

Slowing Down the Anger
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Rabbi Yael Ridberg

On the very day we had been dreading for 50 years - the day the Supreme Court overturned Roe v Wade, I was awash with emotion. It was the very same week of other difficult SCOTUS decisions ruling that a football coach at a public high school had a constitutional right to pray at the 50-yard line after his team's games¹; that states with strict limits on carrying guns in public violate the Second Amendment²; that a Maine program that excludes religious schools from a state tuition program is a violation of the free exercise of religion.³

I was scheduled to have an important meeting for a grant proposal Dor Hadash was planning to submit. In the hours leading up to the meeting, however, I was furiously writing an op-ed with other Jewish leaders here in San Diego condemning the Dobbs decision⁴ that stripped away women's bodily autonomy.

I was convinced that *nothing else mattered*.

I joined the meeting late, but I didn't stay long. My rage was debilitating, and I said - I can't focus on this - go write the grant - I need to finish the op-ed.

I was unprepared for the anger and despair that coursed through my veins. I'm not a particularly angry person. I've grown accustomed to letting go of anger that doesn't serve me, of anger that feels only cathartic, but not constructive. But with this singular decision, on the heels of what felt like the demise of democracy, I. Was. Angry.

I actually hate feeling angry. But on some level I would be more terrified if I could not feel such emotion. So on that day, I poured out my heart into the op-ed, had a

¹ [Kennedy v. Bremerton School District](#),

² [New York State Rifle & Pistol Association v. Bruen](#)

³ [Carson v. Makin](#)

⁴ [Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization](#)

really good, ugly cry, donated some money to women's health organizations, and made sure my children understood what had just happened.

To be clear - there is a lot to be angry about in our world that fuels our interactions, and many manifestations of anger. Social discourse and media mechanisms have come undone and cultural divides have worsened, thereby making anger a *first* response, not a calculated one.

The primordial history in the Torah is all about these manifestations of anger: The Torah imagines that God's angry that Adam and Eve don't obey and throws them out; Then God is angry at humanity and the world and destroys it, except Noah who is ok relatively speaking; and while God says, "I'm never doing that again – Humans are evil from their youth. Human beings are inevitably going to mess up in this world, so what's the point of getting angry? We are set up to see God's wrath as indicative of God's character.

When the patriarchs and matriarchs arrive on the scene, God never expresses the impulsive, reactive anger shown in the first 11 chapters of Genesis. It is only when we meet Moses that we witness the renewal of anger that channels a kind of righteousness: Against the Egyptian for killing the Israelite, against Pharaoh for oppressing the Hebrews, and even against the people for the creation of the Golden Calf. These are all examples when Moses is *moved* to challenge the status quo in favor of something better. It's so elevated that Moses *has to temper God's anger* - which in a moment of divine maturation - he does.⁵

In addition to the various forms of anger experienced in the Torah, later Jewish tradition has also emphasized the many challenges of anger: "Give up anger, abandon fury, do not be vexed – it can only do harm" offers the Psalmist⁶; "Whoever gets angry; it is as if they worship idols ... if they are wise, wisdom will leave, if a prophet, prophecy will leave...verily, the life of irritable persons is no

⁵ Exodus 32:11-14

⁶ Psalm 37

life”⁷ teach the rabbis. And the great medieval philosopher Maimonides lays it bare:

“Anger is such an extremely evil tendency that it is appropriate for a person to distance oneself from it to the other extreme. One should teach oneself never to get angry, even over a matter which befits anger.”⁸

And yet.

While the Torah imagines God’s anger as something that can blaze forth, consuming those who have done wrong, that seems to not be the ideal - even for God. When God is imagined to call forth the divine attributes - in the midst of grace, compassion, kindness and truth comes the phrase *erech apayim* - slow to anger.⁹ The phrase literally means “long of nose” as when one is angry, one might take a long breath before reacting, thereby delaying the anger.

Some 20+ verses in biblical literature refer to this slowness of anger, and while not even God is always depicted as measured in the expression of anger, I am newly impressed by the *inclination* for *patience* - not only because of its virtue, but because of what it might afford us in this time of an onslaught to our values, our relationships and our very planet.

And just before you wonder what I mean when I use the proverbial *our* - let me invite you tonight to absorb the message of *erech apayim* - slow to anger - from whatever point on the continuum you find yourself, and however you receive these words.

We all get angry sometimes, over any number of things that may not shake the bedrock of society, but doing so impacts our wellbeing as well as that of others. What happens physiologically when something or someone makes us angry?

⁷ Nedarim 22b, Pesachim 66b, Pesachim 113a

⁸ Mishneh Torah Hilchot De’ot 2:3

⁹ Exodus 32:10

In brief, there is a cascade of biochemicals that flow to various brain structures. Some structures below the threshold of consciousness, others are involved in the “higher” functions of inhibiting or enhancing reactions, imagining consequences, resisting impulses and so on.

So if the news of the day, an exchange with a colleague or loved one, or the latest injustice in the streets stirred echoes of anger in your amygdala - the part of the brain in charge of emotions - then your prefrontal cortex the part of the brain that modulates attention, impulse inhibition, and cognitive flexibility probably kicked in with some inhibitors to keep you from standing up and screaming.

