

Get Angry. Change the World.
Rosh Hashanah Morning, 2019/5780

The Torah tells us in the words we will read in a little while, “And God remembered Sarah.” So, God had FORGOTTEN Sarah up until now? Sarah has been struggling to have a child with her husband for actual decades. Sarah gave Abraham her servant, Hagar, after their first ten years of infertility, so that he could have a child and, hopefully, preserve her marriage. It isn’t enough to save herself. I imagine Sarah’s anger. After Sarah overhears the angels tell her husband that she and Abraham will have a child in their old age—they are 90 and 100—the text reports that she laughs. I can only assume it was one of those chuckles that comes out when you’re furious, and you know it’s an inappropriate time to rant and get mad. Women know that chuckle. About thirteen years earlier—she was only in her mid-seventies back then—she had given her husband Hagar to have a child with, and NOW God decided she would have a child of her own? I can only imagine that Sarah was angry with everyone: the world, her husband, Hagar, herself, God. What kind of a world was this to bring a child into? She and her husband were nomads, and he just told King Abimelech of Gerar that she was his sister, so that they didn’t kill him to take her for the king. (Instead, they took her anyway, presuming her single, and God messes with the fertility of the entire kingdom in retribution.) This is the world to bring a new, innocent baby? She must have been angry with her husband, the one who spoke with an invisible God that nobody else knew. Sure, he had a baby no problem with her servant, but not with herself? He didn’t even defend her when she laughed at the absurdity of their having a child at their ages. Hagar would have been an easy target of her anger. As far as we can tell from the text, Abraham and Hagar conceived a child with no delay. There is nothing more infuriating for a woman who desperately wants a baby of her own—and then the Torah tells us, “when [Hagar] saw she had conceived, her mistress, [Sarah], was lowered in her esteem (Gen. 16:4).” Of course Sarah was angry with herself. Her body didn’t work right. What else could she have done to get pregnant earlier? Why did she let her husband take her away from her family, her support network in the first place? Why, why did she laugh when God told her about her upcoming pregnancy? And God. How could Sarah not save the bulk of her anger for God? The God who spoke to Abraham and told him to pick up and move to a land that God hadn’t even revealed yet. The God who, according to the Torah, closed up her womb and made her infertile for 90 years, only to change courses seemingly on a whim and open it up long, long after Sarah thought she would never have a child of her own. She wasn’t even sure if God meant it, or if God could really do it, and now at 90, she could feel her hopes rising yet again. Sarah is ANGRY.

And it’s not just Sarah. For a holiday we think of as joyous, the Rosh Hashanah texts are full of anger. Hannah, the subject of our Haftarah reading, has every reason to be angry, too. Her husband’s other wife got pregnant no problem, but Hannah can’t, and then her devout

prayers are assumed to be drunken ranting by the priest? Infuriating! And then think about the story we'll read tomorrow morning, the Binding of Isaac, where Abraham is told to sacrifice his son—the one Sarah has at age 90 in today's story. Abraham is angry about being forced to sacrifice his son by the God to whom he has given over his entire life. Isaac is angry about, well, becoming his father's sacrifice. Sarah is angry at her husband's willingness to bind his son on the altar and offer him as a sacrifice. All of them are, presumably, angry at God for demanding such a sacrifice—and then God says, 'never mind; it was just a test!' Abraham and Isaac don't speak again in the Torah. Sarah dies immediately after the story; the rabbis attribute it to a broken heart. I think anger is the more likely culprit. All of this anger is intense and profound, and it intrudes on our holiday. What if anger, though, is the point of this holiday?

Anger can lead to many different outcomes. It flares up, making us do rash things. It burns slowly, and it makes us bitter and resentful. Sometimes it flames out. Sometimes, though, anger is righteous; it moves us forward, gives us power, and it spurs us to action. Sometimes, anger gives us the strength to act in profound and dramatic ways.

Jewish tradition has a lot to say about anger. Our Judaism teaches us to model ourselves on God. These High Holy Days, we repeat the attributes of God that some might say are the most important: "The Eternal, a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness"¹. So, God gets angry, too! But God's anger is slow, meaning it takes a whole lot to make God angry. God is so powerful, though, that God's slow-burning anger must lead to some kind of action. As we try to act in the image of God in which we were created, it's not clear that anger, even slow anger, will always lead to positive outcomes.

