

Passion and outrage-When does it help and when does it hinder?

Yom Kippur 2018

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Final

An elderly couple talk in the evening. The man with thin, graying hair looks over at his wife sitting by his side and says, “Honey, I’m sorry that I took my anger out on you so often. How do you manage to stay so calm with my foul moods?” “Well,” she looks at her husband of forty years and smiles, “I always go and clean the toilet when that happens.” He shakes his head in disbelief and replies, “And that helps?” The sweet aged woman answers softly, “Yes, because I’m using your toothbrush.”¹

To be sure, people have always gotten annoyed or angry with one another. We are all human after all. How we deal with frustration, insult, and adversarial situations can differ greatly depending on our personality and the situation at hand. This has always been a challenge for interpersonal relationships in every era. Today, though, and in recent years, tempers seem to be running higher and there are greater amounts of outrage. Those of you who have lived in other tumultuous times, perhaps, will have a more historical perspective on this. I know, for example, that the 1960’s were a polarizing time but I didn’t live through that decade. So let’s talk about today, 2018, Jewish year 5779.

I am seeing a continuous wave of anger and ire. The latest tweet, scandal, or news headline gets our blood boiling and our heart racing. There are also issues we have to deal with at work, in school, and interpersonal relationships. Getting worked up, feeling emotions acutely, can lead to both good and negative outcomes. It can motivate us to act and to change but it can also have detrimental effects on us, our relationships, and country.

There are, too be sure, many good things that can come from passion or outrage. We have a famous story in the Torah of a man who acted on his zealousness. Pinchas was the grandson of Aaron, the high priest. Now, the priests in the Torah were leaders of our community. They presided over the animal sacrifices and conveyed the teachings of our law. In the book of Numbers², we learn that some of the Israelites are being enticed by Moabite or Midianite women and are starting to worship other gods.

We are well aware that the Torah condemns the sin of idolatry. Heck, the first two of the Ten Commandments state, “I am Adonai, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods but me.”³ So while our people are in the wilderness, some of the men are seduced and end up violating God’s laws. Zimri of the tribe of Simeon, brazenly takes a foreign woman called Cozbi. In the sight of the entire community, he brazenly brings her into the privacy of his tent. The by standers are crying at this violation. Pinchas, a high priest of Israel, sees this and becomes infuriated. He takes his spear, enters the

tent, and impales the man and woman with one thrust. It's rather a gory image. And I would say controversial by our standards but by the Torah's perspective, Pinchas is a hero. He saved the people from a plague, upheld the Torah, and enforced loyalty to Adonai. As a reward, he and his descendants are rewarded eternally with the priesthood.

Pinchas is a man, a leader, who sees something wrong and takes action. Whether you agree with the conclusion of this Torah story or not, we can at times see the benefits of outrage. There are times when we know something is grievously wrong and we are woken out of the slumber of our complacency to take action. Have you ever voiced a concern to a person in authority? Have you ever taken another person to task? Have you ever undertaken action to correct something wrong or dangerous? Almost always, we need to feel the passion, we need to feel some degree of outrage, for an issue to be raised to a level of importance.

There's nothing that gets my blood boiling more than worrying about my children. When my son was in third grade, he kept telling me that he didn't like his teacher. My response was, "You need to learn even if you dislike your teacher." Well, a few months went by and the stories were getting worse. Kids in the classroom were punished for misunderstanding an assignment, there was clear favoritism such as different rules for boys and girls, children were yelled at, and it clearly wasn't a good classroom environment.

My son shared with me on a very cold day in winter that his teacher didn't let the kids get their jackets before recess. A number of them were so cold that they stood shivering by the door of the classroom waiting for break time to end. I also learned from another boy's mother that this teacher asked for a rope so she could tie the poor ADHD boy's legs to a chair so he would be forced to sit still. I was quite upset. I sat down with the principal and teacher and went through my list. While I wasn't able to have her fired, I was able to make her and the principal aware that there were significant wrongs taking place. At least, she was more professional for the remainder of the school year.

I'm sure many of you have needed to intervene on behalf of a loved one. You have had to advocate medically, legally, or just humanely to help another person. Feeling impassioned, feeling anger, can do a lot of good for people we care for and to advance issues near and dear to our own hearts.

The prophets of the Bible were men impassioned to do good and they spoke out about social justice. Amos said in the eighth century BCE, "You who turn justice into wormwood...because you impose a tax on the poor...how countless your sins...assuredly, at such a time the prudent man keeps silent, for it is an evil time. Seek good and not evil, that you may live."⁴

Ezekiel, in the 6th century BCE said, "If a man...has not wronged anyone...if he had given bread to the hungry, and clothed the naked; if he has...executed true justice between man and man, if he has followed my laws and kept my rules and acted honestly- he is righteous."⁵

Isaiah, in this morning's Haftarah reading, calls our people to task for not doing what is right, for abandoning the laws of God, and then boasting, "Why, when we fasted did you not see?"⁶ He then chastises, "Because on your fast day, you see to your business, oppress all your laborers." Isaiah counsels that God wants for us to let people go free, take care of the poor and then our light will burst like the dawn.

