

Yom Kippur, Kol Nidrei Sermon 5779/ 2018:

Striving to Be Erech Apayim (Slow to Anger) & Fast to Forgive Like God

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Consider the following hypothetical scenario, one that may sound all too familiar: Harry is standing in line at ShopRite. It is 5:30 PM and he has to be at the Hebrew School by 6:00 PM to pick up his kids. Harry can make it to the shul in time... if he's lucky and if the line moves along. But it doesn't look good. Two of the five cashiers close their lanes. He thinks, "How dare they take a break when there are so many people waiting?!" The customer who has just started putting his food items on the conveyor belt starts chatting with the cashier about last night's Mets game. Harry mutters under his breath, "This is a supermarket, not a pool club. Just hurry up and finish taking your damned stuff out of your shopping cart!" By now, Harry is **impatiently** tapping his toes while trying to make the time go faster by reading his FaceBook posts on his iPhone. The woman behind him is speaking loudly on her phone & the noise of conversations between other people standing on the line is **grating on Harry's nerves**. He sighs in exasperation. The cashier is taking forever to scan and bag. Harry's **impatience** is visible on his face and in the rest of his demeanor. Turning to the person next to him, he mutters sarcastically, "This isn't rocket science! Why does this have to take so long?!" By the time it's Harry's turn at 5:50 PM, he is **in a rage**. His **nose is flaring**, his **heart is racing**, he is **breathing heavily**, and his **hands are shaking**. He's **furious** at the stupid and slow customers, as well as the incompetent guy at the cash register. He's also **angry** at his wife for not being able to do carpool today. And he **resents** the Hebrew School principal for making him feel guilty whenever he is even 1 minute late picking up the kids from school.

Harry's anger seems to have a life of its own. Even if we may not ever react as impatient and angry as Harry, we may still be able to relate to him to a certain extent. Think about it. Have you ever snapped at someone or made sarcastic comments to express your anger? Have you ever gotten so angry that you lost your composure?

Clearly, it is far better for us to master our anger than to have our anger master us. / There is a good starting point for taking charge of anger. And that is to consciously strive to work on the Jewish virtue known as **Erech Apayim**. This idiom is often translated as “slow to anger”, “forbearance,” or “patience.”¹ It literally means, “a lengthening of the time it takes before your nostrils begin to flare [in anger].”

Erech Apayim is one of the **13 attributes of God**, the *Sh'losh Esreh Middot*, that we invoke repeatedly throughout the [High Holidays](#) season. When we [take the Torah out of the ark](#), as well as during the [S'lichot](#) section of the [Amidah that we recite on Yom Kippur at Maariv & Neilah](#)², we refer to God as

“Adonai, Adonai, El Rachum v’Chanun, ERECH-APAYIM,, v’Rav-Chesed v’Emet, Noseh-Cheshed la-alafim, Noseh-Avon va-Fesha v’Chataah v’Nakeh.”

“Adonai, Adonai, a God who is compassionate and gracious, SLOW TO ANGER, abounding in kindness & faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, & sin, & granting pardon.

As is often the case in Jewish prayer, when we praise, thank, or make requests of God, we often enumerate or describe divine attributes that we ourselves are hoping to **emulate**³. This is part of what it means to be created **“in God’s image”** (**“b’tzelem Elohim”**) and **“to walk in God’s ways”**.

¹ *Erech Apayim* is #20 out of 48 virtues necessary for “*kinyan Torah*”/“acquisition of Torah” enumerated in Pirkei Avot 6:1

² as well as in Musaf & Mincha in other High Holiday Machzorim. In Machzor Chadash, the 13 Middot only appear in Maariv & Neilah

³ *imitatio Dei*

In the Babylonian Talmud (**Sotah 14a**), **Rabbi Chama bar Rabbi Chanina** teaches: What is the meaning of that which is written (in **Parashat Ekev**, in the Book of **Deuteronomy 13:5**): "*Acharei Adonai Eloheychem telechu.....*"? "After the Lord your God shall you **walk**, and God shall you fear, and God's commandments shall you keep, and unto God's voice shall you hearken, and God shall you serve, and unto God shall you cleave"? But is it actually possible for a person to **follow** the Divine Presence, [to literally **walk** the same way that God walks]?! He [Rabbi Chama bar Rabbi Chanina] explains: Rather, the meaning is that **one should follow God's example by emulating the attributes of the Kadosh Baruch Hu/ the Holy One, Blessed be God.**

Rabbi Chama then provides several concrete examples:

- Just as God **clothes the naked**⁴, so too should you clothe the naked.
- Just as the *Kadosh Baruch Hu* **visits the sick**⁵, so too should you visit the sick.
- Just as God, **consoles mourners**⁶so too should you console mourners.
- Just as the *Kadosh Baruch Hu*, **buries the dead**⁷, ...so too should you bury the dead.

