

Ki Tisa 2018 The Many Uses of Anger Rabbi Alan B. Lucas

“Angry people are not always wise.” So, wrote Jane Austen in *Pride and Prejudice*.

So what are we to say of *Moshe Rabeynu* in today’s Torah portion who display’s one of history’s greatest temper tantrums when he comes down from Mt Sinai, from spending the last 40 days and 40 nights dwelling in the presence of the Lord, with the Tablets of the Commandments in his hand – only to be confronted by the sight of the people who were waiting below had constructed a Golden Calf – and idol around which they were dancing and celebrating. In a fit of rage, he casts the tablets to the ground breaking them and castigates the people for the faithlessness and disloyalty. And to this day – the image of those broken tablets is arguable history’s most famous example of righteous anger.

But, “angry people are not always wise.” So, was Moshe’s temper tantrum a moment of deep wisdom – or lack of control?

Well, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks points out in his excellent commentary on the weekly Torah portion that Moses was not criticized for this display of anger. In fact, Reish Lakish using a close reading of the words of the Torah learns that God actually approved of Moses’ anger. Later, in commenting on the concluding words of the Torah where it states, “No other prophet has arisen in Israel like Moses who knew God face to face...or in any of the mighty hand and awesome wonders Moses displayed in the sight of all Israel.” (Deut 34:10-12) On the phrase “mighty hand,” the rabbis said that it refers to the breaking of the tablets. In other words, they saw it as one of his greatest acts of courage and leadership.

So, we learn from this that anger is good?

Well, not so quick. Many years later our hero was faced with another moment of crisis. The people had arrived at Kadesh. There was no water. The people complained. Once again, Moses displayed anger. Told by God to speak to the rock, he struck it twice, and water gushed out. This time, however, instead of being praised for what he did, God said to him, “Because you did not trust in Me to sanctify Me in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this assembly into the land I have given them.” (Num 20:12)

Rabbi Sacks is puzzled by the comparisons of these two moments in Moses’ life – both expressions of anger, both responses to a people out of control, but one was commended and the other condemned. And this leads Rabbi Sacks to ask: “Why was a show of anger appropriate in one case but not the other? Is anger always wrong when shown by a leader, or is it sometimes necessary?”

Rabbi Sacks finds the answer to his question in the teachings of Maimonides. In his *Laws of Character*, Maimonides tells us that in general we should follow the middle way in emotional life. But there are two emotions that Maimonides says we should NOT follow a middle way but rather we should strive to eliminate them entirely from our emotional life: pride and anger.

Here is what Maimonides has to say about anger:

Anger is an extremely bad attribute, and one should distance oneself from it by going to the other extreme. One should train oneself not to get angry, even about something to which anger might be appropriate response...The ancient sages said, “One who yields to anger is as if he had worshipped idols...” Therefore, they have instructed us to keep far from anger, training ourselves to stay calm even in the face of provocation. This is the right way. (Hilchot Deot, 2:3)

Well this makes sense as to why God got angry with Moses over the striking of the rock – but it does not explain why Moses is praised for his display of anger in today’s Torah reading.

Oh, wait, it seems that Maimonides added one more thought to his exegeses on anger...

Maimonides ends his teaching on the danger of anger with one important qualification:

If one wants to instill reverence in his children and family, or in public if he is head of the community, and his desire is to show them his anger so as to bring them back to the good, he should APPEAR to be angry with them

so as to reprove them, but he must inwardly remain calm as if he were acting the part of an angry man, but in reality he is not angry at all. (Hilchot Deot, ibid)

According to Maimonides, the emotion of anger is always the wrong response. But a display of anger may not be. When we feel anger, we lose control, and we say and do things that are directed by our anger rather than by our reason. What was it that Jane Austen said? "Angry people are not always wise." I suspect that Maimonides would say, "Angry people are rarely wise." Ambrose Pierce, the American Civil War writer, said, "speak when you are angry, and you will give the best speech you will ever regret."

My desk is filled with letters I have written and never mailed, my email trash file is filled with emails I have composed and never hit send, my wife, Edy is filled with rants I have delivered over one or another perceived slight or injustice after which I said or did nothing more.

