



Rabbi Kenneth Chasen

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“The Anger in Our Pockets”

There are moments in a rabbi’s career that are never forgotten. They are timeless, filled with lessons.

I am thinking this evening of one such moment. It was back when I served Westchester Reform Temple in Scarsdale, New York – my previous congregation before coming to Leo Baeck. Because Scarsdale is densely populated with young Jewish families, we had a very large number of Bar and Bat Mitzvah students each year, and one of my responsibilities was overseeing their learning with our clergy. One of the challenges was simply making the schedule work – enabling all of the students to meet with all of the people they needed to see. Another challenge was that this was all taking place in Scarsdale – a suburban enclave outside of New York City filled with accomplished, very busy and often rather demanding people.

One day, I get a call from a Bar Mitzvah student’s mom – we’ll call her Mrs. Schwartz. She asks to have her son’s weekly meetings with the Cantor moved to Tuesdays at 3:00 pm, right after school. I explain that another boy is currently in that timeslot, but that in a couple of months, when his Bar Mitzvah service is held, I’ll be happy to move her son Alex into that slot.

Mrs. Schwartz is displeased. She wants to know why Alex can’t have the 3:00 pm slot right away. I repeat, “Another student sees the Cantor at that time.” “Well, can’t they just move to our slot?” she asks. I say, “They aren’t asking to move. They like their timeslot. But they’ll be done in just another seven weeks, and then you can have it.” I hear no words come from the other end of the line. Just a sigh. But blessedly, Mrs. Schwartz decides not to keep pushing. She just hangs up. On me. At least the conversation is over.

So a couple of days pass, and I come back from lunch, and my assistant with the thick New York accent, Pearl from New Rochelle – she’s easy to picture, isn’t she? – sheepishly enters my office. “Rabbi, I apologize, but I have to give you this message.” She places the pink slip on my desk and scurries out of the room. This is that pink slip.

It seems that Mr. Schwartz had called while I was at lunch. Pearl's message read: "His son Alex needs to see the Cantor on Tuesdays at 3:00 pm. He told me to tell you that your communist approach doesn't work for him. Either give him what he wants – he's been generous – or tell him to take his business elsewhere. And he does not want one of your usual lectures."

I wasn't laughing then. I was fuming mad. In fact, the only thing that managed to cool me down a bit was the visual in my mind of Pearl taking that message down: "Okay, let me repeat... the rabbi's communist approach doesn't work... you don't want one of his usual lectures. Okay, I'll tell him. Have a nice day."

I won't get into the details of what I said to Mr. Schwartz. I can say, however, that it wasn't one of my finer rabbinic moments. He had gotten under my skin. He got me to respond from anger. He got me to react from the part of myself I like the least. Of course, at least in his case, he had it coming. But when it was over, I was left asking myself: "Why did I let him get to me like that? Over a stupid appointment time? I could have responded with humor. I could have responded with reason. Instead, I responded with indignation – who cares that it was justified – and with a desire to shame him. But I'm sure that the only one of us who ended up feeling ashamed was me.

It's not an unfamiliar pattern for most of us. We have partnered in creating a society in which public discourse grows more hostile every day. We say we lament it, and yet almost all of us tune in to hear our favorite ideologues doing their thing on the radio or TV stations where we know we can find them. And the harder they hit those with whom we disagree, the better we tend to like it. If we didn't like it, they wouldn't be on the air.

But this is our day for questioning ourselves, not them. So why is it that we actually like the very incivility that we bemoan? Because there is something very cathartic about that release of anger. It feels good to let loose. It creates in us the illusion that we've regained power over someone or something that has left us feeling wronged or diminished. It corrects an injustice. It exacts revenge. And here, I'm less interested in the public square, and more interested in our personal lives, because this is something we all do, whether we wish to admit it to ourselves or not... whether we are inclined to do it loudly or softly. That is to say, anger comes with the territory for human beings – all of us.

A brand new book about the neurobiology of anger was released just this year by one of the most well-published experts on anger management, psychotherapist Ronald Potter-Efron. It's called *Healing the Angry Brain*, and in it, Potter-Efron walks the reader straight through the cortex of the brain and beneath it, describing the science of anger responses. And in a nutshell, what he establishes is that even those who seem never to get angry are wired the same as those of us who do. No one is anger-free. It just comes out of us in different ways. So we are wise, then, to take note of anger's different faces. The volatile words spoken in an explosive moment, creating wounds

that persist long after that moment has passed. The sarcastic remark, which masquerades as a greater level of civility, but is every bit as much of an attack. The passive-aggressive behavior – when we drive another person crazy by doing what we know upsets him or her, and then denying any negative motivation for doing it. And we shouldn't forget what the psychologists call our "cold anger" – the polite iciness we use to get back at someone, the praise or affection we withhold from those who count upon us for it, our withdrawing, our refusal to talk about what's wrong. That, too, is anger, even though we often think of it as self-control... so long as we're the one doing it.