Now, we might add to the list of ways of "following/emulating the attributes of God" the Jewish virtue of "*Erech Apayim*". In **Rabbi Moshe Cordovero's 16th century work, Tomer Devorah**⁸, he teaches that we are not just supposed to recite God's *Shlosh Esreh Middot*; we are also supposed to be inspired by God's example to similar acts of compassion, grace, patience, kindness, etc. Our repeated invocation of the 13 attributes, including the *middah* of *Erech Apayim*, is intended to inspire us to **imitate God (imitation Dei)**. By striving to be more patient, we are not required to deny our feelings of anger. Anger isn't necessarily wrong in all situations & Jewish law (*halacha*) does not forbid us from ever expressing anger. However, we are supposed to try to be less reactive, to slow anger down. There are responses to angry feelings that are considered inappropriate according to Jewish tradition, such as: raging, flying off the handle, going ballistic, or bursting out with hurtful put-downs. Being "Slow to Anger" means slowing down the reaction time, striving to be more patient.

⁴ as it is written (in *Parashat B'raysheet*. **Genesis 3:21**): "And the Lord God made for **Adam** and for **his wife** garments of skin, and clothed them"

⁵ as it is written (in *Parashat VaYera/ Genesis 18:1*), with regard to God's appearing to **Abraham/Avraham following his circumcision**: "And the Lord appeared unto him by the Terebinths of Mamre",

⁶ as it is written (*Parashat Chayei Sarah Genesis 25:11*),: "And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed **Isaac/Yitzchak** his son",

⁷ as it is written (*Parashat V'Zot Ha-B'racha. Deuteronomy 34:6*): "And he (**Moses/Moshe**) was buried in the valley in the land of Moav",

⁸ in his commentary on **Rosh Hashanah 17a**: "Let them carry out this service (the invocation of God's 13 attributes) before Me" as cited by **Bryna Jocheved Levy** in "Waiting For Rain: Reflections at the Turning of the Year" 2008

Mastering the *middah* of *Erech Apayim* is considered more praiseworthy than mastering physical or material things. As it says in the Book of **Mishley (Proverbs) 16:32,**

“*Tov Erech Apayim mi-gibor, u-moshel b’rucho mi-loched ir.*”

“Better to be slow-to-anger than physically mighty,
[better] to have self-**CONTROL** than to conquer a city.”

But, I’ve always wondered, and you might be wondering as well: Do all of us have the ability to **CONTROL** our anger? Or- is anger an automatic response for some people that is simple uncontrollable? Is the tendency to get angry easily and to be impatient ingrained in some people’s personalities, or perhaps even in their DNA?

In **Pirkei Avot 5:13**, it is taught

There are 4 types of temperaments (*Arba middot b’adam*)

- 1) Those who are EASY to provoke to anger, as well as EASY to appease⁹
- 2) Those who are HARD to provoke to anger¹⁰, as well as HARD to appease
- 3) Those who are HARD to provoke to anger and EASY to appease¹¹.**
- 4) Those who are EASY to provoke to anger & HARD to appease¹²

Of these 4 personality types, Pirkei Avot clearly favors the 3rd one. The ideal temperament is: HARD to provoke to anger and EASY to appease:

KASHEH lichos v’NOACH lirtzot. That person is considered to be a ***chasid.***

(a saintly or pious person)

In another **Pirkei Avot teaching (2:15)**, **Rabbi Eliezer** explicitly says:

“*AL t’hi NOACH lichos.*” “Do NOT be so EASILY provoked to anger.”

⁹ *NOACH lichos & NOACH lirtzot.* Of him it is said, “The loss is canceled by the reward.”

¹⁰ *KASHEH lichos v’KASHEH lirtzot.* Of him it is said “The reward is canceled by the loss”

¹¹ ***KASHEH lichos v’NOACH lirtzot.*** He is considered to be a ***chasid*** (saintly/pious).

