Parashat Ki Tisa (Exodus 30:11–34:35)
Middah: כעס | Kaas | Anger

Source: The Mussar Torah Commentary, Ed. R. Barry Block (CCAR 2020)
Chapter: "Kaas – the Value of Anger" by Rabbi Mari Chernow

Summary of Ki Tisa
- God sends the plagues of locusts and darkness upon Egypt and forewarns Moses about the final plague, the death of every Egyptian firstborn. Pharaoh still does not let the Israelites leave Egypt. (10:1-11:10)
- God commands Moses and Aaron regarding the Passover festival. (12:1-27)
- God enacts the final plague, striking down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt except those of the House of Israel. Pharaoh now allows the Israelites to leave. (12:29-42)
- Speaking to Moses and Aaron, God repeats the commandments about Passover. (12:43-13:16)

Questions for Consideration
- How comfortable are you with considering God to be nearly out of control in anger? Does this interpretation conform to your beliefs about God? Alternatively, are you drawn to the idea that God is in a process of reflecting and learning?
- How might we balance God’s presentation of anger and God’s self-description as “slow to anger”?
- In what ways might anger be positive or productive? Is God’s anger positive or productive in our Torah portion?
- Consider the verse from Proverbs (16:32): “Better to be slow to anger than mighty, to have self-control than to conquer a city.”

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God’s anger (kaas, כעס) may not be surprising, but it is shocking nonetheless. It is wrathful, ruinous, and terrifying as God threatens nothing short of calamity. This is precisely the anger that teachers of Mussar warn against. The Talmud cautions us about anyone who “tears his garments or scatters his money or breaks his vessels in his anger.” These actions are mild and restrained compared to the destruction that God intends to bring upon the people of Israel in Ki Tisa.
When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, “Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that man Moses, who brought us from the land of Egypt — we do not know what has happened to him.”

Aaron said to them, “Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.”

And all the people took off the gold rings that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. This he took from them and cast in a mold, and made it into a molten calf. And they exclaimed, “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!”

When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron announced: “Tomorrow shall be a festival of the Lord!” Early next day, the people offered up burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; they sat down to eat and drink, and then rose to dance.

The Lord spoke to Moses, “Hurry down, for your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have acted basely. They have been quick to turn aside from the way that I enjoined upon them. They have made themselves a...
molten calf and bowed low to it and sacrificed to it, saying: ‘This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!’”

9 The Lord further said to Moses, “I see that this is a stiffnecked people. 10 Now, let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them, and make of you a great nation.” 11 But Moses implored the Lord his God, saying, “Let not Your anger, O Lord, blaze forth against Your people, whom You delivered from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand. 12 Let not the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that He delivered them, only to kill them off in the mountains and annihilate them from the face of the earth.’ Turn from Your blaz ing anger and renounce the plan to punish Your people. 13 Remember Your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, how You swore to them by Your Self and said to them: I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and I will give to your offspring this whole land of which I spoke, to possess forever.” 14 And the Lord renounced the punishment God had planned to bring upon the Lord’s people.

Commentary: The Mussar Torah Commentary, chapter by R. M. Chernow

God’s Anger:
To be fair, the Golden Calf is the most egregious offense in the Torah. It will become the prototypical sin in Jewish tradition. To be fair, the description of the idol, *Eileh elohecha Yisrael asher he-elucha mei-eretz Mitzrayim* (אֵלֶה אֱלֹהֶיך יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶר הָעֲלוּך מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם), “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!” (Exodus 32:4), is an outrage. To be fair, it was not long ago that God lovingly promised, *V’lakachti et-chem li l’am v’hayiti lachem leilohim* (וְלָקַּחְת י אֶתְכֶם ל י לְעָָ֔ם וְהָי ית י לָכֶם לֵאלֹה ים), “I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God” (Exodus 6:7); and here, the people respond with disloyalty and distrust.