Most words of our tradition tell us that anger is always bad. Moses got angry and smashed the tablets². Proverbs tells us "it is better to be slow to anger than mighty, to have self-control than to conquer a city"³. In the book of Esther, our Purim story, the king sends Queen Vashti away because he was so angry at her for disobeying his command—although in the next chapter, he realized what he has done "when the anger of King Ahasuerus subsided"⁴. Over and over again, our biblical text and our rabbinic texts tell us that anger destroys.

The Talmud⁵ tells the story of Rabbi Hillel, who was held up as an example of overcoming anger. There were two people who made a bet, and if one of them could make Hillel lose his temper, he would win a sum of money. The one who had to try waited until

¹ Exodus 34:6

² Exodus 32:19

³ Proverbs 16:32

⁴ Esther 2:1

⁵ Shabbat 30b

Friday afternoon, not too long before Shabbat. He went to Hillel's house, knocked on the door, and Hillel got out of the bath and wrapped himself in a towel to answer the door. The man was standing there with a relatively meaningless and unimportant question, "Why are the heads of Babylonians oval?" Babylonian Hillel, rather than getting insulted as intended, responded that it was a great question, and that it's because the Babylonian midwives don't shape babies' heads well. The man went away, waited a little while, and then came back and knocked on the door again. Hillel wrapped himself in a towel again, and again, the man had a somewhat ridiculous question. Hillel answered it logically, and the man went on his way. When he came back a third time, and Hillel calmly answered his silly question yet again, the man told him he had many more questions, but didn't want to make him angry. Hillel said, "ask all your questions!" At that, the other man got angry and told Hillel, "may there not be many like you in Israel!" Why? Because he lost a sum of money because of Hillel's patience and godlike attribute of being so slow to anger.

In the middle ages, the Spanish rabbi, doctor, and philosopher Maimonides wrote about the importance of aiming for the middle. For example, someone who was always late should instead try to be early, so that she averaged out to about on time. Anger, however, he thought was so dangerous that there is no middle; instead, "anger is an extremely evil tendency and it is proper for man to remove himself from it to the other extreme. One should teach himself not to get angry, even over a matter which befits anger."⁶ But Maimonides's position, the rabbinic view of anger, is extreme. He thought of anger only as violent and explosive, and therefore bad. While I acknowledge other kinds of anger, I underscore Maimonides's view of explosive anger: anger that hurts another person, in rage or through control, is never okay.

In this morning's Haftarah, we see a different version of anger. Hannah, who like Sarah, has not been able to have children, has a slower-burning anger. She is not rash or violent; she is not ranting or screaming. Instead, the picture the text paints is more pitiful. Her anger has been simmering for a long time, and she has become resentful and sad. She is powerless. In the society in which she lives, a childless woman is at the bottom of the home hierarchy, especially in a situation where her husband has more than one wife, and he has children with the other wife, as in Hannah's case. We learn that her husband's other wife mocks her and taunts her, even though Hannah is their shared husband's favorite. She weeps. She doesn't eat. She prays silently, finding power in the act of praying to God. She pours her anger into her prayer, transforming her anger from resentment to action, finding an avenue of power with which to move forward. When the priest, Eli, speaks to her, she is able to explain her sadness and anger, and he responds. Hannah's anger is slow burning, but in the absence of power to use her anger, she becomes bitter and resentful instead of acting. Only after she finds power, in her case through prayer, is she able to use that anger to help change her situation.

⁶ Mishneh Torah, Human Dispositions 2:3

Anger with other people, with situations, or with ourselves, that leads to soul-searching, self-improvement, improved relationships is righteous anger worth feeling. Anger that burns too slowly can lead to inaction and resentment, rather than change and power. That is the point of the holiday, for me. We read all of these prayers, and we reflect and we repent, and it makes us angry. Why can't we do better? Why did we make the same mistakes as last year? Why did our loved ones fall short of our expectations? Anger that leads us to make ourselves better, to improve our world, to work on our relationships—this is the righteous anger that I think these Days of Awe is all about.