¹² *NOACH lichos v’KASHEH lirtzot.* He is considered to be a ***rasha*** (wicked person/scoundrel)

But is this even feasible?! If someone is inherently predisposed to feeling angry or to expressing anger, is he/she even capable of change? Is a person able to move from one personality category type to the next? If you are "EASY to anger" ("NOACH *lichos*"), is it possible for you to become "HARD to provoke to anger" ("KASHEH *lichos*")? Can someone actually CHOOSE to be "Erech Apayim"/ "Slow to Anger" or patient?

Well, I would daresay that it is possible to change... An individual like Harry with "EASY to anger" tendencies may not be able to transform himself into a "HARD to anger" person overnight, but he certainly can take steps towards becoming "slower to anger" over time. Even if one has a certain predisposition, one doesn't have to and shouldn't make excuses like, "Well that's the way I am & there's nothing I can do about it.""

And, of course, if there is any time to consider the possibility of change, it's the **High Holidays season of *teshuvah***. Now is the time for each of us to **CHOOSE to be a better person tomorrow than we are today**.

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Going back to the list of God's 13 attributes, the ones that we recite and sing repeatedly during Yom Kippur services, the biblical source of the "*Adonai Adonai El Rachum v'Chanun*" passage can be found in the Book of Shemot/**Exodus 34:6**, in **Parashat Ki Tissa**.

The context of this biblical verse is the aftermath of the Sin of the Golden Calf (*Chet Ha-Egel*). Not too long beforehand, the newly liberated People of Israel had received the Ten Commandments & the rest of the Torah at Mount Sinai. Yet, despite having just been commanded not to worship idols, the Israelites worshipped a calf that Aaron made for them from the gold jewelry that they themselves had donated. Even though they had just experienced the Revelation of God at Sinai, B'nai Yisrael seemed to have lost faith when they thought that Moshe was delayed in coming down from the mountain. God's initial reaction to the Israelites' apostasy was ANGER. At first, God was so furious with B'nai Yisrael that God threatened to destroy the people and to create a new nation from Moshe's descendants.

But, being the great leader that he was, Moshe pleaded with God not to destroy the Israelites. He implored, "*Lamah Adonai YECHERAH APCHA b'amcha asher hotzeta me-Eretz Mitzrayim?*"

"Let not your ANGER, O God, blaze forth against your people whom you delivered from the Land of Egypt." (Exodus 32:11) After listening to Moshe's convincing arguments, God "renounced the punishment that He had planned to bring upon His people.

*"Va-y'nachem Adonai al ha-raah asher diber laasot l'amo."* (Exodus 32:15)

Shortly thereafter, Moshe descended Mount Sinai and saw, with his own eyes, the idol worshipping scene at the bottom of the mountain. Then, he became ANGRY and did not successfully control his temper. Enraged at the sight of Bnai Yisrael's sin, Moshe hurled the tablets (upon which the 10 Commandments were engraved) to the ground, shattering them to smithereens.

After burning the Golden Calf, grinding it to powder, and meting out a punishment to the idol worshippers, Moshe spoke to God again, saying, "I acknowledge that the people committed a great transgression. However, I implore you to **FORGIVE them** and not destroy them."

After God's & Moshe's ANGER subsided a bit, God called Moshe up to Mount Sinai again so that Moshe could carve a second set of tablets, upon which God would inscribe the Ten Commandments once again. These *luchot* would replace the shattered ones that Moshe had broken. Moshe did as God commanded and carved a second set of *luchot*. It was at that point that God approached Moshe in a cloud and proclaimed the 13 attributes, "*Adonai Adonai El Rachum V'Chanun Erech Apayim*" & so on.

This biblical story provides an example of a situation in which God CHOSE to HOLD BACK his anger. When God first saw Bnai Yisrael worshipping the Golden Calf, God was ANGRY & considered destroying the people. But Moshe talked him out of it. Despite the Israelites' unfaithfulness, God resisted full-blown irreconcilable ANGER & ultimately, showed mercy to His people. God CHOSE the path of RESTRAINT, FORBEARANCE, & SELF-CONTROL

The 13 divine attributes, including the *middah* of *Erech Apayim*, remind us that God made a CHOICE. God could have been cruel, angry & unforgiving, but, instead, God CHOSE to exercise some self-restraint and to be compassionate. So too should we make similar CHOICES, striving to be "SLOW TO ANGER" and FORGIVING.

