

The Problem of Anger

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Leah bat Shifra and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The first of our two *parshiot* contains a rather quizzical *pasuk* (verse): “Eleazar the kohen said to the soldiers returning from battle, ‘This is the statute that the L-rd commanded Moses.’” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 31:21, this, and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Eleazar’s new and unprecedented role as the teacher of our nation is particularly perplexing. Since Moses was the *rebbe par excellence* - and the one commanded by the L-rd, why and how did it become Eleazar’s job to teach “the statute that the L-rd commanded” to the Jewish people? Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself upon *Midrash Sifrei Matot* 48, suggests the following answer:

Eleazar the kohen: Since Moses came to a state of anger, he came to err, as the laws of purging gentile vessels eluded him. [Therefore, Eleazar had to teach them.] A similar incident happened on the eighth day of the investitures [of the *kohanim*], as it says, “He [Moses] became angry with Eleazar and Ithamar” (*Sefer Vayikra* 10:16); he came to a state of anger, so he came to err. Similarly, in the episode of “Now listen, you rebels... and struck the rock” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 20:10-11); through anger, he came to err. (Brackets my own)

The shared approach of the *Midrash Sifrei* and Rashi as to why Eleazar suddenly became the provisional rebbe of the Jewish people is found, as well, in a parallel passage in *Talmud Bavli, Pesachim* 66b:

Reish Lakish said: “In regards to every man who becomes angry, if he is a Sage, his

wisdom departs from him ... [we learn this] from Moses. For it is written, "Moses became angry with the officers of the army, the commanders of thousands and the commanders of hundreds, who had returned from the campaign of war," (*Sefer Bamidbar* 31:14) and it is written, "Eleazar the kohen said to the soldiers returning from battle, 'This is the statute that the L-rd commanded Moses.'" (*Sefer Bamidbar* 31:21) From this it follows that [the *halacha* of koshering vessels that was presented to the Jewish people by Elazar] had been forgotten by Moses. (Translation, *The Soncino Talmud* with my emendations)

The message in these passages seems quite clear: Anger causes wisdom to depart from a person and, consequently, causes him to err. If this could happen to Moses, the greatest of all the prophets, it is something that can surely affect all people. Little wonder, then, that the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) embraces the rejection of anger as one of the constitutive elements of a spiritually healthy personality:

Anger is also an exceptionally bad quality. It is fitting and proper that one move away from it and adopt the opposite extreme. He should school himself not to become angry even when it is fitting to be angry. If he should wish to arouse fear in his children and household - or within the community, if he is a communal leader - and wishes to be angry at them to motivate them to return to the proper path, he should present an angry front to them to punish them, but he should be inwardly calm. He should be like one who acts out the part of an angry man in his wrath, but is not himself angry. The early Sages said: "Anyone who becomes angry is like one who worships idols." They also said: "Whenever one becomes angry, if he is a wise man, his wisdom leaves him; if he is a prophet, his prophecy leaves him." The life of the irate is not true life. Therefore, they have directed that one distance himself from anger and accustom himself not to feel any reaction, even to things which provoke anger. This is the good path. (*Mishneh Torah, Sefer Ma'ada, Hilchot De'ot* 2:3, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger, underlining my own)

The Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270), as well, focuses upon anger in the beginning paragraph of his famous *Iggeret HaRamban*:

"Hear, my son, the instruction of your father and don't forsake the teaching of your mother." (*Sefer Mishle* 1:8). Get into the habit of always speaking calmly to everyone. This will prevent you from anger, a serious character flaw that causes people to sin. As our Rabbis said (*Talmud Bavli Nedarim* 22a): "Whoever flares up in anger is subject to the discipline of Gehinnom," as it is says in (*Sefer 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 (*Sefer Mishle* 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: ‘Following humility comes the fear of Hashem.” (*Sefer Mishle* 22:4, the passage’s translation with my emendations, <http://www.pirchei.com/specials/ramban/ramban.htm>)

In consonance with Maimonides, Nachmanides views anger as “a serious character flaw;” he diverges from the Rambam, however, by emphasizing anger’s role in causing people to sin. On the positive side, he who successfully eschews anger from his persona will be able to pursue the path of humility, which, in turn, leads to awe of Hashem and, by extension, fealty to His commandments.

Perhaps there is no better time than the Three Weeks to engage in honest introspection, so that we can discover and face our faults and shortcomings, and engage in *teshuvah* (returning to G-d). Many of our failings may very well be associated with anger. Beyond any doubt, nearly all prevent us from properly serving Hashem. Therefore, as the prophet Yermiyahu passionately declared so long ago, “Restore us to You, O L-rd, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old.” (*Megillat Eichah* 5:21) *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

The email list, *b’chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik’s](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.