

Anger

Carrol embraced what she called her “Joan of Arc post-chemo look” until her mother asked, “Why aren’t you wearing your wig to cover up?”¹ And she was offended by her husband’s refusal to discuss end of life planning. He wanted Carrol to keep fighting, while she retired and prepared to confront an illness that would soon take her life.²

Nancy seethes at pharmaceutical advertisements and hospital commercials that feature joyous cancer patients. One particularly egregious example depicts two middle-aged adults on a bright red motorcycle with a windswept flag above their heads declaring, “My cancer may have a powerful enemy: me.” This phrase, Nancy contends, “neatly combines the persistent metaphor of cancer as a battle with a familiar American narcissism of can-do self. That notion that you are responsible for healing from your disease reinforces the idea that you are responsible for having [it] in the first place: You gave yourself cancer, now take it away.”³

Nancy and Carrol were part of a support group also attended by author and professor, Dr. Susan Gubar, who writes about her experience in a column for *The New York Times* called “Living with Cancer.” Dr. Gubar explains that the righteous indignation Susan and Carrol and so many others express about their families and the gargantuan pharmaceutical and healthcare machines reflects the flip side of the roiling fear that the disease instills in patients and also in caregivers. Anger, she believes, is how many patients deal with the panic about loss of control, fear of mutilation and pain, and grief over disability and mortality.⁴ Illness immerses its victims in a frightful non-knowing, and Dr. Gubar defends anger as a cathartic response that channels misery and frustration.

¹ Susan Gubar, “[The Anger of Cancer](#),” *The New York Times*, 11 Aug 16 [accessed 3 Oct 19]

² Ibid.

³ Nancy K. Miller, “[Cancer Gadfly: Nothing but blue skies...](#)” *Nancy K. Miller website*, 9 Dec 14 [accessed 3 Oct 19]

⁴ Susan Gubar, “[The Anger of Cancer](#).”

Anger has a bad rap. Female anger conjures “threatening archetypes of the harpy and her talons, the witch and her spells, Medusa and her writhing locks.”⁵ And male anger evokes images of rapists, serial killers and lone gunmen. Because of a few indelible stereotypes, anger has been written off as dangerous and criminal, selfish and unhealthy. But anger is a primary color in our emotional palette, and we cannot paint our lives without it. Anger unveils the truth by giving forceful expression to our fear, our vulnerability, and even our hope.

The question is not whether we have permission to be angry; of course we do. At this season of reckoning, the real question is how we will deploy our anger toward healing and repair, toward change and accountability.

I have spent much of the year thinking about anger, in particular how anger in women is so frowned upon that my own rage is cordoned off in a closely monitored sphere of observation rather than expression. My fury at the state of the world is kept at a whisper, only rarely expressed to close confidantes, and even then, I still worry about appearing like a “loose cannon.”

A few days ago, I was leading Shabbat morning *tefila* with Cantor De Lowe. During the *hakafah* as we paraded through the congregation with the Torah greeting worshippers, a visitor stopped me and said, “You girls are doing a great job!” I know his intentions were generous, but neither Cantor De Lowe nor I is a girl. We are grown women. We are professionals. We are clergy. And we do not solicit feedback on worship during worship. Outwardly, I thanked this man for his “compliment,” but in my head I fumed, “Hey, Buddy, I’m not a girl, I’m your rabbi!”

On a very different scale, every time I read about a mass shooting—between Memorial Day and Labor Day 2019, America endured 26 mass shootings in 18 states⁶—I want to tear apart the newspaper and blast the furious confetti at our criminally negligent lawmakers. As I pace my study or my apartment, places where I can privately vent my fury, I simmer with rage at reckless politicians who shirk their civic obligations, hiding behind empty platitudes of thoughts and prayers. The exploitation of prayer as a valid strategy to battle the evils of unrestricted access to firearms in our country is offensive to me as a Jew, a rabbi, and a believer in God. How dare they lay this scourge at the footsteps of the Holy One? We are guilty. And only we can legislate the safety of our fellow

⁵ Leslie Jamison, “[I Used to Insist I Didn’t Get Angry. Not Anymore.](#)” *The New York Times*, 17 Jan 18 [accessed 3 Oct 19].

