

"TEMPER - LOST AND FOUND"

King Solomon uttered a prophetic insight into the contemporary period when, in the characteristically gray mood of Koheleth, he bemoaned the condition of man: "For what hath a man after all his labor and ambition, working under the sun?" -- ki kol yamav makhovim, va-khaas inyano, gam ba-lailah lo shakhav libo, gam zeh hevel hu, "For all his days are filled with pain, and vexation is his occupation; he cannot sleep at night, and this too is foolishness" (Eccl. 4:3).

What an unfortunately accurate description of the mood of modern man! Life is so complicated, society is so complex, the demands upon us from all sides are so many, time is so limited and loneliness so oppressive, the anxieties of social and professional and domestic life so overwhelming, that insomnia and a sense of futility are well nigh universal. In Solomon's words, va-khaas inyano, we seem to make a career of kaas, vexation.

Indeed, the original meaning of kaas is "anger," and the most prominent reaction of the contemporary American in this age of racial strife and dragging wars and polluted air is -- kaas, a short temper quickly lost. Who of us has never known anger? Whatever else we win or lose in life's many games, what we lose most is our temper. It is worth, therefore, pondering the nature of anger, and learning what Judaism has to say about it.

In the Code of Maimonides, the author presents to us his formula for the foundation of Jewish ethics and character training: it is the law of the Golden Mean. Every trait has two extremes and a middle area; and a Jew should keep away from either extreme, and attempt to follow the middle road. Thus, for instance, one must not spend money too freely, nor must he hoard it in miserly fashion; rather, he must be generous. Or, a man should be neither a coward, nor a fool who brashly and unnecessarily risks his life; he must be reasonably heroic. This holds true for all features of character (Hil. Deot. 2:4).

However, Maimonides mentions two exceptions, and one of them is kaas. With regard to anger, the Jew should keep to the extreme and never permit himself to lose his temper. Maimonides approvingly quotes the passage of the Talmud, kol ha-ko'eis k'ilu avad avodah zarah, whoever loses his temper it is as if he had worshiped an idol. (This does not appear as such in our edition of the Talmud, but was probably the reading in Maimonides' edition, Ned. 22a.)

What is the explanation of this seemingly hyperbolic statement? A religious outlook is, primarily, one in which man affirms that the central value of his life is God; everything else is on the periphery. The moment that God is displaced from the center of man's values and concern, then whatever displaces Him is idolatry. The idol may be the fear of a certain statue, or the

belief in the stars, or money or power or sex or science or humanity or one's ego. As long as any of these becomes the center of one's life, then religion has been replaced with a form of idolatry. Now, when man loses his temper, he is in effect asserting his wounded ego, his injured self, and that ego blows up beyond all proportions and assumes central importance in life. During this moment of anger, therefore, the ego has displaced God, and religion has fallen victim to the idolatry of the self.

This is how Maimonides explains the great sin of Moses. When, in the incident of mei merivah, the Children of Israel demanded water of Moses, and the patience of the great leader was taxed, God told him to take his staff and speak to the rock before the eyes of Israel and it will bring forth water. Moses then proceeded to scold the people of Israel, and he struck the rock, which then brought forth water. The reaction of the Lord was to condemn Moses for his sin and to punish him by denying to him the privilege of entering the Promised Land.

What was the sin of Moses? Rashi maintains that he struck the rock instead of speaking to it. But most of the commentators disagree, for they maintain that at all times that Moses was commanded to take the staff in the hand, the miracle was performed by striking with the staff, as a symbol of the fact that Moses was acting not in his own name, but on behalf of God. Maimonides' explanation of the sin of Moses is that Moses was guilty of -- kaas, anger. When he speaks to the Children of Israel,

he begins with the words, shimu na ha-morim, "Here ye, ye rebels." Moses lost his temper. Indeed, he struck the rock twice -- and the second strike was the expression of his own ire. His punishment for this loss of temper was the greatest disappointment which one could wish upon him -- denying him the entry to the Land of Israel, the climax of all his dreams and prayers.

This was the one great weakness of Moses. The Rabbis tell us (Lev.R. 13) that bi'sheloshah mekomot kaas Mosheh ve'nitalmah mimenu halakhah, at three different times Moses lost his temper, and as a result he forgot a halakhah at each occasion, and others had to remind him of it. What does the tradition mean by this? The Halakhah is God's way for man, it is a method whereby God enters into human life and sanctifies it. But in a state of kaas, man's ego expands explosively, and it casts out the word of God, it ejects any other consideration but that of itself. Hence, the Halakhah was forgotten, for God was momentarily displaced in the heat of wrath. That is why Moses, in his anger, forgot the Halakhah.

In the light of this criticism of Moses by our tradition, we may rightly wonder about the absence of any negative judgment on Moses in the incident recorded in today's Sidra. After the ninth plague, when Moses warns Pharoah about the tenth plague, we read that their conversation was a stormy one. It concluded on the following note: va-yetze me'im Paroh be'hari af, and he went out

from before Pharoah with anger. Now was not this too wrong of Moses? Should not a man of the eminence and stature of Moses, the leader of the people, have controlled himself instead of precipitating this storm because of lack of self-control?

Of course, it is possible, as some commentators maintain, that the verse refers not to the anger of Moses, but to the anger of Pharoah. However, most of our commentators maintain that it is Moses who lost his temper; some even maintaining, according to an oral tradition, that at this point Moses slapped the face of Pharoah!

