

## Righteous Anger Yom Kippur 5783

Isaac Bashevis Singer tells a story about a very angry man. The man has to have everything “just so.” Any time things don’t go his way, he shouts and belittles and, on occasion, reacts violently. So even though he is rich and learned and successful, the man is miserable. His business partners have left him, his friends want nothing to do with him, his children are afraid of him, and his wife is fed up. One day, the man says to his son-in-law Baruch, “What shall I do? I’m a bad-tempered man. I know the sin of anger is as evil as that of idolatry. For years I’ve tried to control my temper, yet it only gets worse. I’m sinking into hell. In worldly matters too, it’s very bad. My enemies want to destroy me. I’m afraid I’ll end up without bread in the house.” Baruch suggests that he and his father-in-law go visit a tzaddik, a chasidic rebbe named Chazkele of Kuzmir, to ask for help. His father-in-law is a *misnagid*, a Jew who is opposed to the chasidim, so he is skeptical, to say the least. But the man is desperate, so he and his son-in-law make the journey to see the rebbe. I’ll tell you the end of the story later, but, as you can probably guess, the rebbe is able to help the angry man and they all live happily ever after.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “A Piece of Advice” in *The Spinoza of Market Street and Other Stories*, pg. 94.

If you're feeling like the angry man in the story, you're not alone. Apparently, there's even a term for the state many of us have been in: panger. According to the Mayo Clinic, "Research has shown an increase in frustration, agitation and anger throughout the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. Pandemic anger, or 'panger,' is a real mental health concern many people are dealing with."<sup>2</sup> Even now, as the pandemic is more manageable and less frightening than ever before, living with the uncertainty and anxiety still takes an emotional toll. Anger is a common human response when we are confronted with our own powerlessness and vulnerability, or when we see the gap between the world as it is and the world as we'd like it to be. Put another way, human beings tend to get angry when we don't get what we want.

Even setting Covid aside, you might have noticed that we are living through a time of great division in our country. Anger seems to be the one thing we have in common. No matter where we fall on the political spectrum, we can find plenty to be angry about. We can be angry about the Supreme Court tossing reproductive rights out the window, or about our government's unwillingness to enact meaningful gun control. We can be angry about inflation, immigration, vaccine mandates, racism, critical race

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mayoclinichealthsystem.org/press-room/covid-panger>

theory, threats to our democracy, climate change... shall I go on? I haven't mentioned those classified documents yet. And don't get me started on Vladimir Putin. Plus, those are just the global and national issues – I'm sure each of us can find at least another dozen very good reasons to be angry in our workplaces, our schools, our synagogues, or our homes. Driving on the freeway every day can provide two or three reasons right there. As the saying goes, "If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention." Anger is our zeitgeist. And it's eating us alive.

We've all seen what happens when anger is stoked and manipulated for political gain. We've all seen what happens when certain angry, disturbed young men get access to firearms. We've seen the news coverage of flight attendants getting assaulted for asking passengers to put masks on, the rise in violence against Asian-Americans and other minorities, the increase in antisemitic acts. But those are just the most extreme consequences of unchecked anger. Even those of us who don't resort to violence can see the destructive power of our anger. When we lose our tempers and lash out, we hurt others, physically or emotionally. We make bad decisions because we're not thinking rationally. We cannot hear criticism or be open to learning new things. And while anger can be energizing, and venting it might feel good in the moment, ultimately, being

full of rage makes us miserable. Of course, we are not the first generation to recognize how damaging anger can be. According to the Talmud, “One who rends his garments in his anger, or who breaks his vessels in his anger, or who scatters his money in his anger, should be like an idol worshiper in your eyes, as that is the craft of the evil inclination” (BT Shab. 105b). Maimonides, the great medieval scholar who normally advises people to follow a path of moderation, warns: “...there are certain tendencies which man is forbidden to follow in the middle-way, but must distance himself from extreme to extreme... So is anger 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.”<sup>3</sup> The person who gives in to his temper is capable of committing any number of severe transgressions, and so, according to many of our sages, anger is a great evil to be kept at bay and continuously battled against.

And yet, we also have it on good authority that anger isn't all bad. When Moses smashes the first set of tablets after seeing the Israelites worshipping the Golden Calf, God does not admonish him. In fact, one midrash imagines God saying to Moses, “*Yasher koach*” for breaking the

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<sup>3</sup> Mishneh Torah, Human Dispositions 2:3

tablets in righteous indignation (Shab. 87a). And Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel explains that “[A]nger is something that comes dangerously close to evil, yet it is wrong to identify it with evil... Like fire, it may be a blessing as well as a fatal thing — reprehensible when associated with malice, morally necessary as resistance to malice... Anger may touch off deadly explosives, while the complete absence of anger stultifies moral sensibility.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, anger can be a moral response to the evils we face. How do we know this for sure? Because God gets angry.