Thankfully, that destruction does not come to be. In several midrashim the Rabbis read God’s words “Now, let Me be” (Exodus 23:10) as intending the exact opposite of their face-value meaning. That is, in supposedly telling Moses not to intervene, God is inviting Moses to intervene! If so, the phrase reveals God’s own misgivings about the force of God’s own rage. Before Moses so much as raises an eyebrow in objection, God suggests that there is reason to object. Moses takes the opportunity and convinces God to relent. Had that not been the case, Ki Tisa might have been an illustration of the teaching of *Orchot Tzadikim*, “It is impossible for the angry one to escape great sin,” and that of Abraham ibn Hasdai, “Anger begins with madness and ends with
regret.” It seems that God teeters just on the edge of both madness and regret. Must anger lead to regret? As an emotion, no. But as a momentary justification for behavior we would not otherwise condone, perhaps. As the Talmud explains, the problem with tearing one’s garments in anger is “that is the work of the evil inclination. Today it tells one to do this, and tomorrow it tells one to do that.” In other words, emotions are fleeting. They come and go. But anger has a particular power to drive us to make reckless decisions. To highlight anger’s toxic potential, the Talmud compares the one who acts rashly in anger to an idol worshiper. Alan Morinis explains: This association of anger with idolatry also reveals why anger is such a frightful power. When a person loses his or her temper, he or she becomes overwhelmed and overpowered by the emotion of anger. By allowing that to happen, a person yields authority over their life to the raging emotion, and it is then the power of anger [i.e., rather than God] that the angry person serves. Comparing anger to worshiping idols seems nonsensical when the anger is God’s. However, in Ki Tisa, the seemingly nonsensical makes perfect sense. The Golden Calf, of course, is the quintessential idol. By worshiping an idol, the Israelites very nearly provoke God to an anger that is equated with idol worship! Anger is almost always triggered by a breach in a relationship. Here, the Talmud creates an equivalency between the original breach caused by the Israelites and God’s reaction to it. Once anger leads us to regrettable action, we can no longer speak of one injured party and one injuring party. Anger has the potential to make it impossible to claim that one is holding righteous high ground. It ensures that both parties will bear responsibility for a damaged relationship. In this case, if God had given into rage, there would be little difference between God and the brazen Israelites. Both sides would be, as it were, idol worshipers.

**God as Slow to Anger:**

How interesting, then, that this parashah includes God’s well-known self-description: “Adonai! Adonai! God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6). This verse will be repeated throughout the Tanach and ultimately included in holy day liturgy. It lays out God’s admirable qualities, those that we human beings are to notice and emulate. Perhaps God’s words are aspirational here, and instructive. Perhaps, once the emotion has subsided and forgiveness has occurred, God vows to behave differently in the future. These words may then be understood as a reflection on how anger ought to show up in a relationship.
They do not describe how God has recently acted, but rather prescribe, with optimism and hope, how God will control divine anger in the future.

It is critical to note that the text does not say “never angry,” but rather “slow to anger.” Anger, in the right measure, is actually a teacher. It can function like a bright red-flashing indicator light on our emotional dashboard, alerting us to a matter in need of attention. As a signal to our souls, anger can be holy. It can reveal a deep passion or perhaps a wound, a longing or a regret. It can help us clarify and prioritize. Imagine if God had said to the Israelites, “I didn’t even realize how important your loyalty was to Me until so much anger rose up that I actually wanted to kill you!” What are the parallels for us? Where can we notice anger and learn from it?

On a societal level, too, anger can indicate that transformative change is necessary. Consider social movements, such as Me Too and Black Lives Matter. The issues at their heart, sexual violence and racial inequality, have long been critical and worthy of our attention. However, they did not gain the national spotlight until anger fueled a sense of urgency.

As with every middah, we are in search of the appropriate place and space for anger, too. The ideal presented in Ki Tisa is “slow to anger,” that is, anger that is tempered by thoughtful consideration. Our goal is to avoid either underreacting or overreacting to anger.

If we tend to overreact, then we might consider the wisdom found in Proverbs, “Better to be slow to anger than mighty, to have self-control than to conquer a city” (Proverbs 16:32). We might seek strategies that help assuage our anger before we react. Several possibilities may be found in Ki Tisa, in Moses’s approach to calming God down.