One answer might be that, from a certain point of view, it is easy enough to understand Moses' ire. The great English theologian and ethicist, Joseph Butler, taught that there are two kinds of anger or resentment. One is the instinctive reaction of moral indignation at any injustice, at any outrage against ethics. This anger is an integral part of man's moral nature. It is hard to conceive how man can maintain a moral structure without this ingredient of righteous anger. Thus, for instance, our anger against the Vietcong in their massacre of South Vietnamese civilians. Or, our universal infuriation at the picture that appeared in the press this week of a South Vietnamese chief of police summarily shooting the brains out of a suspected Vietcong without any trial, and nonchalantly leaving as soon as the act was done. The second type of anger is deliberate resentment, the nurturing of a grudge, whereby we tend to magnify the real or imagined injustice, and ultimately exaggerate it beyond all realistic propor-

tions. This is not an ethical anger. It is morally reprehensible, because here the purpose of my ire is the protection of my vanity and my offended dignity. Thus, the haron af or anger of Moses was of the first kind. Moses' ego was not at all involved in these conversations. Rather, he was furious at Pharoah for his obstinacy, his fickleness, his rebelliousness against God.

Yet there is even a better explanation of the anger of Moses, one that we learn from the halakhic writings of Maimonides. In the laws of character (Hilkhhot Deot 2:4), Maimonides maintains that Jewish law permits only one kind of anger, what we might call instrumental anger. That means, that there are times when a man enforces discipline on another person or group by simulating anger, even while he remains calm within. That is why, says Maimonides, it is sometimes necessary for a parent to show anger to his children in order to train them properly. This pedagogic or instrumental anger is perfectly acceptable, provided that there is no real loss of temper within the parent at that time. So must the teacher occasionally act as if he has lost his temper, and so must a leader occasionally express anger in public -- but all during this time, the individual concerned must retain his equanimity.

The difference between this instrumental and normal anger is that the usual anger is one in which I lose my temper, whereas in instrumental or simulated anger, I find my temper. I am in complete control of myself and therefore am able to exercise control over the situation.

Anger, then, should never become one's master; it is too good a servant. He who nurses a grudge, weans his own misery and raises complications by which to compound a bad situation with his own irascibility. Whereas one who controls inner emotions, controls the bad situation and ameliorates it. The great Koretzer Rebbe once said, "Long ago I conquered my anger and placed it in my pocket. Now, whenever I need it, I simply take it out and use it!"

This explains the haron af of Moses in today's Sidra. He was speaking to Pharoah, and knew the psychologically right moment to intimidate the Egyptian ruler, and so prepare for the exodus of Israel. The wrath of Moses was a posture, it was simulated, it was not really expressive of any inner loss of control. Proof that this was the kind of anger exercised by Moses, is the fact that after the plague of darkness, when Pharoah again changes his mind and refuses to let the Israelites go and orders Moses and Aaron never to see him again, Moses is quite calm when he says to Pharoah, "All right, I never will see you again." Then, while still in the presence of Pharoah, Moses receives a prophecy about borrowing the gold and silver from the Egyptians -- surely a happy message and one that is not conducive to wrath! -- and only afterwards, still before Pharoah, does Moses predict a tenth plague -- and then leaves in anger. Thus, it is not a loss of temper, but a calculated move by Moses to educate Pharoah, to carry out as a Divine plan and further God's program. Moses' wrath is simulated. He remains in control of himself at all times.



In a world filled with anger, when men and women get drunk on the wine of the grapes of wrath, and bubble over in anger, it is good to relearn that lesson of Jewish law and ethics: with the exception of righteous indignation and instrumental anger, both used for non-egotistic purposes, both used to serve higher and non-selfish ends, there must be no kaas at all.

It is a source of pride and pleasure to us as Jews to notice the attitude of Israelis, for instance, to the Arabs: there is no hatred, and no anger. Many Israelis to whom I spoke on my recent trip are remarkably open-minded: they can understand and even sympathize with the Arabs. They are sad at the turn of events, they know that Israel is right both historically and ethically, but there is no anger. They are resolved that we shall persevere, they are determined that we shall not retreat, but they have no resentment against the Arabs as people.

As Americans, indeed as human beings, we ought all of us be grateful that the reaction of our American government at the Pueblo incident was one of measured response. For a brief moment it seemed that the government might follow the hotheads in our country and precipitate world war. Thankfully, the anger subsided, and though the problem is not yet solved, our leaders' tempers were not lost in a situation where the loss of temper might well have meant the loss of civilization.

This is a lesson worth putting into practice in our daily



lives as we tend to burst into rage because of social crises or professional misery or business worries or domestic irritations. To retain our inner calm at all times is of the essence of Judaism. The Jew may sometimes use anger; never must he allow himself to be used by it.

When, in rare moments, Moses lost his temper, he forgot his halakhot, his Torah learning. The reverse is true as well. It is the study of Torah which will endow us with the ability to control ourselves, to find rather than to lose our even temper. Hashem oze l'amo yiten, Hashem yevarekh et amo va-shalom. "The Lord will give His people strength, the Lord will bless His people with peace." What is this strength that leads to peace? -- The Rabbis told us: ein oze ela Torah, this "strength" refers to the spiritual strength of the study of Torah.

It is the study of Torah which will help us control our kaas, our anger, and which will lead us and all humanity to the blessings of peace.