⁶ Mitch Smith, “[Inside a Deadly American Summer](#),” 21 Sept 19 [accessed 3 Oct 19].

Americans. I burn with resentment at the national conversation. I attend the March for Our Lives. And I walk through life wrapped in a blanket of fear that a bullet will one day pierce the body of my precious son.

There are physical and emotional tolls to anger: feelings of anxiety and stress, guilt and shame, not to mention hypertension, headaches, and insomnia.

I seek guidance from our tradition. What shall I do with this fury I feel? Can good come of these harsh feelings? Can such passion drive meaningful change?

Our Scriptures are multi-vocal on anger, but it's easiest to find condemnation. Talmud asserts that God loves three kinds of people, "One who does not get angry. One who does not get drunk. One who does not stand on ceremony."⁷ Eleventh century jurist Moses Maimonides wrote in his seminal law code *Mishneh Torah*, "One who becomes angry is as though that person had worshipped idols."⁸ Anger is easily vilified in our sacred texts.

Interestingly, when God rages at the Israelites for worshipping the golden calf, threatening to destroy the "stiff-necked people," Moses exhorts,

Let not Your anger, Adonai, blaze forth against Your people, whom You delivered from the land of Egypt...Let not the Egyptians say, "It was with evil intent that God delivered them, only to kill them off in the mountains and annihilate them from the face of the earth." Turn from Your blazing anger and renounce the plan to punish Your people.⁹

According to Maimonides, God's fury at the Israelites is just as idolatrous as their idol worship! Moses successfully steers God away from destructive impulses, but he, too, rages at the Israelites' betrayal. While they survive this cardinal transgression, Moses descends Mount Sinai and smashes the Ten Commandments. Midrashic tradition tells us that Moses shattered the stone tablets on the 17th of Tammuz, a fast day, he re-ascended Mt. Sinai on the first of Elul, the beginning of our month

⁷ Bavli Pesachim 113b

⁸ Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De'ot 2:3

⁹ Exodus 32:11-12

of introspection, and only on Yom Kippur did he descend the mountain again with a new set of tablets, not inscribed by God, but by his own hand.¹⁰

Moses exercises leadership in numerous ways: he defuses God's lethal rage, he conveys God's and his indignation directly to the Israelites so they know the error of their ways, and he gives them time to do the challenging work of rebuilding themselves and their community in the wake of their iniquity. In the story of the broken tablets, we have the first example of communal *teshuvah*, and it is precipitated by the expression of divine and then human anger.

It is easy to revile anger as harmful and idolatrous when it leads to violence or oppression, but what about the righteous anger of Moses? Clearly, not all anger is destructive. Author Rebecca Traister writes,

What I have glimpsed, in the moments when I have let myself give voice to the deep, rich, curdled fury that for years I tried to pretty up and make easier on everyone's stomach, is that for all the care we take to bottle it up, rage can be a powerful tonic. It is a communicative tool, which speakers and writers and activists not only find freeing, but which acts as a balm to listeners and readers struggling with their own subsumed vexations.¹¹

Philosopher Myisha Cherry helpfully characterizes another powerful and necessary form of anger: anger at injustice. This anger recognizes wrongdoing. It is not selfish. When someone is angry at injustice, they're not just concerned with themselves but also other people. This anger does not violate others' rights and most importantly, it desires change.¹²

Moses' anger is a communicative tool that also desires change. In shattering the precious tablets of the law, he alerts the Israelites to a profound rupture in their relationship with him and with God. In ascending Mt. Sinai once again to procure a new set, Moses signals hope for reconciliation.

¹⁰ Pirkei d'Rebbe Eliezar, Midrash Tanchuma, Pekudei 11:11, Rashi on Shemot 34:29

¹¹ Rebecca Traister, *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger* (Simon & Schuster, New York: 2018), p. xxvii.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.

The phrase for “kindling anger” in our Torah is *baron af*, or literally “the burning of the nose.” Emotion, our text tells us, is not abstract; it is embodied. Anger can be felt in the center of our faces, therefore, it cannot and should not be ignored.

Anger does not have to be wild and threatening. In fact, we would do well by our families, communities, and societies writ large to learn how to harness our indignation toward progress. Contemporary psychologists argue that anger can be constructive, empowering us we pursue our goals. Anger expressed in intimate relationships clearly identifies problems and helps us find solutions. Anger can motivate self-change, and even reduce violence as a strong social indication that a situation requires resolution.¹³

Atara Cohen writes that as a child she internalized a belief that anger was sinful and shameful. Now, as a rabbinical student, she argues for more representation and acknowledgment of God’s anger, which “can give permission, or even encouragement, to embrace anger on a human level. Just as God’s wrath is consuming and burning to result in a better world, so too can humans destroy oppressive systems in order to enact positive change.”¹⁴

In Exodus, God’s wrath is on full display. Even more poignantly, a ninth century midrash depicts God as the object of angry reproach. In a dialogue between God and the personified female Jerusalem, God attempts to console her for the destruction of the Temple. God offers comfort to Jerusalem and she responds, “I will not receive comfort from you until we speak rebuke.” Jerusalem refuses consolation until God admits wrongdoing and concedes that Jerusalem is right. She takes the loving relationship God offers and turns it into one of censure—which God accepts. This midrash not only condones anger but also directing that anger at any injustice, even if the injustice comes from God! Anger, our tradition argues, resists complacency. Like personified Jerusalem, we can demand and shape a better world.¹⁵

So, what are we mad about and how do we harness our outrage toward progress?

First, we must examine the roots of our anger. We are all furious at the driver who stole our parking spot or the stranger who told us our child wasn’t dressed warmly enough. Hopefully the sparks that

¹³ Jeremy Dean, “[The Upside of Anger: 6 Psychological Benefits of Getting Mad](#),” *PsyBlog*, 6 Mar 12 [accessed 19 Sept 19].

¹⁴ Atara Cohen, “[Learning from God to Be Angry](#),” *State of Formation*, 17 Jan 19 [accessed 19 Sept 19].

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

fly in these relationship-less interactions evanesce quickly; there is no love here—only the frustration of being judged or delayed.

If we look past the outrage that we easily express in our cars and on the street, to the more private kinds of anger—the subsumed vexations simmering in our souls—we find relationship. “I am furious at my ex-wife and the way she is pitting my children against me as we navigate divorce.” Anger at separation and triangulation.

“I cannot believe the audacity of my father’s doctor who gave him a prognosis with so little hope, so little sensitivity.” Anger at painful news.

“Our son won’t tear himself away from his cellphone long enough to acknowledge our existence, nevertheless express appreciation for everything we do for him.” Anger at ingratitude.

“I feel so alone. I pray and there’s no listener and no answer. Now, God ignores me?” Anger at abandonment.

In our most sacred relationships, psychologists insist, anger must be addressed directly with the party who wounds us. As Jerusalem models in the midrash—“I will not receive comfort from you until we speak rebuke”—we can be brave in admitting our disappointment: that we feel manipulated or scared, ignored or alone. Giving voice to the pain that lies beneath our fury invites those who hurt us to see past blame toward our vulnerability. This expression of anger signals that there has been a breach and repair is required.

Yom Kippur reminds us that anger is not a permanent state of relationship. The fuel which fires our fury must also be used to seek reconciliation. Any meaningful pathway of anger must have a terminus with forgiveness. Anger is an invitation into *teshuva*.

And what about anger that extends beyond our relationships, to our world? So much of my own fury has bloomed out of fear: fear of that bullet taking my son, fear of global warming starving his generation, fear of the pervasive culture of sexual violence in our country, the list goes on.

Just last month, 16-year-old environmental activist from Sweden, Greta Thunberg, modeled what anger at global injustice looks like. At the United Nations Climate Summit, she accused her audience,

You all come to us young people for hope. How dare you! You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words...People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you! For more than 30 years, the science has been crystal clear. How dare you continue to look away and come here saying that you're doing enough, when the politics and solutions needed are still nowhere in sight...There will not be any solutions or plans presented...today, because these numbers are too uncomfortable. And you are still not mature enough to tell it like it is. You are failing us.¹⁶

Thunberg, who correctly believes that the inaction of previous generations has cost her future, is following in the footsteps of other activists whose loss and fear propelled them to demand change.

Candy Lightner founded Mothers Against Drunk Driving after her 13-year-old daughter was struck and killed by a drunk driver.¹⁷ She refused to live in a world where “Death caused by drunk drivers is the only socially acceptable form of homicide.”¹⁸ Emma González, a survivor of the deadliest school shooting in US History, channeled her anger into a four syllable accusation of lawmakers, “We Call BS!” that became a rallying cry for gun control activists. At the March for Our Lives, González’ anger imbued a lengthy moment of silence that recalled the time it took for the assailant to murder 14 students and 3 staff in her high school. In the wake of the shooting, the State of Florida passed the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act raising the age to purchase guns to 21 from 18, banning bump stocks, and empowering law enforcement to take guns from those deemed a threat to themselves or others.¹⁹

Grief and loss and fear, the drivers of our fiercest anger, can change the world, inflaming an entire generation to rally for progress. The anger of Greta and Emma and Candy

¹⁶ Greta Thunberg, “[Transcript: Greta Thunberg's Speech At The U.N. Climate Action Summit](#),” *NPR*, 23 Sept 19 [accessed 23 Sept 19].

¹⁷ Mirah Riben, “[Anger: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly!](#)” *Huffpost*, 19 Dec 17 [accessed 23 Sept 19].

¹⁸ “[Candy Lightner Biography](#),” *Biography*, 2 Apr 14 [accessed 23 Sept 19].

¹⁹ Steven Melendez, “[Here's a list of gun control laws passed since the Parkland shooting](#),” *Fast Company*, 14 Feb 19 [accessed 23 Sept 19].

forces us to question the oppressive structures that victimize too many. Their rage is a call to action we cannot ignore. Like Moses, they are smashing the tablets of the systems we've inherited, and insisting we ascend Mt. Sinai together to demand justice.

Tomorrow morning we read in *parshat Nitzavim* a desperate appeal from God via Moses to the Israelites as they prepare to enter the Promised Land:

הַעֲדוֹתֵי בְּכֶם הַיּוֹם אֶת-הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת-הָאָרֶץ: הַחַיִּים וְהַמָּוֹת נִתְּנִי לְפָנֶיךָ הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה וּבְחַרְתָּ
בְּחַיִּים—לְמַעַן תִּחְיֶה אַתָּה וְנִרְצֶה.

I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life—that you and your descendants shall live.²⁰

Choosing life means living into all the colors of our experience, including the deep red fury that inflames our souls. We have permission to be angry. The option between blessing and curse means evolving passed our indignation into forgiveness or social action. Cursed rage can be violent and destructive, it can oppress the vulnerable, tyrannize our partners, muzzle identities, and make us sick. But the anger of blessing is liberating and healthy, a powerful tonic that fortifies us as we lean into fractured relationships and crusades for justice.

Dr. Susan Gubar found a sacred community of cancer patients where her honest anger and theirs fostered connections and built trust. Emma González proved that the language and the silence of anger can unite millions in the fight for gun control. Greta Thunberg has shown the power of rebuke, what we call *tochecha*, in her call for meaningful political action on climate change. Millions of citizens are marching their anger, voting their fury, writing their indignation in letters to Congress and opinion editorials, and campaigning for public office on their ravenous appetite for change.

And what about us? How will we use our silence and our words and our *tochecha*? How will we choose life by honoring the full rainbow complexity of our humanness and our pervasive challenges? I hope that we find the strength to be like Jerusalem, brave enough to address the causes of our anger, all the way up to the God who created this imperfect world and made us her stewards.

²⁰ Deuteronomy 30:19

And on this Yom Kippur, I pray that along with greater tolerance of and engagement with our anger, comes a strong desire for reconciliation with those who hurt us. Anger is a tool, and we deploy it most successfully when it leads us on the path of *teshuva*: seeking or bestowing pardon. There is Torah in our burning noses, and it can liberate us to mend our broken world and our broken hearts.