I wish I could tell you that I had developed to the level that Maimonides teaches where I no longer feel anger – but alas I am not there yet. But, I think I have achieved a level of wisdom to know that no good will come from anger and rage, and most of the time – not all of the time – but most of the time I seek alternate ways to vent that anger.

Moses was wrong when he struck the rock because he allowed his anger to control him. He felt enormous anger at the faithlessness of this people that he had led from slavery to freedom. A people that had time and time again witnessed with their own eyes that miracles of God and still – had not yet learned to believe, to be faithful, to trust – and Moses gave into that anger and struck the rock and God was displeased: this is not the way for a leader to act.

But earlier in his career, in the incident of the Golden Calf which we read in today's Torah portion, Maimonides would have us believe that Moses won God's approval and the praise of our sages because this was not a moment of loss of control - -but precisely the opposite: it was a carefully constructed display of anger intended to teach a wayward people of the extent of their sinfulness.

Rabbi Sacks calls this – therapeutic anger. "It is done not out of emotion but out of careful deliberate judgement that this is what the situation calls for right now. The person who delivers the shock is not so much feeling anger as showing it. That is what makes it all the more shocking."

As parents we all know the value of "therapeutic anger" – of the deliberate display of anger at a moment when we know the situation calls for it even though anger is not what we are feeling. A young child sits on the kitchen floor with peanut butter all over their face and hands and though we are tempted to smile at the cuteness and hilarity of the moment – we know that displeasure is what is called for.

But as parents we also know the times when we allowed anger to overwhelm us, and it caused us to say or do things that in retrospect we wish we had not said or done.

There are families and cultures where anger is used all too often. We live at a moment in history when we are in desperate need of leaders who will model calm and thoughtful guidance but instead our TV screens, twitter feeds and newspapers are filled with too many examples of anger, fits of outrage, piques of resentment that are abusive and harmful.

We live in a world that is filled with too much anger. Our Arab cousins seem to nurture a culture that raises their children on the milk of anger – and the result of that resentment and frustration has become a plague to the modern world. We live in a country where politicians nurture anger and resentment as a weapon to get votes. *They* are out to take your guns, *they* are out to take your jobs, *they* are out to steal your culture, your language your country – I can defend you, I can protect you.

We have a new sign on the front lawn of our Temple – I wish it was bigger – you may have missed it – but it expressed what I hope all of us believe, what I as your rabbi want you to believe – what Maimonides as our teachers has directed us to believe. The sign says: "Hate has no home here."

"Hate has no home here!"

What does it mean to say that hate has no home here?

It proclaims that this synagogue is a safe place where everyone is welcome and valued. It expresses the essence of our commitment to inclusiveness. It expresses our refusal to allow anger and resentment clouds our better judgment.

But, we all strive to be responsible adults and citizens and to conquer our anger and control our emotions. We also have learned from Maimonides that while it is never a good idea to feel anger – it is at times a very good idea to display anger. I think it is time for us to display anger with our entire political system that has broken down to the point where the most common-sense laws of gun control cannot even make it to the floor for a vote.

I think we should be a bit ashamed that it takes the *display* of anger from our children – the High School students that are mobilizing around the country that their leadership is one of the few moments of true leadership we have seen on a public stage in a long, long time. Not platitudes – not, “our thoughts and prayers are with you,” but concrete demands.

Why did all those companies break their relationship with the NRA – because all of a sudden, they decided it was a bad idea? Or because the display of anger threatens to become a national movement they wanted to get ahead of. Why did Dick’s Sporting Goods and Walmart change their sales policies for assault rifles? Because all of a sudden, they realized it was a bad policy – or because they feared the threat of boycott by an angry customer base?

So, a close reading of today’s Torah portion yields two very important lessons – and I hope you will leave shul today armed with both of them.

We should never feel anger. “Hate has no home here.” Anger is bad for the person who feels it and even worse for the person on the receiving end of it. Anger is abusive and harmful.

But, while we should never feel angry – there are occasions that demand that we display anger. When we see leaders act wrongly – we should express anger. When we are in the presence of injustice – we must display our anger.

Moses, understood, when he threw those tablets to the ground in a display of enormous anger – that his people needed a shock to help them change their lives.

So, do we.