When those with slow-burning anger find power, it becomes intense, world-changing anger. In our current political world, new candidates for up and down the ballot are finding their power, signing up because they are angry. They are people who might not have been interested in running for office, but they are so angry about the state of our world, our country, our political situation, that they have decided to take matters into their own hands and try to fix it from the inside. Activist Amanda Litman, who started the organization Run for Something, supporting young, liberal candidates who run for local offices, is quoted in Rebecca Traister's book *Good and Mad* saying, "My anger is my cup of coffee in the morning. It gets me out of bed and keeps me focused...every memo I write, every donor I meet with, every reporter I speak to, each conversation I have, is guided by strategy but fueled by the fury I feel at my country, at dangerous men, at my party, and at the very system of democracy I love that painfully let me down."⁷

Some are taking their anger and banding together with others to find their power and transform their anger to change the world. I have a friend who posted on social media about the crisis at the southern border. She read, as many of us did, about girls and women who were not given menstrual supplies, who were literally bleeding through their clothes. She found others who shared her fury, and they organized a drive to collect sanitary pads and tampons. She connected with Arizona Jews for Justice to add Target gift cards so that they could purchase additional toiletries and necessities. This friend could have posted a rant online and moved on. She could have fumed to herself. She could have called her senators and screamed at their offices. She probably did all of those things. She also organized several synagogues (including this one), Jewish schools, and organizations to do something about the problem. The collection box is in front of the office. Her anger has become the power to direct help to hundreds, even thousands of strangers.

Writers understand the power of anger to do great things. In Madeline L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*, she tells the story of Meg, who travels through time to find her father, a scientist exploring time travel. As Meg and her companions are about to face the final part of the journey on their own, without their mysterious friends, Mrs. Whatsit whispers to her, "Stay

⁷ Amanda Litman in *Women's Health Magazine*, October 17, 2017; quoted in Traister, Rebecca: *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger*, Simon and Schuster, 2018, p. 242.

angry, little Meg. You will need all your anger now.”⁸ Meg’s anger at her situation, her world, her missing father have been building for almost a hundred pages of the children’s story, and Mrs. Whatsit intuits that she will need power for the rest of the adventure ahead. As a child, Meg is lacking in power, and her anger could too easily lead her to inaction, to being overwhelmed and resentful, as it did with Hannah in the Haftarah. Instead, Mrs. Whatsit pushes her to use that anger to build her power, to change her world.

Similarly, in *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi*, Yoda tells Luke Skywalker that “anger, fear, aggression: the dark side of the force are they.” Again and again, Luke is cautioned against anger, reminded that anger is dangerous and antithetical to being a Jedi. But Luke and his friends on the light side, the resistance, use their anger to plot, to plan, to overcome the dark side. Their anger isn’t the violent, explosive kind that Yoda and the ancient rabbis caution against, but the Godly kind, the slow burning kind that, when channeled, can lead to righteousness, to world-changing.

Even our anger with God can empower us to act. It is infuriating to consider why so many good people suffer, and why the world can be so unfair. “I’m angry at God right now,” someone told me recently. “God has taken so many of the people I love, and it’s not right.” It’s not fair. I’d be angry, too. But it’s about what we do with our anger at God. We can scream and rant. We can let it simmer, refusing to engage with Judaism, blaming God and complaining to everyone that God just isn’t fair—or that God just isn’t, period. Or we can let that anger inspire us. It can inspire us to spend more time with our loved ones, and it can inspire us to help others who are going through hard times. It can inspire us to take better care of ourselves. It can lead us to seek our own power over our lives, and to let that anger at God make us powerful.

Returning to Sarah, the story with which I began, she had every reason to be angry. But she didn’t explode in anger, and she didn’t wallow in her anger, becoming bitter or resentful. She made changes in her life: she had a son, Isaac, she leaned into the laughter of which God accused her when she found out about her pregnancy—her son Isaac’s name in Hebrew, Yitzchak, means “he who laughs,” and she shared that laughter with others. The first thing the Torah tells us Sarah says after the birth of her son is, “God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me” (Gen. 21:6). She took control of her life, casting out Hagar and Ishmael when she felt they threatened her son, Isaac. Right or wrong, agree or disagree with her decision, Sarah used her anger to make changes in her life and to take action.

Anger is powerful. It can cause us to act rashly and violently; it can paralyze us, it can prevent us from moving forward. Or, it can be a powerful force to lead us to make positive

⁸ A Wrinkle in Time, page 98

changes in our lives and our world. Amanda Litman, the political activist fueled by anger, wrote, “I know you might be angry, too. Instead of resisting it, or avoiding it, let your fury push you to action. Embrace your anger and put it to work.”⁹

And so, may we get angry. May we feel that anger like God does, deeply and powerfully and slowly. May we use that anger to find the power to help us improve ourselves, to strengthen our relationships, and to fix our world.

⁹ Amanda Litman in Women’s Health