

## Overcoming Anger

We are approaching the Selichot prayers, that part of the Kol Nidre service where we have an opportunity to reflect on those ways in which we have "missed the mark," done things that have hurt ourselves and others. For the next 24 hours, we have an opportunity to reflect on this, to take to heart the ways in which we can do better.

In a few minutes we will chant the traditional list of "al hayts," the alphabetical list of transgressions that help us think about ways in which each of us may have gotten off the path this past year. It's a mundane list - no dramatic sins, no murder, grand theft, political treason. The things that are listed are actions that we can all relate to, at some point in our lives: speaking disrespectfully; abusing food or drink; dishonesty; gossip; jealousy; being stubborn. As we begin reflecting on the internal obstacles we face to being our best selves, I'd like to take a few minutes to talk a bit about something that most of us experience in one way or another, and that is the challenge of anger.

I began thinking about this this summer, as I felt all the reactions to the situation in Israel and Gaza swirling around me. While I was in Israel, I didn't experience any anger directed at me personally, but I was aware of the ways it was manifesting in so many places: angry right-wing Israelis physically attacking other Israelis protesting the war; angry Palestinians in the West Bank, demonstrating against both Israeli and Palestinian authorities; and coming from all directions, the anger that swept through cyberspace, popping up on people's Facebook pages and in other social media. There was the anger of different groups of Jews here in Boston directed at one another; and the anger of non-Jews in Europe expressed in disturbing protests and acts of violence.

All of this politically-provoked anger got me thinking about anger more generally, both its seductiveness and its destructive power. I thought back on my own childhood, and while it feels far away now, I do remember getting angry a lot as a kid. I got frustrated easily if things didn't go the way I wanted; I remember banging angrily on the piano when I was in 6th grade and couldn't play something perfectly the first time. I remember getting furious at my dog when she wouldn't obey, and angry at my little brother when he wouldn't cooperate without whatever I was desiring in that particular moment (forgive me, Ted!). I got angry as a teenager when I felt unjustly blamed for things by my father, and angry in my first job as a summer camp counselor when I felt I wasn't being respected. And while years of spiritual work and going on meditation retreats have greatly dampened whatever angry tendencies I might once have had, I can admit to moments of which I am not so proud in more recent years, moments of anger at my stepchildren or my spouse when I've felt powerless or misunderstood.

As I've been studying a bit about approaches to anger in Jewish tradition, I've learned that it's a wonderful doorway into spiritual practice in general, because anger can arise for so many different reasons. There is a quality of discernment that one needs when dealing with anger, for there are some useful purposes that anger can serve. Yet acting from a place of anger is rarely, if ever, productive.

So, what do we need to know about anger and how to deal with it?

Anger arises for different reasons, but one fundamental cause is our desire for control; our frustration when, in the words of Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, "events don't conform to our agenda." Anger can be the reaction to any situation in which we expect things to be easier, or faster, or simply different than what they are. My own weakness in this area is when I'm driving, usually when I haven't left myself enough time to get myself from point A to point B. Every slow driver in my path becomes an obstacle and potential object of my anger.

For other people, anger might arise because of an expectation that something will go a certain way at work, or because our children are making us late, or because our vacation plans didn't turn out as we hoped. The challenge here is to ask ourselves--why exactly do I expect things to be other than they are? Why do I assume that the universe should be arranged in such a way as to make things easier and more pleasant - for me? Most of us probably wouldn't admit to such an assumption, but what else could we be assuming, when things don't go as we expected?

One approach to dealing with anger comes from the Jewish tradition of Mussar, which teaches the cultivation of positive qualities and ways of dealing with negative qualities. There are a few specific *middot*, or qualities, that we can foster as antidotes to anger.

One key *middah* is gratitude. Rabbi Zelig Pliskin, whom I mentioned earlier, is the author of a Mussar book on anger (*Anger: The Inner Teacher*, Mesorah Publications 1997). He writes that one of the root causes of anger is the feeling that my needs are not being met. We feed our tendency towards anger when we play endless tapes in our head of all the ways we are deprived, all the ways that other people, or the world in general, is failing us. We foster a tendency towards anger when we focus on all the ways that our needs are not being met by those around us.

By actively fostering gratitude instead, we can begin to quiet that angry soundtrack. In any given situation, I can shift my focus from what I lack to what I have. Instead of being acutely aware of my lack of time and getting mad at the driver in front of me, I can be grateful that I even have a car, that I have the capacity to get myself from point A to point B on my own. Or, as I used to do sometimes when I was driving from Lexington to West Newton on a Shabbat morning and worried that I'd be late—when I found myself stuck behind a slow car, I pretended that it was a Shabbat angel, driving slowly in order to remind me to take the foot off the gas and relax. I gave thanks for the angel, and the anger dissipated.

