

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

Chukat 5780 - Anger

Notwithstanding our deference, this Shabbat, to Israel's Parshat HaShavua of Chukat, our chizuk will discuss a topic whose timeliness should be plain - the evils of anger.

The sin of Moshe at Mei Meriva, whose punishment denied him entry into the land of Israel, has been extensively interpreted by our classical commentators. (See 20:7-13.) It is the approach of Rambam that will occupy our attention. Rambam (Sh'moneh P'rakim 4) asserts that when Moshe, in response to the People's demand for water, exclaimed, "Listen now, you rebels, shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?!" (20:10), he spoke with anger. The People assumed that if Moshe was infuriated by their request, Gd was equally so. This, though, was clearly not the case. From HaShem's perspective, He understood that with the death of Miriam, the miraculous well that accompanied the People in their desert sojourn, had vanished. Hence, the pressing need for water was quite defensible.

But, what of Moshe; how can we explain his rage? Rav Soloveitchik proposes this explanation (Chumash Mesorat HaRav, Bamidbar pp.164-165). The generation now poised to enter Israel was not the same generation that left Egypt. For 40

years, they had become the students of their rebbe, Moshe. Regarding the people of the Exodus, their complaining would be understandable. After all, they were a downtrodden lot who had not matured into a Gd-fearing and faithfully trusting people. But, these Israelites, who - for 40 years - experienced HaShem's unceasing providential care and imbibed Moshe's wise teachings, how dare they grumble! Moshe, it would seem, could be forgiven if he momentarily "lost it" and rebuked them as sharply and as angrily as he did.

Rambam explains that for the average person, such a display of anger could be pardoned, but not for Moshe. For him - the most humble person on the face of the earth (Bamidbar 12:3) - this behavior was totally out of character, unacceptable. It contradicted the very essence of his virtuous nature (See Avodat HaMelech, Hilchot Dei'ot 2:3) And so, unfortunately, Moshe would have to be held accountable for even this slight emotional expression of outrage.

Rambam's interpretation of Moshe's sin can perhaps be explained by his rather stringent view on the appalling trait of anger in general. In his own words: "Anger is a terrible mida, from which a person must distance himself to the opposite extreme. Man must train himself never to get angry, even in situations that justify anger. If a person finds it necessary to intimidate his family, or if a community leader finds it necessary to intimidate the community

to guide them towards self-improvement, he may only give the appearance of anger that is necessary to rebuke them, while his thoughts remain calm - like a person who feigns anger, but is not really angry at all" (Hilchot Dei'ot 2:3).

Here, Rambam was no doubt referencing Chazal's judgement, in numerous places, about the horrendous consequences of unbridled anger. It drives away Gd's Sh'china (Nedarim 22b); a person forfeits his wisdom (Pesachim 66a) and lives a bitter, dreadful life (Pesachim 113b); and most dramatically, the Talmud declares (Shabbat 105b) that he who cannot control his temper outbursts, is as if he worships idols and is in the craft of the Yetzer Hara (See also Yevamot 96b-97a)

Indeed, in the hypnotic grip of anger, a person ignores all thoughts about what is right and wrong. Ethical norms are abandoned, even discarded. Divine commandments are sidelined, and what only matters are satisfying that inner seething beast by assaulting others with ad hominem attacks and emotional explosions. Much like idolatry which allows a person to indulge in whatever passions and actions he chooses, anger becomes that ready excuse to perpetrate all sorts of terrible offenses against another. In marriage, anger can be an abusive method of control. Among people, it can lead to mayhem and violence. Within a nation, it can tear apart the social fabric of civilized

conduct and downslide into chaos and catastrophe.

Truth to be told, everyone naturally gets angry from time to time. Life, so often, is unfair and merciless. People experience defeat and failure, innocent people are victimized, and frustration and despair set in. It's quite normal to get upset when things simply do not go as planned. The issue though is not whether people will get angry; inevitably, they will! The enormously important ethical question, however, is, how will they manage their anger. Will the fury be channeled into constructive change, or will it be allowed to rage on like a wild fire? Will the anger be honestly judged as wrong and misplaced, or will it be exploited to justify undisciplined and criminal behavior? Does a person have the moral will and inner strength to quash the anger, and override its frenzied negativity with beliefs and convictions that have the power to uplift one above the clashing madness of anger pit against anger?

It takes centuries to fashion a righteous and just society, a beautiful social edifice of goodness and chesed. And it takes only a fraction of that time to destroy it! Is anger the only cause? Surely not, but does it fuel the conflict, absolutely!

Moshe got angry and had to suffer the utter disappointment of a dream unfulfilled. His anger was hardly noticeable and yet - for him - was

inexcusable. We, of far lesser stature, are often guilty of an anger of much higher voltage and intensity. And for this, we cannot be forgiven when we let it loose to wreak dehumanization and devastation upon those, hapless enough, to be in its path.

Ramban, in his famous and impassioned letter to his son (Iggeret HaRamban), chooses to devote its beginning with a warning about the dangers of anger. The letter should be prominently posted in every home and office.

"Hear, my son, the instruction of your father and don't forsake the teaching of your mother (Mishlei 1:8). Get into the habit of always speaking calmly to everyone. This will prevent you from anger, a serious character flaw which causes people to sin. As our Rabbis said (Nedarim 22a): Whoever flares up in anger is subject to the discipline of Gehinnom as it is says in (Kohelet 12:10), "Cast out anger from your heart, and [by doing this] remove evil from your flesh." "Evil" here means Gehinnom, as we read (Mishlei 16:4): "...and the wicked are destined for the day of evil." Once you have distanced yourself from anger, the quality of humility will enter your heart. This radiant quality is the finest of all admirable traits (see Avoda Zara 20b, Mishlei 22:4), "Following humility comes the fear of HaShem."

Through humility you will also come to fear HaShem. It will cause you to always think about (see Avot 3:1) where you

came from and where you are going, and that while alive you are only like a maggot and a worm, and the same after death. It will also remind you before Whom you will be judged, the King of Glory ...

When you think about all these things, you will come to fear HaShem who created you, and you will protect yourself from sinning and therefore be happy with whatever happens to you. Also, when you act humbly and modestly before everyone, and are afraid of HaShem and of sin, the radiance of His glory and the spirit of the Shechina will rest upon you, and you will live the life of the World-to-Come!"