

Parashat Matot-Masei:
The Breath and Breadth of Anger

Numbers 30:2-36:13

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I just saw a performance of *Oh, God*, an Israeli play in which a depressed God enters therapy with Ella [1]. When Ella draws uncomfortably close to the core truth of his wounds, God is on the verge of striking her dead. She showers him with praise for ultimately restraining his anger. Though we learn that it wasn't in fact restraint that motivates God in that moment, the scene is fantastically Mussardik — watching a character on the edge of reason, on the precipice of a true tantrum, ultimately step back from acting out that rage.

Pirkei Avot (5:11) teaches us that there are four types of temperaments: one who is easily angered and easily appeased; one who is easily angered and difficult to appease; one whom it is difficult to anger and difficult to appease; and one whom it is difficult to anger and is easily appeased. This last one is called a *chasid*. We all know someone, perhaps even ourselves, who is not yet that pious, yet all of us likely pray that our spiritual practice will help cultivate that kind of temperament in us.

Matot, the first *parashah* in this week's double portion, has little to teach about anger management and much to offer about giving anger full expression. Chapter 31 is replete with lurid and disturbing details about executing vengeance upon the Midianites and taking captives and spoil. Following this description, we are told that Moses's anger was aroused against the captains and officers of the army for not also killing the Midianite women — וַיִּקְצֹף מֹשֶׁה | *va-yiktzof Moshe* (31:14).

Even the Talmud takes note of this instance of Moses' anger:

Resh Lakish said, As to any person who becomes angry, if he is wise, he loses his wisdom; if he is a prophet, his prophecy departs from him. [We learn this] from Moses, as it says, "And Moses was wroth at the army officers" (Numbers 31:14), and it says, "and Elazar the priest told the soldiers going to war, 'This is the statute of the Torah that God told Moses'" (Numbers 31:21). The implication being that Moses forgot it. (*Pesachim* 66b)



This passage indicates that because of his anger at the soldiers for not killing the Midianite women, Moses forgot the laws dealing with the Midianite vessels which Elazar then had to teach the soldiers in his stead. Anger can do that to us — it makes us forget things in that moment, whether it be facts/intellect/reason, whether it be love, whether it be gratitude. With so many losses resulting from anger, who would *choose* to be less wise, less dignified, less grateful, or less equanimous? We don't always fathom the consequences of that choice because we truly do lose wisdom and foresight in that moment of anger. Furthermore, in that moment of stolen wisdom, the explosion of anger can feel so cathartic. The Sages taught that "Whoever loses his temper will ignore the *Shechinah*...s/he will forget her/his learning and increase in foolishness" [2]. Yet how often we go this route nonetheless.

Regarding Moses' anger in Numbers 31:14, Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv, the Alter of Kelm, taught that rebuke and anger need not go hand-in-hand,

Moses' rebuke was correct. The soldiers had erred and deserved censure. Moses' only wrong was his emotion of anger. Even when a person should rebuke someone, he must remain calm and be careful not to grow angry. [3]

The Alter of Kelm is inviting us to offer rightful rebuke when necessary, but without anger or rancor. Apparently this was something that another Mussar master, Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian, practiced to perfection. Whenever R. Lopian felt the necessity to rebuke one of his children or students, he would always allow time to pass to ensure that not a trace of anger remained. On one occasion he waited 15 days to reprimand his son after the offense to be sure he had rid his heart of anger first. [4]

Other stories are told about Mussar masters and their practices for anger management:

- It is said that the Rabbi Israel Salanter, the father of the Mussar movement, was completely devoid of anger. He was particularly strict in regards to the obligation of completely eliminating grudges, as he believed that "Almost every sin between man and his fellowman stems from holding a grudge," and he understood this practice to be fulfilling

the mitzvah of “You shall walk in God’s ways.” Sometimes he would simulate anger in public to reprimand an individual or community. People sometimes noticed that in his presumed “anger,” he would turn his face to the wall and whisper to himself: “Anger of the face, not anger of the heart.”[5]

- Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv, the Alter of Kelm (and R. Salanter’s student), would never allow himself to become angry for any reason whatsoever, unless he first put on a garment specifically designated for that reason.[6] In creating space between the initial emotional response of anger and the result of it by donning that garment, he was, in effect, “counting to ten,” creating space between the match and the fuse.

