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Rosh Hashanah Morning
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Reckoning With Our Covid Rage

It was the second century. The Romans, during Hadrians' rule, continued to persecute the Jews. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai sat with Rabbi Yehudah ben Il'ai and Rabbi Yossi deep in conversation. In an exchange resembling that classic scene in Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, Rabbi Yehudah ben Il'ai began to praise the Romans -- how magnificent that they have established marketplaces, and bridges, and bathhouses. Rabbi Yossi said not a word.

His silence antagonized Rabbi Shimon, who hated the Romans. Rabbi Shimon blurted out, "Everything the Romans have established, they have established for their own purposes! The marketplaces are for prostitutes. The bathhouses are so they can pamper themselves. The bridges are so they can collect taxes."

Unfortunately for Rabbi Shimon, one of his own pupils spread the story to the Roman governor. The ruling came swiftly. Rabbi Yehudah ben Il'ai, who spoke well of the Romans, was appointed head of the Sages. Rabbi Yossi, who was silent, was sent into exile. Rabbi Shimon, who denounced the government, was sentenced to death.

Rabbi Shimon and his son, Rabbi Elazar, fled to a cave. God sustained them by making a carob tree grow out of the ground and a spring of water appear. To prevent their clothing from getting tattered, they would strip and sit in the sand covered up to their necks. In this fashion they studied Torah all day. This went on for 12 years. Then one day, Elijah the Prophet paid them a visit. He announced that the Emperor had died and Rabbi Shimon's death sentence was annulled.

When Rabbi Shimon and Rabbi Elazar emerged from the cave, they saw people plowing and sowing the land. They were disgusted and ashamed to see these people working, abandoning Torah study in pursuit of earthly matters like feeding themselves.

They couldn't adapt to the people around them. After such a profound experience of studying God's mystical teachings hour after hour in seclusion for

12 years, they found themselves engulfed by rage as they tried to re-enter their world.

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When I came out of my cave last May, boarding an airplane for the first time in over a year, I felt Rabbi Shimon's fury. I got seated next to a teenager who wouldn't keep his mask over his nose. I politely asked him to pull it up. He grunted and reluctantly complied. Then he pulled the mask down so he could take a nap. I asked him again to cover his nose.

"Just chill out," he responded.

Maybe it was my fear that his aerosols were laden with COVID, or my indignation that he would be so inconsiderate, or my exasperation that I hadn't seen my elderly parents in so long, but my hand just flew up to the call button above my head.

"Can I help you?" the flight attendant asked.

"He refuses to wear his mask over his nose," I explained.

I wanted her to yell at him. Or threaten him with a fine. I wanted his mother, sitting across the aisle from us, to apologize for his insolence. Or at least just act a little embarrassed.

"Would you like to take a different seat at the back of the plane?" the flight attendant asked kindly.

That was it?

"Sure," I replied.

What a weird time this is. Most of us had enjoyed some freedom over the summer. I ate in restaurants. I went shopping without a mask. I worried less. I socialized more.

But just two or three months later the mask ordinances are back, the case counts are rising, the ICUs are filling up.

We feel angry because too many people have refused vaccination. We feel angry because too many people won't wear masks. We feel angry because too many politicians cynically call for individual freedom while snubbing the welfare

of the community. And as we have learned so well, the virus really doesn't care about politics. We will all pay the price.

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The story of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai continues: When Rabbi Shimon saw the people plowing and sowing the land he muttered, "These people are abandoning the eternal life of Torah study!" Wherever he and his son turned their gaze, fire shot out of their eyes and burned up everything in their path.

Then a divine voice emerged from the heavens and chastised them: "Did you come out of your cave in order to destroy My world? Go back to your cave!"

They returned to their cave to atone for their sins. After twelve months the divine voice called to them again. "Try again. Come out!" This time it was different. Rabbi Elazar still destroyed everything in his path. But everywhere that Rabbi Elazar would strike, Rabbi Shimon would heal.

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Lots of Jewish texts address anger. The Torah is full of stories about angry people. Cain attacks his brother, Abel, and kills him. Sarah banishes Hagar and Ishmael from her home. Moses smashes the precious tablets that God had just given him.

The Rabbis do not look kindly on uncontrolled anger: "One who rips his clothes in anger, one who breaks his vessels in anger, and who wastes money in anger," they write, "should be viewed as if he worships idols" (Shabbat 105b).

Perhaps they knew just how devastating anger can be, how it can indiscriminately destroy anything in its path, how it can lead to suffering and violence between individuals, within a society, among nations.