I've always loved the way poet Christina Davis stripped away the honor we prefer to attach to our "cold anger" when she wrote:

She said, I love you.

He said, Nothing.

(As if there were just one
of each word and the one
who used it, used it up).

In the history of language
the first obscenity was silence.

Yes, anger has many faces, and each of us is prone to wearing them in our own way. Knowing this, the sages of our tradition have been careful to caution us about the dangers of surrendering to our anger. The rabbis of the Talmud identified anger as a form of idolatry, which was, for them, the worst possible sin of all. Contemporary Jewish scholar and poet, Rodger Kamenetz, explains what they meant. He writes: "When we are angry, anger is our god, and we cannot at that moment be in touch with any larger awareness. We are cut off from God in our anger, as surely as an idol worshipper is."

Whether you believe in God or not, the argument still holds true. If you think about it, anger does have a way of blotting out every other reality than our own. Suddenly, there is an absolute right and an absolute wrong, and the illusion of that clarity... in which we are fully victimized, and the object of our rage is fully guilty... that sanctions almost anything from us. They deserve it, we say. This explains, for instance, how we can gesture obscenely at a total stranger who cuts us off on the freeway. How many of us stop to wonder whether the other driver actually even knows that he cut in front of us? Perhaps it was just a mistake. And even if he does know that he did it, we rarely ask ourselves if he may have done it because he actually *is* in a greater hurry than us. Maybe his wife is about to give birth at the hospital... or he's about to miss his first job interview in a month.

None of this, of course, would require us to like being cut off. But in the absolute world of anger, the other person's story is irrelevant. Only my pain counts.

And if that's true on the freeway, it's also true in our marriages, in our parenting, at our places of work, and even here in this congregational community. When our anger overtakes us, the other person's story stops mattering. If I was thinking about his or her reality at all, that would already have slowed me down, and I'd be responding with a greater degree of balance.

Isn't that the purpose of the proverbial "count to ten" when we feel anger boiling up inside us? Believe it or not, that strategy was actually hatched by Thomas Jefferson, who once wrote: "When angry, count ten before you speak; if very angry, a hundred." Of course, along came Mark Twain after that to teach: "When angry, count four; when very angry, swear."

Most of us are probably considerably closer to living by Twain's counsel than by Jefferson's. We count maybe as high as four before we swear – at our spouse for forgetting something we had asked, or at our children for putting us out, or at our parents for their predictable patterns, or at our coworker for making a mistake, or at the waiter for messing up our order, or at our fellow congregant for breaking the rules and saving a seat. It isn't that we're not justified for being upset. It's just a question of whether our response is truly fair to the person whom we have deemed to slight us – and also whether our anger actually gains us more than it costs us. Or to say it as Aristotle once did, "Anybody can become angry. That is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, and at the right time – for the right purpose and in the right way – that is not easy."

On this Day of Atonement, when we choose courage – the courage to see ourselves as we truly are, so that we might take that elusive first step toward becoming who we know we ought to be – can our tradition provide us with guidance for mastering our anger, instead of allowing it to master us? I believe that it can, and we need look no further than our encounter with the Torah tomorrow morning – with the rituals we embrace and the passages we study each year on this *Shabbat Shabbaton*, this most sacred of sacred days.

The lesson will begin before the scroll is even in our hands. When we stand before the open ark, Cantor Kates will sing a text that is sung in Jewish communities all over the world to open the Torah service on Yom Kippur morning, just as it is on the other major festivals of the Jewish year. It is itself a passage from Torah, but we sing it as liturgy – as inspiration for the heavy self-work we do on this day. The words describe attributes our tradition assigns to God... attributes that we should be striving to emulate in our own lives. *Adonai, Adonai, El rachum v'chanun, erech apayim, v'rav chesed v'emet* – we seek to become more and more as we wish to envision God to be... compassionate, gracious, loving, true... and *erech apayim*, slow to anger.

What's interesting about that articulation is that it doesn't propose "angerlessness" as a state to which we should aspire. Perhaps that's because even in the times of the Torah, it was already understood that being anger-free was an impossibility for humans. But it doesn't even say that we should be "anger-reduced" – the attribute is "slow to anger." Why? Because we really can't control how frequently we're going to experience things that makes us angry. What will happen, will happen. But slowing down when we feel the angry impulse is what prevents us from converting destructive feelings into destructive action. If we're slow to anger – if we make the experience of anger a more deliberate, time-consuming exercise – we'll do less damage to ourselves and to others. We'll have time enough to ask ourselves: What is my anger about here? Have I actually been wronged? Might there be a reasonable explanation for what's happened? And even if not, is the level of my anger more than this slight deserves? Might my frustration be at least in part about my weakness, or my vulnerability, or my ego – and not just the offense that has been done to me? If we give ourselves time to ask and answer these kinds of questions, we'll hesitate before saying the one thing we know will blow the situation sky high. We'll reread that email message one more time before clicking "send." We'll pause before lifting our hand and doing something that we'll forever regret.

