

Kol Nidrei Sermon 5783: Slow Anger

Rabbi Abi Weber

A pious Jew is asked, "What was the happiest day of your life?" "Ah!" the pious man responds. "Once, I was sailing on a ship full of merchants and wealthy folk. I had no money and was dressed in rags. As I lay there on the deck, looking like the lowliest of people, a wealthy man stood up to go to the bathroom. My lowliness reached his eyes, and he exposed himself and urinated on me. I was shocked by his great brazenness. And yet, by the life of God, my soul was not pained at all. **I felt no anger arise within me.** And I rejoiced greatly that I had arrived at such a stage that I was not pained by this man's scorn. I paid no attention to him. This is true humility."¹

When I came upon this story during a Jewish meditation class, I was horrified. Never before had I encountered a lesson of such passiveness in the face of great degradation. What was the source of this shocking and somewhat disturbing story? The Rambam. The great, level-headed medieval sage, commenting here on Pirkei Avot.

In fact, the lesson in this story sounded much more like those I had learned from a very different source: Buddhism. I have deep respect and admiration for the Dalai Lama, the leader of the exiled people of Tibet. Despite the fact that the Chinese government has systematically repressed Tibetan Buddhism for the last 60 years, causing the Dalai Lama and his government to flee into exile in India, the Dalai Lama refuses to even refer to the Chinese government as his enemies. "The Chinese are my brothers," he says calmly.

In most Buddhist teachings, anger is *never* justified, no matter the cause. "Anger is like stabbing yourself through the stomach to hurt someone standing behind you with the tip of your sword,"² a Buddhist text explains. One of the goals of meditation is to learn to overcome this anger, to sublimate it, and thereby decrease suffering in the world. By elevating myself beyond my own self-indulgent anger, I create more harmony in the cosmos.

I wish that I could be like the Dalai Lama. I wish that I could be like that pious man on the ship. But I am not. I am angry.

Three months ago, when the Supreme Court announced its decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, I was completely floored. Although it had become clear over the prior months that abortion access in this country was in danger, nothing prepared me for the actual moment. Decades of hard work by feminist activists was suddenly thrown out the window. As it stands today, about 1 in 3 Americans of childbearing age cannot legally access an abortion in their home state. In several states, there are no exceptions for women who are victims of sexual assault. How can I look at this and not feel anger?

¹ פירוש המשנה לרמב"ם מסכת אבות פרק ד:ד. Translation by Rabbi James Jacobson Maisels.

² Rodger Kamenetz, *The Jew in the Lotus*, p. 187.

And even more than that, the reasoning used in the Dobbs decision, along with Justice Clarence Thomas's chilling concurrence, led me to another fear: was it possible that this Court would roll back LGBT rights too? Should I be worried that my marriage could be dissolved by the government? Like many other queer people in the wake of the decision, my wife and I rushed to an attorney to write up health care proxy documents, wills, power of attorney agreements – and we are now in the process of deciding whether we need to go through a legal adoption for *our own child*, with fear that the government could someday remove our parental rights for our daughter. What can I feel in the face of this except deep rage?

You see, I don't have to lie on the floor in rags to feel degraded and spat upon. I just need to be a queer woman in this country.

It's clear to me that the Rambam's lesson on overcoming anger is important for many people. This lesson is repeated in many places in Jewish text: the Talmud in masechet Shabbat (105b) teaches that being angry is like worshiping idols. Hasidut gives strategy after strategy for quelling this so-called evil impulse. And it is clear why. Anger can be harmful. It can lead to lashing out at loved ones; to hurting people who have done nothing wrong; it can lead to violence and suffering and pain, and more pain in response. Anger is scary. Yet when I read texts that exhort me to let go of my anger, to feel only peace and tranquility in the face of degradation, I can't help but – get angry. I think of the many generations of women taught to be quiet and accept second-class citizenship with grace. I think of the queer people taught to stay in the closet and not make a fuss in the face of homophobic slurs. I think of the Black Americans taught to sit passively in the back of the bus, never daring to complain for fear of assault by those in power. I think of the poor, the disenfranchised, all of those whose place in society makes it unsafe for them to express the mildest displeasure at their treatment. *These* are not the people who need to be taught to overcome their anger. We are the people who need to learn how to use it.