In the Hebrew Bible, God gets angry. A lot. God gets angry at Moses when Moses tries to avoid becoming God’s right-hand man. God gets angry at the Israelites when they build a Golden Calf, when they show no gratitude during their wandering in the desert, and when they lose faith in God time and time again. But most of all, God gets angry when people act wickedly, when they forsake God’s commandments, when they worship other gods. We might feel uncomfortable when we think about God’s wrath, thinking, “This is the God who is loving and merciful? This is the God who on this holy day is going to forgive me?” But as Heschel points out, “Divine anger is not the antithesis of love, but its counterpart, a help to justice as demanded by true love.” God loves human beings, and God loves

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<sup>4</sup> *The Prophets*, 360.

righteousness and justice. When we turn away from goodness, when we treat one another unjustly and unkindly, it makes God mad. And it should make us mad too.

God's anger can be a model for ours in several ways. First, as we have seen, God gets angry at the right things. God doesn't get mad at the long line at the DMV, or whatever the divine version of that would be. God generally tolerates all sorts of annoying human behavior – dealing with the patriarchs and matriarchs was certainly not always a walk in the park. But when God is really incensed, it's because the stakes are high or the behavior is egregious. So we should likewise save our anger for what's really important. The 13th-century rabbi Jonah Gerondi advises: "Weigh in the scales of your intellect if this thing is fit to get angry about. And if you find [any] argument to remove your anger, [use it and] negate it. But if it is a thing that is fit to be angry about regardless, then you can allow yourself to get angry."<sup>5</sup> I would take Gerondi's advice further, and say that if a thing is fit to be angry about—when we see cruelty, corruption, dishonesty, and so on—then we are not just allowed to get angry, but we are obligated to get angry. When we stop being angry at injustice is when we stop being moral beings.

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<sup>5</sup> Rabbenu Yonah on Avot 2:10

Another aspect of God's anger that we are called to emulate is God's patience. One of the central texts of our High Holy Day liturgy is the Thirteen Attributes of God: "Adonai, Adonai, *El rachum v'chanun, erech apayim, v'rav chesed ve'emet*. Adonai, Adonai, God, compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, loving, and true...." God is slow to anger, and God's anger passes quickly. As Psalm 30 says, "God's anger is for a moment, God's favor for a lifetime" (Ps. 30:6). One way we can cultivate patience is through empathy. When we are attuned to how others might be feeling or why they are behaving a particular way, we can draw on our compassion and avoid, or at least delay, getting angry. Being the parent of a small child is a good spiritual exercise in this regard.

And finally, God's anger is a model for us because God controls it. Yes, there are times when God smites people for their sins, but more often, we read in the Bible of God's anger blazing against the people, but then being held back when Moses intercedes or the people repent. The sages see God's forbearance as the greatest example of God's might, saying, "this is the might of His might, that He conquers His inclination in that He exercises patience toward the wicked" (Yom. 69b). Likewise, we can show our strength by mastering our anger. We might not be able to control how we feel, but we can control how we express those feelings. So Rebbe

Nachman of Bratzlav advises: “You must break the force of your anger with love. If you feel yourself becoming angry, make sure you do nothing unkind because of your anger. You must make a special effort to be kind to the very person you are angry with. Sweeten your anger with kindness.”<sup>6</sup>

Easier said than done, I know. But Rebbe Nachman is wise to remind us that our emotions do not have to dictate our actions, and, in fact, our actions can affect our emotions. Kind acts just might lead us to kind feelings.

I want to point out that controlling our anger is not the same as denying or suppressing it. Just as there are those of us who are short-tempered and must work to control our anger, there are also those of us who find it difficult to express our anger at all. And suppressed anger can be damaging as well. Suppressed anger doesn’t disappear; it makes itself known, through high blood pressure, depression, anxiety, or pain.<sup>7</sup> Women and People of Color are especially susceptible to this problem. Women, for example, are taught from a young age that we are supposed to be “nice,” meaning gentle, passive, and accommodating. Anger is seen as a masculine trait, so when women express our anger, we are defying the natural order of things, and it sometimes makes us, and other people, very,

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<sup>6</sup> Likkutei Etzot, Anger 1.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/may/11/women-and-minorities-claiming-right-to-rage>

very uncomfortable. That is why, as Rebecca Traister, in her book “Good and Mad” explains, “men like both Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders can wage yelling campaigns and be credited with understanding—and compellingly channeling—the rage felt by their supporters while their female opponents can be jeered and mocked as shrill for speaking too loudly or forcefully into a microphone” (xxii). As Traister explains, “We are regularly fed and we regularly ingest cultural messages that suggest that a woman’s rage is irrational, dangerous, or laughable” (ibid.).

A friend of mine told me a story recently that illustrates the point. She was in a staff meeting at work and she expressed frustration during the meeting because of something her boss had done to undermine her. After the meeting, her boss took her aside and reprimanded her for losing her temper in front of everyone. “The ironic thing is,” she pointed out, “that one of my coworkers regularly loses his temper during these meetings. He can throw a tantrum whenever he wants and no one says a word. I lose my temper once and I’m berated for it.” We accept and expect men to show their anger, and we expect women to keep theirs well hidden.

