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3/27/92

## A JEWISH VIEW OF ANGER<sup>1</sup>

### I. ANGER AND IDOLATRY

Our halakhic discussion revolved about קורע בחמתו, one who tears a garment in anger, and the question of whether such outbursts can be considered constructive (מתקן) or destructive (מקלקל). Clearly, however, anger as such is ethically repugnant--as straight *halakhah* according to most Rishonim, and as *halakhic musar* according to Rambam. This dimension of *kaas*, anger, is often accompanied by similar phenomena such as pride (גאווה) and disputatiousness (מחלוקת), as well as other such traits. We shall therefore proceed to discuss anger and then one or two of these concomitant character defects that emerge from a study of how Judaism views the range of negative human emotions.

I once heard the Rav שליט"א offer an insightful axiological explanation of the dictum of the Sages identifying anger with the sin of idolatry: הכועס כאילו ע"ז. But if idolatry is basically fetish worship, how does that relate to us? After all, the Sages taught that historically the temptation of heathenism came to an end with the destruction of the First Temple. Yet, if idolatry is irrelevant to our modern experience, how account for the attraction of the Prophets for all ages, our own included; do not the Prophets rail against idolatry above all other sins? The Rav answers that one must first understand the nature of אמונה or faith in God: this means, he avers, that it is God who must occupy the very center of my concerns, my values, my very existence. If God is only peripheral to some other being or value--whether money or sensuality or any of the isms so ubiquitous in our times--we are by definition idolaters. Now, if one loses his temper and submits to anger, it is usually because his ego has been injured, and because that ego is his central, transcendent value. It is he himself who stands at center of his existence, and that *kaas* is therefore tantamount to idolatry.

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1. This *musar* section follows the halakhic portion of the *sheur kelali* entitled ואביזרייהו בהלכה ובמוסר היהדות.



The validity of the Rav's thesis is evident from the fact that the Rambam holds that there are only two exceptions to the Law of Moderation (הדרך הבינונית, דרך ה') which governs his definition of character (דעות), and they are anger and pride (גאווה וכעס). The common denominator of the two is: ego at the center of one's life.

Now, this is not as self-evident as it may seem. Most contemporary ethicists, under the influence of modern psychology, encourage the expression of anger as a catharsis, a voiding of noxious emotions that might otherwise becloud our judgment. Mental and physical health thus require free expression of anger. To put this in halakhic terminology, these psychologists hold that because *kaas* can sometimes be technically considered constructive, מתקן, because it provides an emotional outlet for one's pent up feelings (דעביר נחת רוח ליצרו), therefore it is commendable. Thus, they consider anger a neutral phenomenon; like hunger, it is neither good nor bad. It is best to express resentment immediately rather than let it fester. Small angry encounters protect the individual against stagnated, unexchanged feelings.<sup>2</sup> (This is in keeping with the phenomenon one notices, especially with patients of therapists who are philosophically and ethically mediocre, that their original symptoms may recede or disappear, but they are immediately replaced by an obnoxious narcissism...) It is no wonder, then, that in keeping with this therapeutic outlook on ethics that there should result the legitimation of the wild and unfettered social and political protests of our time, and the enshrining of "rage" as a positive good in the expression by the underclass for its striving against the status quo and the "establishment." Hence, the justification of the excesses by so many self-perceived victims of injustice, whether of ethnic minorities or "alternate life style" advocates or the Intifada, etc. What these modernist ethicists and contemporary psychologists fail to recognize is precisely what we pointed out in our halakhic discussion, namely, that although anger may be technically considered a מתקן, psychologically constructive, morally it is destructive, a מקלקל, and is moreover idolatrous in nature! In Judaism, psychology does not determine morality...