If we tend to underreact, then we might examine how to prioritize our own needs. If we never get angry, we may have an overabundance of humility or compassion. If we never get angry, there may be anger under the surface with the power to control us just as much as overt anger does.

The teachings of the Talmud, *Ibn Hasdai, Orchot Tzadikim*, Proverbs, and Ki Tisa itself guide us to identify anger and give it healthy space to breathe. They warn of the danger of unmanaged rage. They invite us to learn from anger as we strengthen our emotional and spiritual health. Anger contains great wisdom. Our task is to give it honor but not too much power, to listen to it carefully without wholly deferring to it, and to find within it sparks of holiness.
Ahab sent orders to all the Israelites and gathered the prophets at Mount Carmel. Elijah approached all the people and said, “How long will you keep hopping between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; and if Baal, follow him!” But the people answered him not a word. Then Elijah said to the people, “I am the only prophet of the Lord left, while the prophets of Baal are four hundred and fifty men. Let two young bulls be given to us. Let them choose one bull, cut it up, and lay it on the wood, but let them not apply fire; I will prepare the other bull, and lay it on the wood, and will not apply fire. You will then invoke your god by name, and I will invoke the Lord by name; and let us agree: the god who responds with fire, that one is God.” And all the people answered, “Very good!”

Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Choose one bull and prepare it first, for you are the majority; invoke your god by name, but apply no fire.” They took the bull that was given them; they prepared it, and invoked Baal by name from morning until noon, shouting, “O Baal, answer us!” But there was no sound, and none who responded; so they performed a hopping dance about the altar that had been set up. When noon came, Elijah mocked them, saying, “Shout louder! After all, he is a god. But he may be in conversation, he may be detained, or he may be on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and will wake up.” So they shouted louder, and gashed themselves with knives and spears, according to their practice, until the blood streamed over them. When noon passed, they kept raving until the hour of presenting the meal offering. Still there was no sound, and none who responded or heeded.

Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come closer to me”; and all the people came closer to him. He repaired the damaged altar of the Lord. Then Elijah took twelve stones, corresponding to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob — to whom the word of the Lord had come: “Israel shall be your name” — and with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord. Around the altar he made a trench large enough for two seahs of seed. He laid out the wood, and he cut up the bull and laid it on the wood. And he said, “Fill four jars with water and pour it over the burnt offering and the wood.” Then he said, “Do it a second time”; and they did it a second time. “Do it a third time,” he said; and they did it a third time. The water ran down around the altar, and even the trench was filled with water.
When it was time to present the meal offering, the prophet Elijah came forward and said, “O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel! Let it be known today that You are God in Israel and that I am Your servant, and that I have done all these things at Your bidding. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that You, O Lord, are God; for You have turned their hearts backward.”

Then fire from the Lord descended and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the earth; and it licked up the water that was in the trench. When they saw this, all the people flung themselves on their faces and cried out: “The Lord alone is God, The Lord alone is God!”
The Lord said to Moses: “Carve two tablets of stone like the first, and I will inscribe upon the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you shattered. 2 Be ready by morning, and in the morning come up to Mount Sinai and present yourself there to Me, on the top of the mountain. 3 No one else shall come up with you, and no one else shall be seen anywhere on the mountain; neither shall the flocks and the herds graze at the foot of this mountain.”

So Moses carved two tablets of stone, like the first, and early in the morning he went up on Mount Sinai, as the Lord had commanded him, taking the two stone tablets with him. 5 The Lord came down in a cloud; He stood with him there, and proclaimed the name Lord. 6 The Lord passed before him and proclaimed: “The Lord! the Lord! a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; yet He does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of parents upon children and children’s children, upon the third and fourth generations.”

Moses hastened to bow low to the ground in homage, and said, “If I have gained Your favor, O Lord, pray, let the Lord go in our midst, even though this is a stiffnecked people. Pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for Your own!”