This is why one of Judaism's greatest medieval sages, Nachmanides, wrote way back in the 13th century: "Distance yourself from anger." He didn't tell us to suppress it or cure it. Just give yourself some time, some distance. And not so coincidentally, along came the Dalai Lama years later with exactly the same counsel for his religious community, using exactly the same language: "Distance yourself from anger."

Dr. Potter-Efron, in that new book of his, confirms that our brains need that distance. He says that anger episodes are going to begin in our brains whether we like it or not. Part of it is unconscious and uncontrollable. Where we have control is whether we learn to detect when it's happening and to react when it's ramping up. That takes discipline. Deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, mindfulness meditation – these are the techniques the doctor proposes. Counting to ten, basically, instead of four – being slow to anger, just as we imagine God to be as we stand before the open ark.

Then we'll unroll the scroll, and Rabbi Timoner will read for us a most famous passage from the Torah. It's the crescendo of Moses' swan song – his final words to our ancestors before they become the first Jews to attempt to give Torah life by the way that they live. And he says to them: *"V'im yifneh l'vav'cha... v'hishtachvita Leilohim acherim va'avad'tam, higad'ti lachem hayom ki avod toveidun..."* – If you allow yourselves to be lured away into the worship... the distraction... of other gods, you're never going to make it. You'll be lost. It will take you apart.

Well, we already know that our anger is just such a false god in the eyes of the Talmudic rabbis. And you better believe that it's a form of idolatry that takes us apart. You see, our anger doesn't just have consequences for those at whom we direct it. It has very deep consequences also for us. It leaves us with broken relationships. It

leaves depressed and ashamed. It leaves us with a worldview in which practically everyone becomes an enemy. And it has proven, discernible effects upon our health – heart rate, blood pressure, respiration, gastro-intestinal wellness. Mastering our anger is, in fact, a matter of life and death – certainly a matter of life and “living death”... the kind of life that nobody wants to live... a life of emotional servitude to the people and words and actions that I allow to take me apart.

Only you can rescue yourself from that living death at the hands of those who get under your skin. The great Chasidic master, Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav, taught that “the one who guards himself from anger will not be ruled over by those who trouble him.” Ruled over. They really do take us over. They can actually kill something precious in us, if we let them. *Uvacharta bachayim*, says the Torah tomorrow morning – let us choose life instead.

We'll then roll up the Torah scroll, and turn to the Haftarah – the teaching from the prophet Isaiah, who shows up on Yom Kippur every year to remind us that there is, in fact, a purpose for this anger of ours that we cannot live without – that it's actually good that anger-free isn't an option. You see, there are some really good reasons to get mad in this world of ours, and that's what our fast on this Yom Kippur is supposed to be about. “You want to get angry?” asks Isaiah – “Think of all the injustices that we fasting, penitent people silently permit. Think of those who are not free. Think of the workers who are treated unfairly. Think of the hungry. Think of the homeless. Look at this world filled with unspeakable oppression,” says Isaiah, “and you'll know what has earned your anger.”

Of course, the sad irony is that we actually think about these injustices all the time, but we almost never react in anger because of them. We generally reserve our anger for the trivial slights, the interpersonal offenses, the tweaks of our egos. Isaiah challenges us to imagine a world in which we'd save up our irrepressible anger for the things that actually matter most.

Can you imagine how your life... our lives... our city... our world... would be different if we could do that? If we could train ourselves to direct our outbursts against real evil, and in the process, reduce our impulse to explode at something much less horrible done by our spouses, or our children, or the guy on the 405? I suspect we'd like living in this world – and like living with ourselves – a whole lot better than we presently do.

American novelist Christopher Morley once wrote, “The size of a man is measured by the size of what makes him angry.” If we're looking for a measuring stick in this new year 5773 – some way to track how we're doing in managing our anger – let that be the image we'll remember.

Let's look on the bright side. Sometimes, you hear a sermon, and you're not really sure when or if you'll get a chance to put what you've heard into practice. Tonight's message will likely find practical application as you're trying to get out of the parking lot... and if not then, then surely as you embark upon the orange cone slalom of

Sepulveda Boulevard. Yes, anger is coming, whether you like it or not – again and again and again throughout this new year. And our size as human beings will be measured by the size of what makes us angry. What size are you going to be?

Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz answered the question this way. He wrote, “Long ago, I conquered my anger and placed it in my pocket. When I have need of it, I take it out.” He didn’t do away with it. But neither did he allow it to take him apart. Instead, he carried it with him in his pocket. It was his to use. It didn’t use him. He didn’t waste it perpetuating grudges... or refusing to forgive... or controlling the people he loved... or trying to gain the upper hand. He just kept his anger in his pocket. And when he needed it – when it had a purpose to serve – he took it out, and allowed it the privilege of actually doing some good.

It’s a new year. And a new standard. It won’t be easy, but nothing truly significant ever is. May we grow big enough pockets in 5773 – and work each day for the wisdom to know when to reach our hands in.

(I am indebted to Rabbi David Stern for teaching me a number of the texts cited in this sermon.)