This does not mean that Judaism necessarily condemns anger at any time and any way as utterly sinful, as monstrous. Thus, the Mishnah (Avot 5:11) describes four personality prototypes with regard to anger and appeasement, indicating that there is indeed a human tendency to react to provocation, but a moral evaluation of such anger depends on "how man manages his impulsive need to act out his angry feelings,"<sup>3</sup> for this is Judaism's central

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2. See, *inter alia*, Theodore I. Rubin, *The Angry Book* (MacMillan: 1969); Leo Madow, *Anger* (N.Y.: Ch. Scribner's Sons, 1972); Rebecca Stern Lamm, "The Legitimacy of Angry Feelings," unpublished paper, May 1982.

3. Rebecca Stern Lamm, p. 15.

concern. This in no wise contradicts the judgment that anger is *per se* a negative attribute rather than a neutral one; it merely demonstrates the Torah's awareness of human limitations and its wisdom in guiding man to a higher level without attempting the impossible.

Indeed, the propensity for anger is universal; even the most perfect of men was subject to it. Thus, according to Rambam, (שמנה פרקים פ"ד) an uncontrolled outburst of anger at the occasion of the "bitter waters" was the major sin of Moses for which he was condemned to die before entering the Promised Land.

Yet it remains the mark of a *talmid chakham*, that he resists the temptation to anger. In the words of King Solomon, דברי חכמים בנחת נשמעים; the words of a truly wise person are heard and accepted only if spoken softly. And even if the greatest of all prophets erred in submitting to the temptation of anger, that must not become the norm for all the rest of mankind--especially the *talmid chakham*.

## II. VULGARITY

The above is true for anger *per se*, but it holds as well for some related phenomena, such as violence or vulgarity of expression. Thus, the Rambam (*Hil. Deiot* 5:17):

תלמיד חכם לא יהא צועק וזעוזע בשעת דבורו  
כבהמות וחיות, ולא יגביה קולו ביותר אלא  
דבורו בנחת עם כל הבריות. וכשידבר בנחת  
יזהר שלא יתרחק עד שיראה בדברי גסי הרוח

A *talmid chakham* should not scream and shriek like animals and beasts when he speaks. He should not raise his voice unreasonably, but should speak softly with people. And [even] when speaking softly, he should be careful not to exaggerate so that he sounds vulgar.

(It is understood that the Rambam's prescriptions for the *talmid chakham* refer not only to rabbis but, equally, to all students of Torah--whether or not they have already received *semikhah*.)

Now, the source for this Rambam is, evidently, the *baraita* cited in Yoma 86a:

ואהבת את ה' אלקיך -- שיהא שם שמים  
מתאהב על ידך, שיהא קולו ושונה  
ומשמש ת"ח, ויהא משאו ומתנוו בנחת עם



הבריות, מה הבריות אומרות עליו,  
 אשרי אביו שלימדו תורה, אשרי רבו  
 שלימדו תורה, אוי להם לבריות שלא  
 למדו תורה, פלוני שלמד תורה ראו כמה  
 נאים דרכיו כמה מתוקנים מעשיו, עליו  
 הכתוב אומר ויאמר לו עבדי אתה ישראל  
 אשר בך אתפאר...

But note that there is here no mention of the harsh term כבהמות--that a scholar must not shout and be boisterous like beasts and animals. Where did Rambam get this formulation from? What was he referring to (consciously or unconsciously)?

I suggest that the source is a Midrash (Gen. R. 22:26) on the verse "ויאמר לו ה' לכן כל הורג קין שבעתיים יוקם" And the Lord said, whosoever kills Cain will be punished seven-fold." The Midrash presupposes a question: since there were no other humans yet created, and it stands to reason that Cain's parents would not kill him, to whom was the Almighty speaking? It records the comment of a Tanna, R. Judah, and the interpolation of an Amora, R. Levi:

ר"י אומר נתכנסו בהמה חיה ועוף לתבוע  
 דמו של הבל, אמר להן לכן אני אומר כל  
 הורג קין ייהרג. א"ר יהושע, בא נחש  
 הקדמוני לתבוע דינו של הבל, א"ל  
 הקב"ה לכן אני אומר כל הורג קין ייהרג

R. Judah said, All the animals and  
 beasts and birds gathered to avenge  
 the blood of Abel; therefore said  
 He to them, that is why I say that  
 whosoever kills Cain will [himself]  
 be killed.. Said R. Levi, the  
 primordial Serpent joined them to  
 demand vengeance for Abel, and that  
 is why the Holy One said, whosoever  
 kills Cain will himself be killed.