In his book, Pliskin relates a wonderful story about a woman who never seemed to get upset when something she depended on - her refrigerator, her washing machine, her telephone - broke down. When someone asked her about this, she replied that she tends to take those things for granted, and so she treats each breakdown as a heavenly reminder to appreciate all of her gadgets and appliances when they do work.

This can be a powerful practice, when we notice that anger - or its precursor, impatience - is starting to arise. I can ask myself, is there something I feel that I'm lacking in this moment? And then, instead of feeding that sense of lack, can I find something in the moment to be grateful for? We can also take on gratitude practices more generally, without waiting to feel angry--for example, taking time each evening to say out loud one or two things for which we are grateful from that day, or writing them down. Or if there is someone we find ourselves in contention with, to search for even one small way in which we are grateful for their presence in the world.

Another path to moving beyond anger is the cultivation of humility. Humility, or *anavah* in Hebrew, is a very interesting *middah*. It is sometimes misunderstood as self-abasement, as tearing down one's sense of self-worth. But self-abuse is not humility. The best definition I have heard comes from Rabbi Ira Stone, a contemporary teacher of Mussar. He defines humility as "taking up the right amount of space." Humility is the healthy balance of understanding my relative smallness in the universe and my inherent worth and importance as a human being. In psychological terms, we might call it having a healthy ego - being strong in my sense of self-worth while also realizing that the world does not revolve around me. A truly humble person does not need to put down others in order to feel bigger, and also does not need to berate herself; a humble person is open to critique and also able to shrug off those insults that have no basis in reality.

How does humility relate to anger? As I said earlier, anger often arises in reaction to my desire for control, for things to go the way I expect and want them to. There is something inherently--even if unconsciously--arrogant about this assumption. If I become impatient and angry with the driver in front of me, it's because I'm assuming that the universe should be arranged in such a way that I will get from point A to point B in exactly this much amount of time. That assumption, of course, is a bit ridiculous, once I get some perspective.

Alan Morinis, another teacher of Mussar, writes that anger often arises from clinging to the "I," to my need to be in control, to be the center of my own story. He says, "So often the things that we get angry about are issues of ego." This is the anger we feel when someone contradicts us, or won't do what we say, or does something that we feel makes us look bad. In these moments, can I step back and explore how my "I", my sense of my own importance, is causing my anger at others?

If anger constrains us and makes us suffer, then fostering a sense of humility can be liberating. Rabbi Pliskin writes: "True humility is relaxing. It frees us from the need to seem perfect, to be a person who never makes mistakes. With humility, we can calmly say, 'I was wrong,' or 'Yes, I made a mistake.' Humility is the awareness that we are fallible human beings with no claim to perfection."

Pliskin goes on to talk about humility and joy, and how true humility "frees us from approval-seeking...[The humble person] does not feel a need to appear stronger, wiser, healthier or better than others in any way, or to win their admiration purely to bolster his own ego. Humility frees us from needless worry about how other people see us. It frees us

from the need to pretend to be different than we actually are, in order to fit some preconceived ideal image. This freedom to be ourselves will allow us to enjoy life more."

Mussar teachers point out that each of us has our own "soul curriculum," and what each of us needs to attend to might be quite different than others. In terms of humility, this is an important point to remember. Some of us might tend to the side of feelings of worthlessness, to muting our own feelings in the face of others' opinions or needs. If this is the case, then your task is to affirm your own essential worth, to remind yourself that, in the language of Jewish tradition, you are created in the image of God, that there is something inherently Godly and of value at your core. Following Rabbi Stone's definition of humility, the task here is to take up enough space, to stabilize your self-esteem and gain confidence in your essential worth as a human being.

On the other end of the spectrum are those folks who tend to not have a problem imagining themselves at the center of the world, who are supremely confident in their approach to life. If this is you, then certain kinds of situations can become opportunities to practice humility. When you feel anger arising because success is elusive, when you feel you are being spoken to disrespectfully, when others point out your flaws--these are opportunities to ask, "Can this be a moment to work on my humility? If I felt truly humble right now, would I be angry? Is there anything I can learn from this situation?" Noticing your anger in these situations can be an opportunity to take up a little less space, to make room for others.

