

Rosh Hashanah 2 Tishrei 5780

October 1, 2019

Rabbi Faith Joy Dantowitz

Women's Anger: Productive Anger

The Middah or Jewish Virtue of Anger

Women's approaches

After a delicious Shabbat dinner this past July, I enjoyed relaxing while my oldest son and his friend started clearing the dishes. There were lots of glasses on the counter when I suddenly heard a shattering sound. I was surprised to see the glasses still there. As I turned my gaze further left, I was shocked to see the oven door shattering with small pieces of glass falling onto the floor. My son looked at me apprehensively and then his face showed relief when I started laughing. It was a surreal scene.

When we spoke later, my son told me that he thought I was going to be angry. Upset. Surprised. Sure. But angry? No. The situation did not warrant anger. The oven wasn't intentionally shattering [or was it]. [Witnesses who saw the broken glass moving on the kitchen floor said it seemed like an episode of Stranger Things.]

This wasn't an injustice. The oven wasn't trying to cause me pain. It was just an unfortunate accident.

As I reflected more deeply on my son's concern about my reaction, it revealed the difficult truth that I must react in anger at inappropriate times if he was concerned that evening.

This begs the question-When is our anger justified and how does it move us to make a positive impact in the world?

JEWISH VIEWS OF ANGER

BIBLE

The middah--or Jewish virtue of anger, ka'as, is one with which we all struggle. How do we respond when we're angry? What do we do when we feel powerless? This Rosh Hashanah morning, we will take a closer look at women, anger and power. While we will explore it through the particular lens of women's experiences, the overarching theme of anger applies to all of us.

How do women respond to anger and injustice?

We know that many women have risen up out of anger to fight injustice. There are numerous women in history who we can name as role models and sources of inspiration. For example, the 2018 elections saw the largest field of women candidates ever and record-breaking numbers of women elected to Congress. This morning, I'd like to highlight Biblical women's responses to anger.

The Exodus is the seminal story of the Jewish people. The two dominant personalities referenced are Moses and God. But, before our ancestors could reach the Sea of Reeds, five women turned their frustration, anger, lack of agency into powerful actions yielding productive outcomes.

As the book of Exodus begins, a new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. He was concerned about the Israelites becoming too numerous and decided to oppress them. Finally, the King told the Hebrew midwives, Shifra and Puah, "When you deliver the Hebrew women...if it is a boy, kill him..."¹

Shifra and Puah's jobs as midwives was to help usher life into the world. They were God-fearing women and knew their hands were not designed to take life. They risked their lives---choosing moral obedience over an evil decree---and when the King asked why the boys lived, they claimed the babies were born before they even arrived to help.

¹ Exodus 1:16

The root of Shifra's name is shin-feh-resh. These are the same letters as Shofar.²

The Baal Shem Tov taught that the call of the shofar on Rosh Hashanah reminds us of the primordial scream, the eternal voiceless call of the soul expressing its desire to return to its Creator.

Shofar sounds--[connected to a mother's cries]-- our wake-up call. The teruah's 9 blasts expresses the fervor with which we need to pay attention to the urgent matter at hand---returning to God, turning to our best selves. It is then that we have the strength to turn outward responding to the shofar's call of a dire situation (Shifra and Puah).

There are three more women to explore from the Exodus story. After Moses was born, his mother Yocheved hid him as long as possible and then placed him tenderly in a basket by the edge of the Nile. Moses' mother knew she had no choice. From her powerless circumstances, she could still choose a spot from where he was likely to be rescued.

None other than Pharaoh's own daughter noticed Moses in the River. She heard the cries of an innocent child and rescued him. She knew her father's decree and even noted it must be a Hebrew baby. This was an inspiring act of defiance for her to take action. She was a righteous woman.

It was Miriam, Moses' sister, who was stationed by the River and offered to find a wet-nurse for Pharaoh's daughter. Thus, Moses was nursed by his own mother. Miriam helped save her brother's life. She supported her mother as well and enabled Yocheved to sustain Moses through his weaning. They made an indelible mark on him. There would not have been a Moses without the help of these five women.

Jumping forward in our Biblical narrative, in the book of Numbers, we learn about the five Daughters of Tzelophehad. Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah and

² I thank my colleague Rabbi Rachel Timoner for raising my awareness of this connection.

Tirzah. They said to Moses: “Our father died in the wilderness...and he has left no sons. Let not our father’s name be lost to his clan just because he had no son! Give us an inheritance among our father’s kinsmen!”³

“Moses brought their case before the Lord. And the Lord said to Moses, “The plea of Zelophehad’s daughters is just: you should give them an inheritance among their father’s kinsmen; transfer their father’s share to them.”⁴

Their anger effected change by creating a new law which furthered their lot and created a legal precedent helping all.

Rabbi Pamela Wax explores the daughters’ anger through Mussar, a Jewish spiritual practice. The Mussar movement is a virtue-based ethics. The middot--or virtues--are neither good nor bad but part of our spiritual curriculum.⁵ Anger, and in fact each virtue, is neither good nor bad. However, one must strive to have these virtues in appropriate balance.

Did the five daughters have a pure motive for speaking up and act out of “religious purpose” (for the sake and honor of God)?⁶

Unlike the sibling rivalries in Genesis, these five sisters unite for a worthy cause.

They work together to confront the patriarchal system. Their plea is an angry one as indicated by the Hebrew word “lamah”--why should our father’s name be lost because he had no sons. They also use an imperative phrase “tna lanu”--’Give us’ rather than saying the polite word ‘na’-please. And this is done in public before a whole assembly.

³ Numbers 27:2-4

⁴ Numbers 27:5-7

⁵ A great introduction to Mussar is Alan Morinis’ book, Everyday Holiness.

⁶ Rabbi Pamela Wax posed this question in an article she wrote on Parshat Pinchas

As two commentaries note⁷: The five daughters don't "play nice," rather, they show no hesitation in pointing out the unfair nature of the present situation with complete confidence..."⁸

As well, "Machlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milkah, and Tirzah exemplify "the politics of just protest, claiming rights for themselves and for others disenfranchised by the system""⁹.

Their strong approach emanated from a place of righteousness which shows their "anger [is] worthy of holiness."¹⁰

LITURGY

"Adonai, Adonai! A God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin."¹¹

Liturgy-our prayers-include this verse from Exodus saying Erech Apayim---God is slow to anger. If we are created in God's image, should we pause when responding in anger?

What makes us angry? [pause]

From the simple to the profound, anger is an emotion and virtue with which we wrestle daily. For the pre-school parent trying to get a young child out the door to an individual facing unknown medical options and unforeseen

⁷ These commentaries were referenced in Rabbi Pamela Wax's article.

⁸ Rabbi Silvina Chemen, The Women's Torah Commentary, pp. 985-6 as noted in Wax's article.

⁹ Rabbi Sue Levi Elwell, "Pinchas: The Politics of Just Protest" in Ten Minutes of Torah, URJ 5768 as noted in Wax's article.

¹⁰ Rabbi Pamela Wax

¹¹ Exodus 34:6

expenses. We are angry at blatant acts of sexism and disrespect from people we thought were friends. To communal, societal and world issues. We are angry. How do we channel it productively?

WOMEN AND ANGER TODAY

In her book, *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger*, Rebecca Traister examines the history of female anger as political fuel---beginning with suffragettes marching on the White House.

As Traister writes:

“I confess that I am now suspicious of nearly every attempt to code anger as unhealthy, no matter how well meaning or persuasive the source. I believe Stanton was correct: what is bad for women, when it comes to anger, are the messages that cause us to bottle it up, let it fester, keep it silent, feel shame, and isolation for ever having felt it or re-channel it in inappropriate directions. What is good for us is opening our mouths and letting it out, permitting ourselves to feel it and say it and think it and act on it and integrate it into our lives, just as we integrate joy and sadness and worry and optimism.”

In her book, *Rage Becomes Her*, Soraya Chemaly cites studies on how children are parented. Boys are encouraged to talk about being mad, but girls are not. It's okay for men to express anger but women are expected to express sadness.¹²

“Being indirectly aggressive is one way that many women navigate strong emotions and competition in the face of social prohibitions on displaying them more “openly.””¹³

¹² *Rage Becomes Her*. Studies by Harriet Tenenbaum and Kerri Johnson, p. 4

¹³ *Rage Becomes Her*. p. 19

We all experience anger. When we care deeply about an issue, our anger is more intense. How will we channel our anger? I invite you to reflect on this poetic expression on anger by the poet, David Whyte:

“Anger is the deepest form of compassion, for another, for the world, for the self, for a life, for the body, for a family and for all our ideals, all vulnerable and all, possibly about to be hurt. Stripped of physical imprisonment and violent reaction, anger is the purest form of care, the internal living flame of anger always illuminates what we belong to, what we wish to protect and what we are willing to hazard ourselves for. What we usually call anger is only what is left of its essence when it reaches the lost surface of our mind or our body’s incapacity to hold it, or the limits of our understanding....”

How often do we feel angry? Are we afraid of it? Or can we honor its essence and let it lead us to productive action?

“...anger truly felt at its center is the essential living flame of being fully alive and fully here, it is a quality to be followed to its source, to be prized, to be tended, and an invitation to finding a way to bring that source fully into the world through making the mind clearer and more generous, the heart more compassionate and the body larger and strong enough to hold it. What we call anger on the surface only serves to define its true underlying quality by being a complete and absolute mirror-opposite of its true internal essence.”

14

As we wrestle with the middah of ka’as, anger, we strive to channel it for good, for holiness. Entering this new year, 5780, we bring our whole selves---we don’t necessarily get to wipe the slate clean from 5779---but with the work of Teshuva--turning to the best version of who we are and turning toward God--we are mindful of the work before us and invoke this prayer of intention.

A kavannah--a prayer of intention on the Middah of Anger :

¹⁴ Excerpted from ‘Anger’ from *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying meaning of Everyday Words* by David Whyte. 2015. [Thank you to Rabbi Judith Beiner for leading me to this source.]

“May any anger I feel or express be held in balance with love and compassion for all humanity, as well as and offered with purity of motive.

May I be called to account for anger that is used for destructive or self-serving ends. May I not dishonor You or Your Creation. May it be Your will that any anger I feel or express be used only for constructive ends, in service to just causes. May it lead, ultimately, to greater humility, wisdom, and justice. ”¹⁵

L’shana tova

Amen.

¹⁵ Rabbi Pamela Wax