Hence, it must have been the animals and the beasts whom the Almighty addressed and who acted as the avengers (גואלי הדם) of Abel; and He refused to accept the decision of this first "kangeroo court."



R. Levi adds that the reason for this refusal was that amongst them in this zoological Sanhedrin was the primordial Serpent-- and that is why God denied them their wish: because He realized that the Serpent was not concerned over the blood of Abel that was spilled, but over the blood of Cain that was not spilled. The Serpent was disguising his blood lust as a passionate call for justice!<sup>4</sup>

Every one of us has, within himself, some residual spark of the primordial Serpent... and therefore we must be acutely aware of our propensity to clothe our egos and anger and rage in the respectable garment of high ideology and rationalize our indignation as serving noble causes.

We have the capacity to shout and scream and yell כבהמות וחיות, as the Rambam said, and as happened after the murder of Abel-- even as we wrap ourselves in the sanctimonious mantle of acting "for Heaven's sake," לשם שמים...

If it is exceedingly difficult to avoid any and all argument (מחלוקת) in life, it is almost impossible, in the course of such controversy, to spurn the temptation to be מתכסה בטלית שכולה תכלת...

The Mishnah (Avot 5:19) has some trenchant comments about disputatiousness "for the sake of Heaven":

כל מחלוקת שהיא לש"ש סופה להתקיים,  
ושאינה לש"ש אין סופה להתקיים.  
אי זוהי מחלוקת שהיא לש"ש זו מחלוקת  
הלל ושמאי, ושאינה לש"ש זו מחלוקת  
קרח וכל עדתו.

Every dispute that is for the sake of Heaven will endure; that which is not for the sake of Heaven will not endure. What is a dispute for the sake of Heaven? - a dispute such as that of Hillel and Shammai. What is a dispute not for the sake of Heaven? -- a dispute such as that of Korah and his entire group.

Now, this is rather strange: why did the Mishnah find it necessary to offer illustrations of לשם שמים and שלא לשם שמים? Is it not self-evident what sincerity and integrity are--and what insincerity and deceitfulness are?

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4. This point is made by R. Avraham Chen, in his במלכות היהדות.

The answer, I suggest, is simple: most people involved in controversies posture as gallant and altruistic fighters "for the sake of Heaven," whereas in fact they are ego-centered and such idealism is at best marginal in their motivation. That is why the Mishnah must clearly exemplify what the term לשם שמים really means: selfless as Hillel and Shammai. Anything less is spurious. And a wise person will be wary of such pietistic claims.

The Mishnah in Avot tells us that דרך ארץ קדמה לתורה, good and decent human relations precede Torah. And the Kotzker Rebbe explains: if you chance upon a sefer, the first thing you do is turn to the Introduction; it is that which reveals to you the quality as well as content of the entire volume. In a like manner, how a person comports himself--his derekh eretz--tells you volumes about the quality of his Torah. I would add that for us at this yeshivah, where we advocate Torah Umadda, this holds doubly true: Without derekh eretz, our Torah is not Torah--and even our Madda is not truly Madda, certainly not in the Rambam's conception. Vulgarity of expression and intemperate, violent rhetoric are unbecoming a talmid chakham of any stripe.

### III. The Ethics of Protest

Does this imply that one may never protest a wrongdoing? Is passivity the only answer Judaism offers? Of course not; the Sages spoke harshly concerning those who should protest but do not: שיכולין למחות ואינם מוחין. However, protest, even on behalf of a right and righteous cause, is wrong and evil if it is overdone.