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We should aim to **emulate God's CHOICE to FORGIVE** the people for idolizing the Golden Calf, not only because the *middah* of *Erech Apayim* (Slow to Anger) is a Jewish virtue, but also because **anger can potentially cause serious damage**. Anger can be **harmful to the person who is angry**, as well as to those who are the objects of someone else's anger.

How can anger harm us? First of all, there are the **physiological costs of anger & impatience**. As I described in the scenario at the beginning of this sermon, Harry's heart was racing, he was breathing heavily, and his hands were shaking.

Early scientific research into the physiology of emotion indicated that all strong emotions grew out of the same physical reaction, a reaction that was dubbed "the stress response."

In **Walter Cannon's** experiments (1929), he observed the same organ abnormalities in all animals who had been exposed to stress (of any kind). Their adrenal glands were enlarged, their thymus glands were small, and their livers were pale. (McKay et al., p. 20)

Hans Selye (1936) referred to this whole pattern of organ abnormalities as "stress syndrome." He found that the body's efforts to deal with stress and with the hormones released in response to stress affected all tissues and cells. It was Selye who first claimed that stress accounted for the wide assortment of "diseases of adaption" found in humans and other animals, such as **peptic ulcers, high blood pressure, nervous disorders, and heart attacks**.

What Rabbi Carlebach taught about hate is also true of anger. **Anger is a CHOICE**. Sometimes we CHOOSE to torment the one **soul** we have by filling it with **anger**, holding on to that **hot coal** with all of our might. All the while, it is our own soul, **the only soul we have**, that is writhing in torment because of the **anger** that we CHOOSE to carry around.

In addition to the harm that anger can cause to a person's body and soul, there are also **interpersonal costs of anger**. There is a price to be paid for **anger**: co-workers who keep their distance from you, friendships that cool off over time, a strained relationship with your spouse. Other costs may be more subtle: a friend's decision not to give you the vital feedback that you really need; a colleague who is willing to write a recommendation letter for you, but without enthusiasm; a boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, or wife who avoids you out of fear of "poking the bear."

It comes down to this: Each and every angry episode cuts into the fabric of goodwill and appreciation that is vital to your relationships with others. Angry people are often viewed as unpleasant to be around; they are sometimes even perceived as dangerous. [A person who is QUICK TO ANGER, someone who is chronically ANGRY, IMPATIENT & UNABLE to CONTROL his/her TEMPER] is often **handled like a loaded gun**: with caution or downright avoidance. (McKay p. 29)

Of course, **anger** not only hurts the person who is angry; it also **hurts the people who bear the brunt of the angry person's fury**. There is a Jewish folktale that illustrates this point quite beautifully:

There was once a boy who was very **angry and impatient** much of the time: He used to **lose his temper** very often. When he got **angry**, he usually **said**, and often **did**, **some very hurtful things**.

As he got older, the boy's parents became concerned about this personality flaw, and pondered long and hard about what they should do. Finally, the father had an idea. He gave his son a bag of nails, and a big hammer. He said to his son, "Whenever you **lose your temper**, I want you to take one nail and hammer it into the oak boards of that old fence in the backyard. Hit that nail as hard as you can!"

Of course, those weathered oak boards in that old fence were almost as tough as iron, and the hammer was mighty heavy, so it wasn't nearly as easy as it first sounded. Nevertheless, by the end of the first day, the boy had lost his temper 37 times & had driven 37 nails into the fence. (That was one angry young man!). But, gradually, the number of nails dwindled down. Controlling his temper proved to be easier for the boy than driving nails into the fence!

Finally the day came when the boy was able to say to his father, "**Today, I didn't lose my temper at all.**" He felt quite proud as he told his Dad about that accomplishment. His father turned to him and said, "That's wonderful. Now here is another idea. Every day that you don't lose your temper, I want you to PULL OUT one nail from the fence."

The first day, the boy did that & he continued doing that. And after about a month and a half, the little boy was able to come to his dad and proudly report, "**Look, Dad, there are no more nails in the fence.**"

Again, the father praised his son for his accomplishment. He said, "That's wonderful. But come here. I want to show you something." Together, they went outside to the fence and the father turned to his son and said, " Look carefully at the fence. What do you see?"

The boy saw many, many **holes**.