Likewise, the stereotypes of the “angry Black woman” or the “violent” propensities of Black men prevent People of Color from expressing their anger for fear of being dismissed or accused of stirring up trouble. As

Soraya Chemaly writes, "...men who display anger at work, studies find, gain influence, whereas their female peers lose influence. A typical study...asked lawyers if they were free to use anger at work when a case merits it and if they felt they were punished for displaying aggression. White men felt much freer to express anger at work than any other group, including minority men," and experienced fewer negative consequences for expressing their anger.<sup>8</sup> When anger is only acceptable from white men, then anger itself becomes a tool of oppression.

The antidote to this weaponization of anger is for us, for all of us, is to listen to and acknowledge the anger of women and minorities. As Traister writes, "We can change [the system] by doing what the world does *not* do: by acknowledging, paying attention to, respecting, and not shying away from other women's anger. Seek it out, notice it, ask women what makes them angry and then listen to them when they tell you. If part of what they're angry at is you, take it in, acknowledge how their frustrations might mirror your own, even if they are refracted at you" (pg. 245). If divine anger is "not the antithesis of love, but its counterpart," as Heschel suggests, then listening to another person express their righteous anger is an act of love.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/may/11/women-and-minorities-claiming-right-to-rage>

And that act might just be transformative; for as Traister suggests, “in the fury of women lies the power to change the world” (pg. xxiv).

So when we get mad, as we inevitably will, our anger can be a motivation for self-reflection. If we find ourselves furious all the time, or reacting out of proportion to the circumstances, it is a good time to ask why. Are my feelings of anger masking other unpleasant emotions, like grief or shame? Do I have an inflated sense of self-importance, which causes me to feel aggrieved because people aren't showing me the deference that I think I deserve? Have I forgotten that I am not God and the world does not, in fact, revolve around me? Chances are, if you are a human being, the answer to this last one is yes. We all forget from time to time that we are not the center of the universe. When we adjust our expectations in a world of which we are just one small part, we will have less cause to be angry when others don't live up to our standards.

When we get angry, we know what not to do: we should not let it overpower our good sense or our conscience. No matter how justified our anger is, it should never lead to abuse or violence. And if we find ourselves directing our anger at those who have less power or status than we do – waiters, customer service representatives, children, women, minorities, or the elderly, that should be a big warning sign that our anger is actually a

symptom of deeper problems that we ought to address. On the other hand, when we are angry, we should not bottle it up and hope it goes away on its own. Instead, we should acknowledge and reflect on our anger: Where is it coming from? Is it worth being angry about this? Can I find a way to let it go? And if I can't let it go, then I must ask, what can I do about it? Because anger is useful and good—even holy—when it motivates us to bring more honesty, equity, and justice to the world.

I promised I'd tell you the end of the story about the angry man. The man and his son-in-law visit Rabbi Chazekela and here is what happens:

“What should a Jew do if he is not a pious man?” the Rabbi asked. And he answered: “Let him play the pious man. The Almighty does not require good intentions. The deed is what counts. It is what you do that matters. Are you angry perhaps? Go ahead and be angry, but speak gentle words and be friendly at the same time. Are you afraid of being a dissembler? So what if you pretend to be something you aren't? For whose sake are you lying? For your Father in Heaven. His Holy Name, blessed be He, knows the intention and the intention behind the intention, and it is this that is the main thing.”

The angry man followed the rabbi's advice. “He stopped snapping at people. His eyes glowed with anger but his speech was soft. And if at times

he lifted his pipe about to strike someone, he always stopped himself and spoke with humility. It wasn't long before the people of Rachev realized that my father-in-law was a changed man. He made peace with his enemies. He would stop any little brat in the street and give him a pinch on the cheek. And if the water carrier splashed water entering our house, though I knew this just about drove my father-in-law crazy, he never showed it. 'How are you, Reb Yontle?' he would say. 'Are you cold, eh?' One could feel that he did this only with great effort. That's what made it noble. In time, his anger disappeared completely... He became a kindly man, so good-natured it was unbelievable. But that is what a habit is like—if you break it, it becomes the opposite. One can turn the worst sin into a good deed.”

We will never run out of reasons to be angry. And we may never achieve the success of the man in the story in ridding ourselves of our fury. But we can strive to recognize our anger for what it is, to challenge it when it's misplaced, and to control it rather than letting it control us. And when we look at our broken world, when we see so much corruption, violence, selfishness, and cruelty, then the only reasonable response, the only moral response, is rage. And it is our sacred obligation to honor that rage and to use it, to channel it towards justice. To paraphrase the chasidic Rabbi

Pinchas of Koretz: “Long ago, I conquered my anger and placed it in my pocket. When I have need of it, I take it out.”