In the story of the Flood, the Torah refers to the major sin of the generation as חמס, violence, which the Sages defined as גזל, robbery. However, the Midrash was troubled: if indeed the flood wiped out all of mankind, we can understand the עושקים, the criminals, were punished; but why the נעשקים, the victims? The Midrash (Gen.R. 31:4) answers: there was a difference between חמס דברים and חמס ממון--respectively, monetary violence and verbal violence. The aggressors were guilty of monetary violence; the victims--of verbal violence. What does the latter mean?

Der Alter fun Slobodka, R. Nata Hirsch Finkel, explained: the sin of the robbed was that of overreaction! If they were harmed for \$1, they cried and protested as if they had been taken for \$1000. They were over-indignant. And that excess protest for the \$999 was חמס דברים, unjust and unjustified psychological and verbal aggression. And so--the flood destroyed all...

All this means that here, as so much else of life, we must walk the thin line between dangerous extremes: that of passivity and of overreaction. Maintaining that balance challenges one's maturity as well as integrity.



Sometimes the moral quality of dissent depends upon time and place. In one situation it may be valid and desirable, in other circumstances injurious and even detestable. It is told of Rabbi Yitzchak Yaakov Reines--founder of the Mizrachi and great both in Halakha and Agadah)--that he was "oif probe" in Lida, the Lithuanian community in which he subsequently built his yeshiva which became a paradigm for our own. He gave a powerful *derasha* when, in his halalakhic discourse, he was interrupted by a local *talmid chakham* who disputed his thesis and asked a "hard *kashya*." R. Reines' rejoinder was shocking: "I had heard there was a big *lamdan* in town, but now I see you're only a *gazlan*!" The man, insulted at being called a robber, walked out. R. Reines got the position, and shortly thereafter the elders of the city came to him to pay their respects--but not the man who had interrupted him. So, several days later, R. Reines visited him, and asked, "How come you never came to visit me with the other notables?" The man replied, "I was insulted; you called me a *gazlan*." R. Reines explained: You indeed asked a very good *kashya*, and here's the *terutz*, the answer... Now, the reason I said what I said is simple. I would have no objection were you to challenge me privately, or even publicly if I had already been elected the Rabbi of Lida. But when you try to show up a Rabbi who's "oif probe," whose candidacy is still undecided, when such a challenge could jeopardize his sustenance and cause untold damage, why then you're not acting like a *lamdan* but like a *gazlan*..."

That is true for every protest or act of dissent. Do it properly, like a *ben torah*, and you're a *lamdan*. Do it improperly, and you're a *gazlan* -- or worse...

## V. Conclusion

The qualities of anger and its concomitants that we discussed are largely matters of outward expression and conduct, especially that of speech. This is an area that is most difficult to control, and therefore demands the greatest effort and attention.

No wonder that our concern for the sanctity of speech is so important in the *musar* or ethics of Judaism, that we refer to it both before and after the *shemoneh esreh*. Immediately before it, we say: 'ד' שפתי תפתח ופי וכו', O Lord, open my lips and may my mouth declare Your praise. And as soon as we conclude this central prayer, we say: אלקי נצור לשוני מרע ושפתי מדבר מרמה, O God, keep my tongue from (speaking) evil and my lips from uttering deceit. Before standing in the presence of the Shechinah, we implore Him to help us purify our lips from the contamination not only of *leshon ha-ra*, but, equally, of anger and contentiousness, of unworthy words that issue from rage and dissembling and psychological violence: of חימוס דברים, verbal violence.

And afterwards, we append a private petition that we not be guilty of desecrating the divine gift of speech by using it to harm another person; and that should we become the targets of such vilification, we not respond in kind: ולמקללי נפשי תדום... May I react in silence to those who curse me.

These are some of the thoughts suggested by the halakhic סוגיא we learned. In the largest sense, קורע בחמתו leads to קלקול; but our task is to train ourselves in תיקון המדות.

There is no other way to approach the even greater undertaking of תיקון העולם, because the world is but individuals writ large.