A few years ago on a meditation retreat, I heard a very interesting definition of anger; one of the teachers said that anger is "thwarted love." This is a fascinating way of thinking about anger. Sometimes my anger arises precisely because I care deeply--about a person, or a place, or a situation. The root of the anger isn't bad, although the anger itself might not be particularly productive. In these situations, anger can be useful in bringing us to awareness of something that is not right--that something is obstructing my ability to love fully, whether it's loving myself, or another person or a whole group of people. Alan Morinis writes that anger can be "a signal that something you care about is endangered or wronged." In these situations, we need to listen to our anger, but not to stoke it.

There is a Yiddish proverb that says, "Anger is like salt. In small amounts it enhances, but too much spoils everything." Anger can enhance our sense of what is right and wrong, it can serve as a warning that we ourselves or someone we love is being abused. But it can also very easily get out of control, can become more like a devouring fire than a sprinkling of salt. I would put "righteous anger" in this category; it often manifests as self-righteous anger, the need to be right and prove others wrong. We need to learn how to move from our initial anger to wise action, from the realization that there is a problem to thoughtful and calm response to the wrong that needs to be made right.

Anger as thwarted love is closely related, I think, to anger that masks a deeper fear. Often, if we peel back our anger, what becomes exposed is a sense of vulnerability. It might be a fear of failure, a fear of loss, or a fear for our own or others' wellbeing. Because fear feels disempowering, we cover it with anger, which can feel (falsely) empowering, something

that we can direct out towards others. Recognizing this fear, and attending to it, can be a way of disengaging from the anger. We can pull our attention back in towards ourselves, and away from the object of our anger. As anger arises, I can ask myself, "What am I afraid of?" Or, as Morinis suggests, in the moment of anger I can ask myself: "What is it that is making me sad?"

In this moment of awareness, I have an opportunity to tend to my fear and sadness, to acknowledge it and bring some kindness to myself. Whether the fear is of something real or imagined doesn't really matter; assuming there is not a clear and present danger that I need to defend against, I now have the time and space to foster greater awareness of the ways in which I am feeling vulnerable, and to consider what it might take to restore a sense of security and balance.

If anger is thwarted love, then an antidote to anger is the cultivation of compassion and love of others. Rabbi Israel Salanter, the founder of the Mussar movement in the 19th century, when asked, "what is the antidote to anger?" gave this answer: "When a person works on mastering the quality of constantly doing acts of kindness for others, this will free him from anger." This is the *middah* of Chesed, of acts of lovingkindness not done for reward or recognition, but out of a sense of connection to the other. It is also the *middah* of Rachamim, of being compassionate towards others, looking for the good within them and avoiding harsh judgment.

As a practice, we can take to heart a wonderful instruction from the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, who taught that when we see someone doing something that angers us, we should understand that this was put in front of our eyes in order to help us realize that there is something that we need to attend to in ourselves. We can then let go of our anger and annoyance at the other person, and take it as an opportunity for self-improvement. Understanding things this way, says the Baal Shem Tov, will help us foster goodwill and compassion for others, and help us better understand ourselves.

There is another component of Rabbi Salanter's response that is important, the teaching that taking upon ourselves the practice of "constantly doing acts of kindness for others" will bring liberation from anger. As we do these acts of kindness, we foster a spaciousness in our hearts and minds, a sense of ease. Doing good things for others has been shown to increase our own sense of wellbeing, and perhaps it is that greater sense of wellbeing that helps release the tendency to anger. Another practice that I have tried and found effective is in the moment when I am about to say something negative or angry about another person, to stop myself and instead send them a blessing. The shift in energy within myself is quite noticeable in these moments, I encourage you to try it.

The most transformative practice, when it comes to anger that festers inside us, is responding with kindness to those who have wronged us. We do this not to let them off the hook, or to condone what was done, but to liberate ourselves from the destructive effects of holding onto anger. Such acts of kindness can change both our own hearts and the heart of the other.

As we engage with the Yom Kippur liturgy over the next 24 hours, we will repeatedly invoke the power of compassion, the possibility of forgiveness for ourselves and others. The sacred name that we sing over and over during this day is *YHVH YHVH El rachum v'chanun, erekh apayim v'rav chesed*, the Source of compassion and grace, patience and lovingkindness. At the end of our Selichot prayers, we will sing out to *Rachamana*, "Compassionate One."

May we embrace this opportunity to seek compassion for ourselves and for everyone around us. Perhaps, sometime over the course of Yom Kippur or in the coming week, we can apologize to someone whom we have spoken to—our not spoken to—out of anger.

My blessing for all of us is that we be liberated from impatience and anger, from harsh judgment of self and others. May we come to embody those Godly qualities of *rachamim* and *chesed*, compassion and patience and lovingkindness, in this new year.

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