, instead of the content it depicted.

And that was the day that I learned ne of the most important lessons I have learned in life: that anger is an emotion that can make us feel powerful in moments when we are powerless. It's an emotion we often feel in

moments when, in actuality, we aren't in control, and indeed, may be powerless to change something awful. But our brains, and our hearts, do not like being helpless, especially in the face of injustice -- and our minds turn that pain into something that feels like righteous power, that is, into anger.

My friend was not an inherently angry person. He had a good job, friends, hobbies, so much joy in his own life, but beneath the surface, as a Jew, as a descendent from a family that had lost people in the Holocaust, there was an ember of the incredible pain of the atrocities done to our people which always burned. "Auschwitz is in our veins, it abides throbbing in our hearts", writes Heschel. And so it was when that play called forth that anguish into the my friend's mind -- and in response to such immense and overwhelming hurt that it could not fix, his mind strengthened itself into anger, and lashed out at the play, attacking the conduit and reminder of the actual offense, the offense he do nothing to fix.

As humans we want to be safe. It's a basic need, like food or shelter. But sometimes, things happen that rip that safety away from us. And in such moments, justified anger is not only a normal reaction, it can give us the

strength to act. The challenge is to learn to use that anger for productive causes, instead of letting that anger rule us.

Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses, the hero of our parasha this week, knew a lot about anger, and also had to learn the hard way not to let that anger control him.

Moses was born, in parashat Shemo, into an unfair, unjust world. A world where his family were slaves, where he was handed a death sentence simply for existing, where society was divided into castes and racism was codified into law.

But young Moses didn't yet understand the injustices of the world around him. The famous happenings surrounding Moses' infancy and adventure in a basket, followed by his discovery, and rescue by Pharaoh's daughter, were all beyond his control or comprehension as an infant. It was only after leaving the palace following a childhood of luxury that Moses comes upon one of the Hebrew slaves, one of his people, being beaten and abused by an Egyptian and he is forced to see the cruelty and discrimination upon which his own privilege relies.

Faced with the enormity of this injustice, faced with the realization that the entire comfortable life he knows was reliant on the abuse and enslavement of others,

Moses flies into a rage. His mind and actions are overtaken by anger.

This is the first scene we see of Moses as an adult, and usually we gloss over it, but not today. Because, feeling powerless, one man alone, unable to fix the huge, broken societal system, unable in the heat of his pain to strategize or gather his thoughts, Moses' fury wins out and he takes matters into his own hands. He strikes and kills the Egyptian who was beating the Hebrew slave, buries him, and then flees the country in fear of his life.

His initial response to the enormous plight of the Israelites in Egypt is personal and instinctive and reactionary. Though he did indeed remove the threat of the one Egyptian, he did not in any way fix the larger crisis. Plus, his decision, made in the heat of the moment to kill the Egyptian, has immediate and severe consequences-- namely, his own exile.

But parashat Shemot isn't the parasha we read today. The parasha we read today was parashat Vaera. And the Moses we see in this week's parasha, which takes place years later, is the same person, and the persecution of the Israelites has not ended. It is still awful. But did we see Moses running around attacking and killing Egyptians with his own hands? Do we see him trying to kill Pharaoh, the man he knows is responsible for incredible evil?

No. We don't.

Where is Moses' rage? Where did his anger go?

By the time we get to this week's Torah portion, something major has shifted. Not only has Moses grown older, gotten married, had a lovely conversation with a burning plant that changed his destiny, no, not only all of that-- the Moses in parashat Va'era is a man with a purpose, a man who knows he is not alone in his anger, a man who believes he has God behind him, a man who has his brother standing at his side. No longer is Moses

making all of his decisions alone. No longer is the weight of the injustice he sees completely on his own shoulders.

Moses' actions in parashat Va'era aren't only because of his own pain, and aren't only for his own benefit, to calm his rage. The Moses we saw today in Va'era, the one having difficult, critical conversations with Pharoah, the one displaying teamwork and trust with Aaron, this leader is fighting because of the pain of an entire people, and for the benefit of an entire civilization.

What ultimately makes Moses a great leader is not that he doesn't feel rage, or doesn't lash out, or doesn't make mistakes. It's that he faces his anger, learns from it, communicates his vulnerability to others, and channels his pain into productive action. The Moses in Parashat Va'era is still angry, yes, and his people are still suffering. But unlike the Moses in Parashat Shemot, who slew the Egyptian in a rage, our Moses we read about this week has learned that a close friend of anger is, in fact, hope. Hope, that the suffering will have an end, hope, that the lives of the Israelites can improve. Hope, that with hard and careful work, he could

bring about that real change. Hope, that the arc of history truly could be bent towards justice, if we are willing to do the hard work of bending it.

Moses' anger is powerful. But with the help of faith, supported by practice, he learns to channel that power for good.

On January 30, 1956, a white supremecist bombed the home of Martin Luther King, Jr. Miraculously, neither MLK, his wife, or their baby were injured. A mob quickly gathered outside of the home and the air was thick with justified pain and deep rage. Some of those present had weapons with them, and it was clear that there was a very real potential for violent repercussions.

Dr. King, famous for advocating for nonviolent resistance, privately reflected on that moment, on the fury and the fear he felt that night knowing how close his family had come to being murdered. And yet, his conclusion in his writings was remarkable, saying that even within himself, quote, "I could feel the anger rising…but [I knew that] I must not allow myself to become bitter." Instead, he went out to the crowd, mustered his courage to be calm, and he quite literally talked them down from the brink of attack.