Our prophets challenged people in power to do the right thing and care for those who are vulnerable. This is a very important Jewish value and one that was picked up by our early Reform rabbis. They advocated for equality, fairness, and quoted these spokesmen of God in every generation. And we, today in our movement, do the same. When we see something wrong and are impassioned to act, changes for the good can happen.

This is why I'm impressed with some of you who channel your energies to effect good. There are those of you who go out of your way to help others, advocate, and organize. You serve on boards, volunteer your time, give of your resources, and do what you can to help. I do want to acknowledge our social action chair Debbie Lelchuk, currently along with her committee, is encouraging everyone at our synagogue to register to vote and to do so according to his/her conscience.

While passion can be a good thing, we all know the flip side of anger and outrage. It can debilitate, paralyze, or hurt our relationships with others. First of all, it is easy to become consumed by the 24 hour news reports, the latest tweet, and to be disgusted by never ending scandals. I think most of us agree that it's not healthy to be constantly worked up. I think sometimes it can be beneficial to take a break from the news or to be aware of when stories are sensationalized for viewing audiences. Also, when the next lurid report is overshadowing important news that could have a significant impact on our lives. In this case, indignation can obscure what is really important. And if we become overwhelmed for too long, we can just shut down and give in to apathy.

What is even worse, in my opinion, is when we become upset at what we are reading or hearing and then take it out on others. Our feelings may indeed be justified but does our neighbor, friend, or sibling really have control over what laws congress passes, what our president says, or even what the government in Israel enacts? I can tell you they don't. When our neighbor expresses strong views that are diametrically opposed to our own, it won't change a thing. Unfortunately, there are just too many issues that are divisive and potentially enraging whether it is players kneeling during the national anthem, corrupt politicians, health care, supreme court, elections, Israel, immigrants, environment, and more. It's too tempting to call out friends, family members, and even acquaintances, if they hold different views. We have to make a decision as to how we deal with our feelings.

Venting our anger or rage in general is not productive unless you make money being a radio talk show host. I don't think that applies to any of us here today. In Authentic Happiness, Dr. Martin Seligman, speaks about this very issue. He writes that "we deem it honest, just, and even healthy to express our anger. So we shout, we protest, and we litigate...but this theory turns out to be false; in fact, the reverse is true. Dwelling on trespass and the expression of anger produces more cardiac disease and more anger."⁷ Seligman points out that venting of outrage doesn't get it off our chest, instead it merely increases it. He teaches that emotions can imprison us in a vicious cycle of focusing on wrongs.

Many of us have strained relationships with people we used to be close to. It is sad when we lose friendships because it is difficult to find people we can agree with all the time. I would like to say it is nearly impossible. Maybe we don't need to strive for 100% alignment. Maybe it's enough that we recognize the good in others. People can agree to disagree. Seligman counsels for us to focus on gratitude. We should think of things we are appreciative of in others and in our lives. We can have friends and family members who have different interests, hobbies, perspectives, and opinions. It's important for our wellbeing to remember the good and to seek out ways to forgive those around us.

Often we are at a crossroads when we feel impassioned. What do we do with these feelings? Do we lift up a spear and take action like Pinchas did? Do we act passive aggressively with a toothbrush? Or when do we take a deep breath and go for a walk?

It comes down to *chochma*, wisdom. The ability to be aware of what we are feeling, think through the consequences of action and inaction, and then to make a choice. There are times when we can do something, when we can effect change for the good and other times when we will only alienate those around us. This is an important exercise for us to do throughout the year but especially on Yom Kippur. It's important for us to reflect and acknowledge what is most important to us. We must be deliberative.

Regarding things that we can't change, Joseph Telushin in Jewish Wisdom, says "According to ancient Jewish folktale, King Solomon commissioned a jeweler to make for him a ring with an inscription, the words of which would be meaningful to him whatever his mood, happy or sad. The jeweler brought him one with the words, "This too shall pass."⁸

There are many things that will pass in time. Our sadness, anger, as well as joy and elation. Elected officials, whether perceived as good or bad, will pass. Situations will change. We just need *chochma* to gauge, to judge, to be able to decipher when we can make a positive impact. We need *chochma* to know when to allow our passions to curse through our veins and speak out, organize, activate, and engage and when we need to let it pass. God gave us our minds, our intellect, the wholeness of ourselves to reason and think things through. And when we act or speak impulsively, God gave us *Teshuva*, the ability to repent. We can ask for forgiveness. We

can say we are sorry for the words we used, for the things that we did. We can say sorry also for not speaking or acting. We can be accountable. We can be responsible. And most importantly, we can do what we can to make our communities better places by strengthening our relationships with those around us.

Our passions make us human. Our minds allow us to plan for the future. May we all be able to combine heart and soul, passion and intellect, and may we all have *the chochma*, wisdom, to navigate the channels outrage so we keep our relationships intact as we strive to create a better future.

Notes:

- 1 <https://topfunnyjokes.net/marriage-jokes/anger-management>
- 2 [Pinchas- Numbers 25](#)
- 3 Exodus 20:2
- 4 Amos chapter 5
- 5 Ezekiel 18:5-9
- 6 Isaiah 58:3
- 7 [Authentic Judaism](#) by Martin Seligman pg. 69
- 8 Joseph Telushin in [Jewish Wisdom](#) pg. 221