“But the thing is – when you get angry, the parts of your brain which generate those powerful feelings are often faster than the parts of your brain that can turn off those feelings. And for good reason. In a moment of arousal, such brain function can save your life. It doesn’t wait for your conscious mind to rationally decide if you are overreacting or is there a legitimate, imminent threat? Those cascades still flood your powerful brain, and it takes time for them to dissipate. For an untrained brain, it takes quite a bit of time for the prefrontal cortex to gain control. So it’s actually physiologically the case that slowing down an angry reaction will help you to respond more skillfully and consider consequences and context.”¹⁰

It is clear that learning how to process our anger appropriately and effectively and identify what is beneath it and seek to understand it *before* we choose to unleash it is critical. And because some psychologists hold that anger is really a secondary emotion, beneath the surface lie any number of primary feelings: Embarrassment, fear, grief, shame, overwhelm, depression, guilt, stress, disappointment, loneliness, offense, discomfort, regret, insecurity, and hurt. Perhaps by identifying what we might *actually* be feeling that we, too, can slow the anger. In other words, how we might learn to *manage our anger*.

¹⁰ Rabbi Katie Mizrahi, *The Angry Clothes of Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv*, Erev Rosh Hashanah 2019

For the ancient Israelites, arrival in the Promised Land is connected to Moses' own anger management. At times Moses is the very model of patience and support. He stands up to God who is imagined to want to destroy the people. He argues passionately and persuasively for God to show compassion and mercy, and in both instances, the people are afforded an opportunity to do *teshuvah* and repair the relationship.

Yet, as he was leading the people through the wilderness, the Israelites complained bitterly of thirst. God is imagined to instruct Moses to *hit the rock* and water would come forth.¹¹ Which he does and the people are satisfied. But that was in Exodus. Later in the Book of Numbers, consternation and complaints once again emerge from the Israelites. This time, Moses is instructed to *speak to the rock*, to bring forth water.¹²

As you might remember, Moses hits the rock instead - *as he was once told to do* - but the circumstances have changed. Only a few verses before, we learn that Miriam died. His sister, the one who saved Moses by watching over him in the Nile, who enabled Pharaoh's daughter to have a nursemaid in Moses' own mother, and who sang at the sea when they were liberated. Moses is in mourning, but the text doesn't tell us about Moses' feelings. We also hear Moses call the people, "*morim*" - the bitter rebellious ones - for complaining on and on.

We might understand that Moses is reacting from grief. Moses is very likely taking out his feelings on the people, and this projection of emotion is impulsive and not measured. It's understandable that Moses is perhaps "not himself" - but his emotion is misplaced. There is no *erech apayim* - no slowness to his anger - and it is this moment that changes Moses' life forever, as he is then prohibited from entering the Promised Land.

The clearest example of God's own slowness to anger is in Moses' encounter with God just after the Gold Calf. God's imagined to be frustrated and angry and wants

¹¹ Exodus 17:4

¹² Numbers 20:10-12

to start over with Moses (a throwback to the early angry God of Genesis and the flood).

Into the mouth of God the text says: “Let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them.”¹³ God is imagined to say, “leave me alone!” This is the Divine equivalent to a self induced time-out. But here Moses offers a *different* kind of time out. Moses doesn’t respond angrily but says, “Remember your covenant with Abraham!” Moses reconnects God with God’s own covenant, with a Divine sense of purpose and passion.

In the words of Rabbi David Jaffe in his book *Changing the World from the Inside Out, A Jewish Approach to Social and Personal Change*, “Connection opens up the possibility for something new, born of love, which was the opportunity for repair and reconciliation.”¹⁴

For anger sits precariously between two dangerous extremes. One extreme is hatred, the breeding ground of violence, and the other extreme is passivity and apathy, the breeding ground of despair and living death.¹⁵ So how do we strike the middle path? Where might we find the *erech apayim* to speak up and out, but to also make change for the better?

Rabbi Jaffe offers that “The middle path is born of significant grief with the purpose of setting things right...This is the work of *savlanut* - often known as patience, but more accurately translated as “bearing.”¹⁶ The key to *bearing* the grief and despair often at the root of anger is that connection that Moses is imagined to have made for God. Connection to ourselves, to others, and even to the source of *erech apayim* - the aspirational divine attribute.

In the words of sociologist Brene Brown; “[anger] is an emotion that we need

¹³ Exodus 32:10

¹⁴ Rabbi David Jaffe, *Changing the World from the Inside Out*, p. 139

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid, p 142

to transform into something *life-giving: Courage, love, change, compassion, justice.*¹⁷

It's true that such a choice is not always easy or even possible. But the notion of bearing the uncomfortable in service of something potentially positive if not rewarding, feels essential for our relationships and even for bringing a long term perspective to social justice efforts that are ongoing.

How do we engage in fixing our relationships and the world while holding the perspective that our efforts could take a long time? We can remember that being slow to anger is most effective when couched among mercy, grace, abounding kindness and truth. We only control ourselves, and in a world of contempt and disdain, I'd rather try a little tenderness for my own sake and even for the sake of others. This is what we are saying when we pray Avinu Malkenu. We are asking God for compassion and generosity - *though we may not even deserve it. Aseh imanu tzedakah vachessed - Ki ain banu ma'asim.*

It is true that all the slowness to anger and grace might not actually change hearts and minds, but even if my bearing the hardship is rejected, and the world around me persists with cruelty and injustice, and I can't change it; I'll at least know that my *erech apayim - my patience and bearing - kept the world's inhumanity from changing me.*

Tonight I am asking each of us to take hold of our anger, our pain, and our fears and engage in the slowness of emotion for the sake of lasting change. Not because our leaders, our community, our family or friends deserve it, but because a little grace might go a long way for all of us.

Gmar Hatima Tova - May our journey towards teshuvah be compassionate, full of grace, slow to anger, and abounding in kindness and truth.

¹⁷ *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone*