

**HOLY ANGER**  
**Rosh Hashanah Day One, 5776/2015**  
**West End Synagogue**  
**Rabbi Marc J. Margolius**

*Tanu rabbanan*, our rabbis taught:<sup>1</sup> The Holy Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, and our people exiled from the Land of Israel because of the matter of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza.

Here's the case: A man who had a friend named Kamtza, and an enemy named Bar Kamtza arranged a feast, and told his servant to go and invite his friend Kamtza. But instead, by mistake, the servant brought Bar Kamtza to the party. When the host saw Bar Kamtza, his enemy, seated in his home, he screamed, "What are *you* doing here? I invited Kamtza, not you -- get out!"

Embarrassed, Bar Kamtza replied: "But I'm here already -- just let me stay. I'll pay you for whatever I eat and drink."

"No way!" answered the host. Bar Kamtza tried again: "Please -- I'll pay half the cost of the feast if you'll just let me stay." Again, the host refused. Finally, Bar Kamtza offered to pay for the entire celebration -- but the host again refused, and unceremoniously evicted Bar Kamtza from the party.

After Bar Kamtza dusted himself off, he said to himself, "Huh -- all those rabbis were sitting and watching what happened to me, yet they said said and did nothing to stop it. They must have approved of what happened." Furious, he went to the Romans and informed them that the Jews were planning to revolt.

Elsewhere in the Talmud<sup>2</sup>, the rabbis note that the Second Temple was a time of *sinat chinam*, a time of baseless anger. The rabbis conclude that free-floating hatred, such as we see in the Kamtza/Bar Kamtza story, is as devastating as idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed combined. Baseless hatred, they say, led to the cataclysmic destruction of the Temple and exile of the Jewish people. The lesson is: when anger is unleashed, it can destroy the world.

Last night Reb Shmuel Lev reminded us that like all emotions, anger has a sacred purpose. Anger is the moral fuel by which we battle injustice, and Judaism surely endorses righteous anger as part of living a life of holiness. Our Torah role models often flash anger when responding to wrongdoing:

Abraham is angry at God for threatening the lives of innocent people in Sodom and Gomorrah. Jacob is angry at Laban for tricking him into serving him for twice as long as he'd bargained for. Moses is famously angry at wrongdoing. He's incensed at seeing

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<sup>1</sup> Babylonian Talmud Gittin 55b-56a

<sup>2</sup> Babylonian Talmud Yoma 9b

an Egyptian taskmaster beating a slave. He smashes the tablets when he sees the people worshipping the golden calf. And of course God, our Number One role model, blows the Divine Stack over any number of injustices, small and large.

Without anger, things might never change. Anger stirs us from of moral lethargy. Anger lifts us off the sofa and impels us to write op-ed pieces, take to the streets, even commit civil disobedience. And when we have been hurt by others, our anger is self-protective; it reminds us we're worthy of respect and kindness.

As any parent of a toddler or adolescent can attest, anger is a crucial aspect of human development. Temper tantrums at the checkout line, icy silences around the dinner table are part of kids' struggle to claim their identities. We parents must grit our teeth and try to accept our children's anger -irrational or not -- as a largely unpleasant but inevitable price of their ticket to selfhood.

We have so many reasons to feel outrage today: the despoliation of this planet, the disparity between haves and have nots, the intractable corruption of our political system, the persistence of anti-Semitism in the world and systemic racism in this country, the daily senseless violent crimes snuffing out innocent lives. Taking in the news makes my blood boil, and I sure yours as well.

Many of us have suffered abuse and grievous wounds at the hands of others. For these personal injustices, too, we are justifiably angry. And the steam generated by our anger energizes us to act and speak against abuse in all its forms.

It sounds maybe as if we should make anger a "middah of the month" at WES. We could do really well at that one, I think. But when it comes to anger, Jewish tradition prescribes extreme caution .

Maimonides describes anger<sup>3</sup> as a terrible human quality. He says that expressing anger is idolatrous, causes scholars to lose wisdom, and strips prophets of their spirit. Angry people, for Maimonides, are not even really living. Even when anger seems appropriate, he advises, one should act only as if one is angry, while staying cool inside. [By the way, I'd love to see the Rambam modeling this while trying to get three little kids out the door to make the school bus.]

Moses himself learned that a short fuse leads to sin. I like the definition of sin offered by novelist Mary Gordon: "a distortion so severe that the recognizable self is blotted out." When anger begins to undermine our sense of self and obscures the humanity of the other, when it overwhelms reason and self-control and makes us "lose it," it leads to actions our we normally would find unthinkable.

We all know anger isn't easily contained. It can begin with a single cell of injustice, but it grows and metastasizes. Mary Gordon writes that "[anger] rolls down a hill, gathering

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<sup>3</sup> *Hilchot De'ot*, Laws of Knowledge, 2:3

mass and speed until any thought of cessation is so far beside the point as to seem hopeless. [Its] causes are lost in the momentum of the anger itself."