Like Moses, Dr. King was a great leader. And also like Moses, Dr. King was a human being: a person who also felt justified rage and who occasionally lost his temper, just like Moses. For Dr. King, these moments where he gave in to his anger seared themselves onto his conscience. After feeling such rage, he reflected, and I quote, "I was weighed down with a terrible sense of guilt… you must be willing to suffer the anger of the opponent, and yet not return anger."

Like with Moses, though, this rejection of reacting rashly in anger did not mean that Dr. King never fought back. Like Moses, Dr. King also came to see that sometimes, a burning wish for hope masquerades as rage. Both men underwent remarkable emotional journeys in their fights for justice, ultimately rallying large numbers of people behind common causes, morals, beliefs, and identities-- and their success came by channeling their anger into something productive instead of either ignoring it or lashing out instinctively. Both men found another way, a different way, than how they initially and instinctively wanted to react to the horrors they faced. And, both men also shone brightest, and most courageously, when they knew they were not alone, and when they communicated their feelings with

others. Because just how anger begets anger, as with the mob outside of Dr. King's home, growing louder and threatening more violence by the moment, so too hope also begets hope-- starting as a spark, spreading from heart to heart, and becoming powerful enough to quite literally change the course of history, if one person can be brave enough to channel that powerful rage in another direction.

For Dr. King, though he knew the joys of marriage and fatherhood, friendship and a meaningful calling, he also lived in a world where many of the people around him hated him and did not think that he deserved dignity simply because of the color of his skin. He constantly held both beauty and the pain of injustice within his heart. He had every reason to feel anger.

Moses knew luck, and faith, health and power. But, he was also ripped from his family, and belonged to a people downtrodden and abused because they were not Egyptian. He, too, held both beauty and the pain of injustice within his heart. He had every reason to feel anger.

All of us in this room know certain luxuries and beauties. Some of which Moses never could have comprehended, like Netflix. We are a lucky bunch, those of us sitting here in community together today.

But we also live in a world that had the Holocaust. We can't go back and we can't change it. And, now, we live in a world that had October 7th, and that has the ongoing conflict which has ensued. This weekend marks 100 days for the hostages still held in terror and abuse in the Hamas tunnels. 100 days of fallout, of pain, of worry, of being reminded that we live in a world where there are groups and organizations that hate us just for being Jewish, and whose stated purpose is to destroy us. 100 days of intense and understandable anger at the injustices we are seeing, from so many corners. We are hurting, we are reeling, we are mad.

This is all to say that we, too, hold both beauty and the pain of injustice within our hearts, just like Moses, and just like Dr. King, and just like every human who has ever seen injustice. We, too, have every reason to feel anger, righteous anger. As Heschel says, this emotional dance that we must dance every day is to live "both in awe and consternation, in fervor

and horror, with my conscience on mercy and my eyes on Auschwitz, wavering between exaltation and dismay."

To live with our eyes on Auschwitz-- or, now, to live with our eyes on the Middle East, with our eyes on the horrors continuing and continuing to unfold, with the feeling of being shaken to our very core, and the need to do something, ANYthing, to make this world a more just place, a place where this sort of thing does not and cannot happen, and where we can feel that safety that we need to feel, again. That is where we find ourselves, today.

In these moments of pain, in these moments of anger, it is both humbling and reassuring to remember that our most powerful leaders were also people, prone to the very real and very normal reactions of pain, powerlessness, anger, and desire for revenge. They, too, lashed out, and they, too, learned to live with hurt and regret-- just like all of us do.

But they also nurtured hope. In themselves, and in others, and they never let go of it, no matter how bad things got.

From the righteous rage of Moses,

From the justified fury of Dr. King,

We can learn that

Anger is not in and of itself a bad thing, but an opportunity.

Anger, righteous and justified anger, is a sign that something is very, very wrong, a call to action, a call to find a way out,

But it is not, in and of itself, the cause or the solution.

Psychologist Harriet Lerner, in her book The Dance of Anger, writes

"feeling angry signals a problem, [but just] venting anger does not solve it. Venting anger may serve to maintain, and even rigidify, the old rules and patterns in a relationship, thus ensuring that change does not occur."

Anger, righteous and justifiable anger like the one felt by Moses, like the one felt by Dr. King, and like the one felt by those of us whose hearts are breaking again and again since October 7, that kind of anger is also is calling on us to believe, against all odds, that we can find a way to build a future that IS, and CAN BE, sustainable, and fixable, something that will not rip us and tear us the way that the world already has. When we remember

that anger is often hope in disguise, necessary hope, then we can choose to embrace that hope, and let it guide us forward.

I know that right now it is hard, almost impossible, to feel hope right now. There is so much right now that hurts.

I imagine that that is how Moses also felt, faced with the immense and deeply-rooted, structural abuse in front of him.
I imagine that is how Dr. King may have felt, seeing the institutionalized, persistent, violent racism surrounding him. These evils were immense.

But they drew strength from those around them, and from God, to hold onto that anger, to hold it and look at it, to feel it, and then to coax out of it the hope, and to use its fire of their anger to lead society forward towards its better self.

It takes immense, immense courage to look our anger in the face. It is a frightening and difficult thing, to feel it, to acknowledge it, and then -- especially when it is justifiable anger-- to make the choice, the brave and difficult choice, to harness it and use its power to move towards hope.

Moses and Dr. King had that courage.

And I have to believe that we can, too.

Shabbat shalom.