In her groundbreaking work *Rage Becomes Her*, Soraya Chemaly writes of the power of women's anger. Most girls, she says, are taught from a young age that anger will be an imposition on others, making them irksome and unlikeable. That it will alienate loved ones and put off people that they want to attract. "As girls," she writes, "we are not taught to acknowledge or manage our anger so much as fear, ignore, hide, and transform it." Over time, this repression has a corrosive effect, as anger becomes exhaustion, sadness, anxiety, self-loathing. One in four women in the United States has been diagnosed with major depression. I am not saying that mental illness would go away if we all lived out our feelings – but what would the world like if we did not treat women's anger as a sin?

This, too, we can find in our texts. At the same time that our tradition teaches the virtue of equanimity, if we go deeper, we find that anger has been there all along. Anger, in fact, is a *divine attribute*. Rabbi Yael Ridberg, the leader of Congregation Dor Hadash in San Diego, points out the verse that we repeat again and again throughout our High Holiday davening:

Adonai, adonai, el rachum v'chanun
Erech apayim
V'rav chesed v'emet

Right in the middle of these attributes of God is “*erech apayim*” – slow to anger. Our God is compassionate, and gracious, and full of lovingkindness and truth. And, this verse reminds us, God also has anger. We need not go far to see this anger: in the very first narrative in our Torah, God exiles Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden when they disobey. Shortly afterwards, God floods the whole world, dismayed by the sinful behavior of all living beings. Years later, God’s rage flares again and again as the Israelites wander through the desert, tempered only by Moshe’s pleading. At times, God is terrifying, severe in meting out punishment. I admit – there are moments when I wonder about this scary God. I often believe that it would be safer to teach my daughter lessons from Daniel Tiger than from a Torah with such a terrifying deity.

At the same time... God’s feelings are *real*. When I think about legislators dissolving my marriage or forcing a rape victim to have a baby, it is not the compassionate, gracious God that I need. I need a God who feels my anger. But I need a certain kind of anger. I need *slow anger*.

Erech apayim is, by definition, not the hot rage of an argument. A midrash on this verse teaches that when God gave Moshe the Torah at Sinai, God said, “Whenever I start to get angry at the Israelites, *remind me* of those 13 attributes, so that I remember to be a God who is patient and kind and loving and slow to anger.” And it works. When the Israelites commit the worst possible mistake – betraying God by building a golden idol – God is, at first, furious. But that anger passes, and God receives the Israelites back in love. God slows down. God learns. God remembers to be *erech apayim*, slow to anger.

But when anger is necessary, God brings it. God hears the cry of the Israelites in bondage and brings the full force of the plagues against the Egyptians. God stands with b’nai Yisrael as they battle Amalek, fighting the powerful army on behalf of a people weakened by slavery. In the psalms, we pray, “El nekomot adonai, el nekomot hofia” – “God of retribution, Lord – God of retribution, appear!” When we need the fiery pillar leading us through the wilderness, God is there, full of that righteous anger that will save us. God’s anger *is* God’s kindness.

So how can we learn to emulate God’s slow anger, not for petty annoyances or mistakes that other people make, but for the real things, the big things? A story is told of Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv, one of the early leaders of the mussar movement. Whenever Simcha got angry, before he did anything in response, would change into his “angry clothes.” I like to imagine this special outfit hanging up in the back of his closet, ready for whenever he needed it. Perhaps Reb Simcha would get into an argument, feel his heartrate increase, and then pause, excusing himself to walk home. By the time he got home and pulled on his angry pants, Simcha would forget what the argument was about in the first place, and he could switch back into his regular clothes right away and go about his life in

joy. But maybe, some days, the anger was there for a reason. Rabbi Katie Mizrahi, who leads B'nai Havurah in Denver, writes, "Maybe there were times, certain unprecedented and unusual times, when anger was thick in the air, when those angry clothes were not just a stalling device, but a suit of psychic armor to wear into battles so important, he needed not only to be powerful, but to win. At those times I imagine the great [Reb Simcha] put on his angry clothes, walked out his door, and **the whole village knew to watch out.**"

I was furious when I heard about Dobbs. But letting my anger simmer and turn into hopelessness is not a useful strategy. I must learn to use anger as a catalyst, not as a life-sucking companion.³ To wield it as a tool of strength, not as a way to stab myself or my loved ones. To wear my anger as a suit of armor as I go into battle for myself and my family.

And so, on this holiday when we repent for our mistakes, when we strive to become better versions of ourselves, I pray for all of us that we learn to emulate God's *slow anger*. That we never hold in what needs to be let out – in a healthy, loving way. That we never mistake passiveness for piety. And that we take time to breathe, to count to ten, to change our clothes, and then face the injustices of the world with all of the armor we need to fight to make it right again. Gmar chatima tovah.

³ Brene Brown