Anger is delicious. In place of vulnerability, anger creates an illusion of security and power. In place of complexity and confusion, anger creates an illusion of clarity and righteousness. The bitter rancor within the Jewish world over the Iran deal this summer illustrates the heat generated when we try to neatly divide complexity into black and white.

As anger expands, it deforms us and the object of our hatred. In the end, anger obliterates the image of God in us and others. As an example, consider the anger of our foremother Sarah in today's Torah reading, which may stem from lingering jealousy or fear towards Hagar and Ishmael. Whatever its source, Sarah's anger leads her, with Abraham's consent, to evict Hagar and Ishmael, likely to death by dehydration in the desert.

So, when is anger legitimate? When is it "sinful?" Should we emulate Moses, whose righteous anger got us out of Egypt? Should we walk in the footsteps of Abraham, who shook his fist at God in defending the strangers of Sodom and Gemorrah? Or should we listen to Maimonides, and always do our best to stifle it? What should we do with the anger simmering or, for some, boiling within us?

The Talmud says that between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, God shifts from *kisei hadin*, the seat of strict judgment, to *kisei rachamim*, the seat of compassion. We might think of this as a sacred process within ourselves, inviting us to temper our harsh judgments with compassion.

We'll end these Days of Awe by hearing the story of Jonah, the hot-headed prophet who sulks in anger when God forgives the people of Nineveh. The supposedly "wrathful God" of our tradition turns out to model the middah of *erech apayim*, extreme slowness to anger. God rebukes the bitter Jonah: "*haheitev charah-lecha* -- is it good for you to be so angry?" The question, no doubt, is meant for us as well.

So between now and then, over this ten day period, we recognize the dangers of our free-floating anger and convert its energy into what we might call "holy anger" -- angry energy that serves a sacred purpose. The three major themes of the Mussaf Amidah, which we're about to begin, describe the arc of this process of transforming our anger into something sacred.

The first theme, Malchuyot or Sovereignty, represents the element of **perspective**. Malchuyot tells us to remember the big picture; **reality is infinitely greater than any of us**. It invites us to dilute the energy of our anger in a vast place.

We practice Malchuyot when we consider whether the reason for our anger will matter ten years or even ten minutes from now, whether the extent of our anger is disproportionate to our injury. We practice Malchuyot when we take a walk, or count to ten, or pause for a few deep breaths, or close our eyes and see, in our mind's eye, a

canyon or a lake or an ocean huge enough to absorb our anger. *I invite you to pause now to consider the place of awe within or beyond you to which you might bring your own anger.*

The second theme of mussaf -- Zichronot or Remembrance -- represents the **interconnectedness of life**. Memory connects seemingly disparate moments, and links them all to the infinite. No moment, no thing, no one is really alone or separate; everything and everyone matters. Life is a team sport. We're all in this together. Zichronot awakens our our capacity for compassion and love.

We practice Zichronot when we remember how deeply we're connected to those who anger us. We're often angriest at the people we love most; our anger reminds us how much we care about them. We practice Zichronot when we identify with strangers who anger us. The person who says something unkind, who violates our trust, is a human being just like us. Zichronot reminds us that we're perfectly capable of doing that which makes us so angry. It awakens our compassion and loosens the grip of our anger.

Even those who enrage us most, who commit evil, depraved actions -- and there are so many candidates today -- even these are human beings with whom we share the quality of being made in the Divine Image. In responding to perpetrators of evil, Zichronot reminds us never to allow our justified anger to grow so large that it erases completely the Divine Image within them or, even more importantly, within ourselves. *I invite you again to pause, and consider your connection with those who are the source of your own anger today.*

Once we've dissipated our anger in the spaciousness of Malchuyot; once we've tempered our anger through the compassion of Zichronot, we're left with "holy anger" -- just enough anger to serve sacred purposes:

- just enough anger to discipline, but with love;
- just enough anger to confront those who've hurt us, but with compassion and humility;
- just enough anger to speak out and act for justice and peace, but without rage or self-righteousness.

The third, final theme of mussaf today, Shofarot -- Revelation and Redemption -- teaches us to channel this "holy anger" out into the world. Today, the blasts of Shofarot express our holy anger at the small and large hurts we have suffered, individually and as a people, the shortsightedness which endangers the future of this planet, the grievous injustices which persist in this world.

So as we consider our anger today, may each of us imagine ourselves right now as a shofar. As the shofar is hollow, may we empty out our egos, refining anger with humility. As the shofar expands from the mouthpiece outward, may we expand our vision, tempering anger with wisdom and perspective. As the shofar expresses the Voice of God, may the energy of our "holy anger" bring forth words from a deeper, wiser place within us -- words that will bring blessing and healing, not curses and destruction.

In this New Year, may we and those around us be burned a little less by our anger. May we learn better to transform the fire within us into "holy anger," into words and deeds by which we fulfill the purpose for which we were created. May our "holy anger" this year bring more light, more healing, more hope, more justice, and more peace -- for ourselves, for our people, and for this world.