The tradition understands that anger can cloud our minds, our memories, our judgments, our relationships with God and others. That is why anger is also equated with idolatry:

One who tears his clothes, breaks his utensils, and destroys his money in his rage should be in your eyes as one who commits idolatry.
(*Shabbat* 105b)

Why is anger equated with idolatry? Rabbi Ted Falcon suggests that “our anger captures our consciousness, and renders us unable to think clearly. Because anger always creates greater separation, it automatically takes us out of a more inclusive awareness. As we then lose sight of Oneness, we slide into the essential fragmentation that marks all idolatry.” [7]

We have been referring to human anger in response to Moses’ wrath, but in chapter 32 of our *parashah*, God’s anger is referenced three different times (vv. 10, 13, 14), as well.

The term *yichar af* | יָחַר אָף (or *charon af* | חָרוֹן אָף) is used in those three instances to describe God’s anger. *Charon* literally means “heat,” and *af* means “nose.” *Charon af* therefore refers to heavy, hot breathing when one is angry.

The opposite of this term is *erekh apayim* which we invoke in the 13 attributes of mercy (*Adonai, Adonai eil rachum v’chanun...*[Exodus 34:6-7]). Generally translated as “slow to anger” or “forbearance,” the term literally means “long

nose,” and seems to imply long, steady, calming breaths that are the exact opposite of *charon af*. Though I believe that “one who is easily angered and difficult to appease” from *Pirke Avot* 5:11 might bring God to mind as an example, the 13 attributes that we recite on holy days also serve to remind us of God’s monumental patience in regard to us humans. God is both quick to anger *and* often incredibly patient.

Mindful breathing — long breaths — seems to be part of the solution, both for God and for us.

Proverbs 16:32 reads “Better one who is slow to anger/*erekh apayim* than the mighty, one who rules his *ruach*/spirit than one who takes a city.” This verse becomes the proof text for the oft-quoted *Pirke Avot* (4:1) saying, “Who is mighty? The one who conquers one’s *yetzer* (inclination to evil).”

May the anger management practices of our Mussar masters inspire us this week, and may we be reminded of the power of long, steady breaths to calm our nerves, to steady our pulse, to keep us truly “mighty” and far from “foolishness.”

Spiritual Practices

1. Be particularly aware of your anger this week, when and why it gets piqued and how you respond. Awareness is the first stage of the transformative process.
2. Review the spiritual practices of Rabbis Salanter, Zissel Ziv, and Lopian, above. How might you adapt these anger management techniques for your own use?
3. Which of the four temperaments from *Pirke Avot* 5:11 best describes you? Or is it possible that you are more like God — both quick to anger *and* slow to anger, depending on the situation? Discuss this with your *chevruta*, spouse, or close friend.

4. Be mindful this week of your breath and how you might use it as a tool to respond to distressing situations. Breathing and counting to ten is a great first step.
5. This prayer/poem about breath may be useful:

“In Praise of Air”

Let us bless the air,
Benefactor of breath,
Keeper of the fragile bridge
We breathe across.

Air waiting outside
The womb to funnel
A first breath
That lets us begin
To be here,
Each moment
Drawn from
Its invisible stock...

In the name of the air,
The breeze,
And the wind,
May our souls
Stay in rhythm
With eternal
Breath.

(John O'Donohue, “In Praise of Air” —excerpted, in *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings*)

6. Use a mantra this week such as:
 - I wish to release any anger I am carrying.
 - May I be difficult to anger and easy to appease. (*Pirke Avot* 5:11)
 - Help me to walk in wisdom/calm and not in foolishness/anger.
 - Fools give vent to their rage. (Proverbs 29:11)
 - Better is one who is slow to anger than the mighty. (Proverbs 16:32)

7. The Dalai Lama has taught that “Anger is the real destroyer of our good human qualities; an enemy with a weapon cannot destroy these qualities, but anger can. Anger is our real enemy.” Journal about the truth of this message and about any anger that you may be carrying.

Footnotes

1. *Oh, God* by Anat Gov
2. *Nedarim* 22b; note that a number of verses in Proverbs equate anger with foolishness
3. R. Simcha Zissel Ziv, *Chochmah U'mussar*, v. 1, p. 161, cited in Zelig Pliskin, *Love Your Neighbor*, p. 370
4. R. Eliyahu Lopian, *Lev Eliyahu*, v. 2, pp. 26-27, cited in Zelig Pliskin, *Love Your Neighbor*, p. 370
5. This idea of simulating anger may derive from *Hilchot Deot* 2:3 in which Maimonides refers to teaching reverence and “good ways” to one’s students or children through simulated anger, so that “when displaying such anger, one should bear in mind that one is *like* a person who is being angry and that one is not really angry.”
6. Stories about the anger management techniques of R. Salanter and R. Simcha Zissel Ziv were found in http://www.hevratpinto.org/parsha/5771/401_matot.html
7. Rabbi Ted Falcon, “The Real Problem with Anger,” www.rabbitedfalcon.com/weekly-focus, *Parashat Balak*