And yet, anger is part of who we are. When we look around -- at our country's response to the pandemic, or at any kind of injustice, how can we not be angry?

The Rabbis taught that we have a *yetzer hara*, an evil inclination, that leads us to harm others. One aspect of the *yetzer hara* is anger. The Rabbis don't wish to eradicate it, though, only control it. They acknowledge that anger can be worthwhile, even important. The great rabbi, Rav Kook, wrote that we should not

try to push out the evil inclination too much. The quality of anger needs to exist. He writes,

> "...To say we wish for no anger at all anywhere, is as if we say that an energy which was created within us is there to purposefully harm us, and that can't be said...Everything was created for a good purpose." (Translation from Michal Kohane, "Where is Moshe? on dealing with anger.")

Anger can be holy, and it can be harnessed to fight injustice. As the Black feminist writer Audre Lorde argued in 1981, "Focused with precision, [anger] can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change." ("The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," keynote presentation at the National Women's Studies Association Conference, Storrs, Connecticut.)

Anger can dislodge us from our apathy and motivate us to mobilize. We should be wary when we are told not to be angry. Women, and especially women of color, are often criticized for expressing anger. In the face of injustice, we should raise our voices. When others tell us to suppress our emotions, we should wonder if they are asking us to stifle our experiences of injustice and let go of our commitment to social change.

That said, sometimes uncontrolled anger can really harm us. Psychologists largely understand that anger is a secondary emotion. Underneath anger is usually sadness or fear. We find it uncomfortable and difficult to come to terms with loss or manage anxiety, but anger can make us feel powerful and mask our vulnerability so we don't have to deal with those other emotions.

The problem is that anger can poison our relationships, demonize those with whom we disagree, and lead us to become bitter and self-righteous. Perhaps this is why the rabbis likened unbridled anger to idolatry.

On the High Holidays we recite the Thirteen Attributes of God, the attributes that we are supposed to emulate. One of them is "*erech apayim*" -- God is slow to anger. Sort of ironic given God's anger issues -- between the flood and the plagues and burying people alive in a huge pit, God does not seem to be the model we wish to emulate.

That aside, we are taught to be *slow to anger*, slow to let our anger engulf us. Before lashing out at others, we need to feel our anger, locate the emotions underneath it, and discover what it might be teaching us. We need to give voice

to grief and fear, allow ourselves to be vulnerable, and express that anger without burning other people up.

Perhaps Sarah Smarsh's op-ed in the *New York Times*, "What to Do With Our Covid Rage," resonated with me because it mirrors many teachings from Jewish tradition. She writes:

> Anger is a contagious energy that jumps quickly from one person to the next. It will seize your mind and body as its host. If allowed to explode, it will hurt others. If allowed to implode, it will hurt you. I had to learn early how to transmute it for the sake of my own survival. I found that it can be the source of a powerful alchemy. If we are up to the task, it could help us create something good together." (August 7, 2021)

We are in a period of real uncertainty, and COVID politics are infuriating. Smarsh cautions us, though, to resist turning complex realities into simple categories of enlightened "us" versus stupid "them." She encourages us to turn our anger into actions that are constructive. She writes:

> We can demand public-health mandates, political blowback be damned. We can communicate with the cost-anxious and wait-and-see people who remain open-minded despite skepticism wrought by a lifetime of disadvantage. We can do good deeds to negate harmful ones, like donating money to a nonprofit health clinic when we see anti-science protesters on the sidewalk or in the news. We can also, in my opinion, occasionally tell those protesters to screw off, if it gets us to our next moment of grace…

It's too bad that Rabbi Elazar was unable to move past that black and white thinking of enlightened "us" versus stupid "them." Both he and his father had been isolated for so long, embittered and disconnected from their community and the world around them. Rabbi Elazar continued to live with explosive anger, destroying everything in his path. He never learned to create something good from it.

Rabbi Shimon, though, chose the path of healing. I don't think his anger disappeared, but he transmuted it for the sake of his survival. It became a source of powerful alchemy and his good deeds negated other people's harmful ones.

On this Rosh Hashanah, let us harness our anger to fight the injustices caused or exacerbated by this pandemic.

Let us use our righteous indignation to fuel our efforts to create social change.

And let us heed Smarsh's powerful words at the end of her article:

> Remember how you felt last spring, at a city stadium or a suburban pharmacy or a rural community building, when you got a shot. How will you remember its blessing? What will you do with the life that it saved?

May we remember the blessing of our vaccination shot.

May we, like Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, heal the destruction throughout our society.

And may this next year bring less suffering to our world.

L'shanah tovah.