

Cutting-out Anger: Lessons from the *Zevach Sh'lamim*

Parashat Vayikra (Bar Mitzvah of Jesse Cohen, son of David & Rabbi Debbie Cohen)

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It seems like just yesterday that I was reading my kids Peggy Parish's famous Amelia Bedelia book series. I'm sure my bibliophile friend Debbie Cohen knows all about Amelia Bedelia, but for those of you who may have gone through your parenting or grandparenting years without meeting this zany character, let me introduce her to you. Amelia Bedelia is a housekeeper who takes all of her instructions literally. So if the homeowner asked her to dust the furniture, Amelia Bedelia would literally sprinkle dust all over the tables and sofas. If she was asked to put the lights out in a room, she would remove all the lightbulbs from the lamps. If she was asked to draw the drapes so the sun doesn't come in, she would literally take out a pencil and paper and draw the drapes! I have so many memories of reading these books and laughing along with my kids because we couldn't believe that she took everything so literally! Expressions, idioms, vernacularisms were totally lost on her. In one of our family favorites, the homeowners asked Amelia Bedelia to dress the chicken in preparation for dinner. Well, wouldn't you know it, Amelia Bedelia found a little dress for the carcass, put ribbons on the *pulkies*, little stockings on the drumsticks! Now I have to confess that I wasn't sure what it really meant to "dress a chicken." It's not all that common nowadays, when we buy our meat all butchered and packaged from the grocery store. But not all that long ago, you had to actually remove some parts from the chicken, the giblets and the gizzard and other various parts that came along with your bird. That's what dressing a chicken means. Now I am sure that someone invented that term in order to avoid a more descriptive expression for the process of essentially butchering meat...a process that we read in all its abundant detail in this week's parasha. I appreciated, Jesse, how you longed for a narrative part of the Torah like the story of Joseph and his brothers, which seems so domesticated, and well, clean compared to the details of Parashat Vayikra. But I think you did great work with the material, and I am going to try to follow your lead.

In Leviticus 3:4 we get the manual for "dressing" an animal, *min ha'bakar*, from the herd for the purpose of the *zevach sh'lamim*, the sacrificial offering of well-being, which as the Etz Chayim commentary^[1] suggests was an "individual...offering ...of gratitude and well-being...motivated not by guilt or obligation, but by a sense of wholeness in the donor's life, a sense of being at peace with one's family, with the priests of the Temple, and with God." If we were living a few thousand years ago, Jesse might bring a *zevach sh'lamim* on the occasion of his bar mitzvah. It's a good will offering, a sacrifice recognizing the many blessings in life. Now roll up your sleeves, put on your gloves and apron, cause we're about to get messy. (I'm really sorry Debbie, I know you're a vegetarian!) The meat of this particular sacrifice was actually consumed by the donor and the priests. But the Torah tells us specifically that the entrails, the fat, the kidneys, and the liver were *not* eaten. Those parts were placed directly upon the altar and burned entirely. Now we could speculate that the Torah is giving us some early dietary advice...fat is not good for you, so put it on the altar instead of in your body. Organ meats are very high in cholesterol. So maybe you should avoid them. I personally only eat chopped liver twice a year, on Passover and Rosh Hashanah! But I suspect that the Torah had more sublime ideas in mind.

In antiquity, as well as kabbalistic and later Hassidic thought, each of the organs of the body corresponded to a specific mitzvah. The parts of the body were understood not only for their anatomical function, but also as the seat of various emotions and behaviors. And while they didn't consider every single capillary and cornea, it was hard to ignore the second largest internal organ we possess--that is, the liver. The Hebrew word for liver is *kaved*, a word that also means "heavy," even to this day in Modern Hebrew. Besides the fact that a liver is about 3 lbs., that heaviness also communicated something to our sages and spiritual masters. In Isaiah 21:15, the prophet uses that same word to describe the *severity* or *vehemence* of war. *Kaved* is not only something that weighs a lot of pounds, it is also something that weighs us down. Something vexing, grievous, even oppressive. In Hassidic thought, the liver was the anatomical source of anger and bitterness. In describing a sacrificial offering that is supposed to communicate wholeness, peace, contentment, fulfillment, the only place for the organ of anger is to be burned up entirely on the altar. It's just not compatible with *sh'leimut*, a sense of well-being and gratitude.

At the end of the Passover Seder, when we open the door for *Eliyahu Ha'Navi*, the prophet Elijah, there is a text we are supposed to recite that is pretty hostile and jarring. As we welcome the prophet who is supposed to bring tidings of the ultimate redemption of the world, we beseech God to:

Sh'foch chamatcha al ha'goyim asher lo y'da'ucha, v'al mamlachot asher b'shimcha lo kara'u...
"Pour out Your anger, Your wrath on the nations that do not know You and upon the kingdoms that do not call upon Your name...*Tirdof be'af*, pursue them in wrath and destroy them from under the sun."

This reading, which contains excerpts from the Book of Psalms and Lamentations, was compiled and added to the Haggadah in the Middle Ages, when Jews regularly suffered Christian oppression. The desire to be free of that victimization and terror comes through so clearly in these verses, as does the desire for justice. Some people aren't all that comfortable with this section of the haggadah and may even omit it, say it silently, or substitute a softer, alternative reading. It's interesting to note, though, that right after this furious pronouncement there is a very touching reading from the prophet Malachi which promises:

"Behold, before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord, I will send the prophet Elijah to you. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the hearts of children to their parents."^[2]

You might have expected some divine retribution following the *Shfoch chamatcha* proclamation, but instead there is divinely inspired reconciliation between people who are estranged or alienated from each other. Reading this with the backdrop of Parashat Vayikra, it seems that in order even for God to unify people's hearts and create peace in families, God first has to "pour out [God's] anger."

Look, anger is a legitimate emotion. We all feel it. We should feel it when we encounter various injustices, abuses, and wrongdoing in the world. It's precisely our sense of anger and disgust that often motivates us to act and work to eradicate those evils from the world. But anger is also one of those emotions that can morph into something much more toxic. It can become, as Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketchum^[3] write, "a fixation, an obsession that consumes us." And, as Aquinas once said, "Anger craves revenge." When anger becomes a build-up of resentments, something that "festers like a pus-filled sore," then it truly becomes an impediment of joy,

satisfaction, and gratitude in life. Which is why you can't come forward with a *zevach shlamim*, an offering of wholeness and well-being that is still attached to the liver, the symbolic seat of anger.

As we prepare for Pesach in just one week from tonight, let us liberate ourselves from the *Mitzrayim*, the Egypt-like oppression of harboring anger. If we walk around with those oppressive chains around our hearts, then no matter how many *Dayenus* we sing, how much *charoset* we eat, or how many stanzas of *Chad Gad Ya* and we make it through, we will still be slaves to that angry taskmaster. On this *z'man cheiruteinu*, this celebration of freedom, let us throw off the shackles of toxic anger once and for all!