And his dad said, "Yes, even though you removed the nails, this **fence will never be the same.**

Saying or doing hurtful things in anger produces the same kind of result. Every time you LOSE YOUR TEMPER and act in anger or say something in anger, you create a hole in someone's heart. Every time you react with ANGER or IMPATIENCE, you create that hole. You may apologize, but that hole is still there. Your expressions of anger leave **scars**, just like these holes in the fence. And these scars will **always be there.. It won't matter how many times you say you're sorry, or how many years pass, the scar will still be there.** You can put a knife in a man and draw it out. But evidence of that wound will remain there forever. So too can **anger cause permanent irreparable damage.**"

Lo m'shaneh kamah p'amim titnatzel, ha-petza adayin yisha-er sham.
It doesn't matter how many times you apologize, the wound will still remain there.

The person who bore the brunt of your anger will be **permanently affected.**

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While this Jewish folktale conveys some very important lessons about controlling one's temper and striving to be ERECH APAYIM (Slow to Anger), there seems to be **something missing from this story**. That something is **FORGIVENESS**.

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On a Jewish educators' website, a suggestion was made to incorporate FORGIVENESS into the story by adding the following ending:

After looking at the holes in the fence, the little boy then understood how harmful his anger could be to others. He looked up at his father and said "**I hope you can FORGIVE me Dad for the holes that I put in you.**"

His father gave him a big hug & said, "Of course I FORGIVE you."

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Another ending to the "Nails in the Fence" story is suggested by **Rabbi Allen S. Maller**<sup>13</sup> :

"How **can I repair the fence?**" asked the child.

"**Will it really have to remain damaged forever?**"

"Yes and no," said the parent. "Our Rabbis say **that if the fence is alive and responds to the way you have changed, it too can change and heal itself. If the fence is dead to the possibility of your repentance it will carry its scars onward.**

**The fence will never be as it was before, but it doesn't have to become like new to be a good fence. If YOU do your part and change, and the FENCE does its part in response, GOD will do something wonderful. God will promote a healing that will make you and the fence better.**

The process is called **ATONEMENT (Kapparah)**. It means that the **changes that come about from repentance (Teshuvah) and FORGIVENESS (Mechilah) can lead people to higher levels of relationship than was the case beforehand.**

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¹³ in Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins, **Rosh Hashanah Readings**, pp. 206-207

Of course, there's a difference between merely apologizing in a perfunctory way and sincerely asking to be forgiven, just as there is a difference between half-heartedly accepting an apology and genuinely forgiving someone.

*Kaasher atah m'vakesh slichah me-Adonai u-mechaverim shelcha
u-ve-emet mitkaven la-zeh, az b'emet ha-chor nimchak l'gamrei
v'lo nishar shoom davar.*

When you **request FORGIVENESS from God** or from other people **and you really mean it**, then the **hole can truly be completely filled** and there will be **no remnant of the hole**.

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**FORGIVENESS does something very special: It closes and heals wounds, and it can even erase scars from the past.** Forgiveness between people works this way, and so does divine forgiveness.

Yom Kippur is a day to forgive & to ask to be forgiven. Our own fences are riddled with holes, and, surely, all of us have driven our own share of holes into others' fences. / But we know that **no fence is ever permanently ruined...** because of the **power of FORGIVENESS. God can heal whatever holes are in our own hearts, and (with God's help) we can patch up whatever holes we've left in someone else's heart.**

**Rabbi Tzvi Sytner** points out: When you apologize to a person you have wronged, it's not as simple as saying, "Oh and by the way, I hope you'll forgive me" because in Judaism, when **asking FORGIVENESS**, you are actually supposed to state what you did wrong.<sup>14</sup>

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¹⁴ unless it will cause you greater pain.

But this isn't just a lesson for the person causing pain. It is also advice for the person who is in pain.

Admittedly, it's not so easy to FORGIVE someone for the suffering that they caused you./ But it's also not fair for you to hold a grudge, which will only prolong your own suffering,as well as the pain of the person you refuse to FORGIVE.

As we begin the New Year 5779, think about those you may have hurt in the past. / Dig really deeply inside yourself to feel the pain that you may have caused another person. / Feel the regret./

Only then should you speak to the person you have wronged, **sincerely and genuinely ask for FORGIVENESS**, & commit to never hurting her like this again.

And if you are the one who has been wronged and is approached by the person who wronged you, who is now seeking forgiveness, try to LET GO OF YOUR ANGER and FORGIVE him.

*And as the Kadosh Baruch Hu sees us genuinely feeling for each other & FORGIVING each other, God will FORGIVE us and grant us a sweet New Year.
Ken yehi ratzon.*

L'Shanah Tovah u-Metukah & G'mar Chatimah Tovah!

