

Who By Fire a.k.a. Tame Your Flame, God
Kol Nidre 5777
The Riverway Project @ Temple Israel
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Surveying his target, eyes fixed, nostrils flared and jaw clenched, he wound up to swing. With all the force he could muster, Mo drove the sledgehammer¹ into a garden gnome's skull. Poor garden gnome, but definitely \$19.99 well spent for a visit to the Anger Room.

It's all the rage these days. I couldn't find an Anger Room yet in Boston (perhaps a business venture to consider), but anger rooms are everywhere. They are reserved spaces where one can go and smash to pieces poor garden gnomes, and desks and tables, glassware, mannequins and even TVs and computers. You can take a swing at anything that can be smashed to smithereens to release your rage, unleash your fury, and vent the fire of your anger.

It's a classic image: the angry person with a beet red face, jaw clenched, and smoke billowing from nose and ears. Literally on fire with fury.

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With nostrils flaring and smoke billowing, God was on fire with fury and Moses was supremely peeved. It had taken longer than expected for Moses and God to write down the Torah up on Mount Sinai. Those impatient Israelites feared abandonment and adjured Aaron to make them a new god. So Aaron stoked a fire, into it threw all of their precious metals, and fashioned for them a molten calf. And in a flare of anger, God threatens to break the covenant and destroy the Israelites. But Moses - amid his own anger waxing hot - pushes God towards a moment of Divine awareness.

"Adonai, Adonai," he said. *"El Rachum V'chanun - you are merciful and loving, Erech Apayim - slow to anger - v'rav chesed v'emet² - and bounding with kindness and truth."* Short of sending God to the Anger Room in ancient Egypt, Moses and God are reminded of the Divine capacity to chill out. Tame your flame, God.

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From the beginning of time, humanity and the Divine have stared anger in its fuming face somewhat literally. In a cursory glance through history, we learn of the Greek and Roman myths of Lytta and Furor and Maniae who were known as the spirits of mad rage, of frenzy, and even rabies in animals, as the spirits of madness and insanity; then to ancient philosophers who

¹ The Guardian, "Rough Day, Time to visit the Rage Room", 12 August 2015.

² Exodus 34:6-7

prized logic and reason over emotion, and thus approached anger with hostility and encouraged mastering it; to medieval depictions of the four humors, credited to Hippocrates and prevalent in Shakespeare and Chaucer. It was the choleric humor of anger, the color of yellow, but associated with fire that depicted anger as something that could digest and consume, metabolize and transform. Of the four humors, choleric anger “made one hot and dry...made their blood active and restless. One who was quick to anger simply overheated. [And] a person’s angry demeanour was thus written on their body before they ever actually became agitated. And someone with red hair,” sorry red heads, “was literally fiery.”³ Later anger was attributed to gender and power and it was actually men who were associated with a quick temper, but also a heavy powerful hand. Until the 18th century, anger was an emotion easily expressed. Amid the emotional norm of the Enlightenment, however, anger became an emotion to be controlled.⁴

One of the most interesting and consistent threads throughout the history of anger is the physiognomy of the emotion. Physiognomy is a word that describes how emotions affect one’s body. (In example: I’m sweating right now because I’m nervous.) And so we encounter the embodiment of anger: the fuming face with nostrils flaring, heated blood coursing through veins, smoke coming out of ears. We can feel, throughout time, how the emotion was experienced because still today our faces heat up in anger, our nostrils flair, I clench my jaw so hard I break retainers. And though I have never had smoke come out of my ears, I remember the intensity of childhood ear infections. Bubblegum Amoxicillin, however, cannot tame our flame.

Thus, the physiognomy of anger in Torah: the Hebrew word for anger - *af* - is the same one for nose, and so God’s nostrils flare in anger. Another word for anger- *cheimah* - means to heat up. God’s fury is hot. So unsurprisingly, God’s emotions appear amid infernos, in floods, in destruction. Kind of like a worldwide franchise of the Anger Room.

And these days it seems like we, too, are in a worldwide Anger Room.

Floods, hurricanes, and disastrous natural events aside - which modern Jewish thought does not attribute to God’s anger - there is much to be furious about these days. We are in a time of crisis with refugees who lack any sort of refuge constantly fleeing regimes and rulers, requesting entry and repeatedly ignored. We are in a time of crisis where rhetoric in the political sphere has reached its lowest point ever; where there is insufficient rebuke for spewing hateful, deceitful, discriminatory, and sexist remarks. We are in a time of crisis where

³ Ben Zweig, “The Physicality of Anger in the Middle Ages”, 30 June 2012, www.theibtaurisblog.com.

⁴ Carl N. Degler, Review: Emotionology, Reviewed Work(s): Anger by Carol Zisowitz Stearns and Peter N. Stearns, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1698218.pdf>.

black and brown people are not safe on the streets; where calling 911 is not a guarantee of safe harbor; where recidivism, the prison pipeline, and deep seated racial injustice is as if the norm. We are in a time of crisis where the gender gap is still gaping open wide; a crisis where bathrooms have become political and transgender people just want a private place to pee; a crisis of Islamophobia where Muslims fear for their safety, and xenophobia is commonplace. It is a crisis for Jews around the world who are also under attack, and so are Christians and most minorities. It is a crisis where hate crimes are still hard to prove; a crisis where Native Americans must camp out in North Dakota to prevent a pipeline's disruption of their sacred grounds. And the crisis of the sacred ground and home of the Jewish people....

Coupled with the environmental disasters which we cannot actually put aside, because so much of these other crises are because people are overheated. They are hot, parched, they are angry and lack access to water that can cool. I could go on, but it makes me too angry because we are in a crisis - in the global Anger Room. And it's hot in here.

And that's where anger comes in handy because in times like these being anger-free is simply not an option. There are so many "reasons to get mad in this world of ours... [and] that's what our fast on this Yom Kippur is [all] about." Rabbi Ken Chasen paraphrases our prophetic reading of Isaiah for us: "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."⁵

What has earned YOUR anger in our global Anger Room? And what are you going to do about it?

We have role models of people who held onto their anger, but channeled their personal pain, communal grief, and overwhelming loss in powerful ways. "Betty Williams, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate from northern Ireland... described how one afternoon she... witnessed the bombing death of Irish children. A little girl died in her arms... Williams returned home in shock and despair, but later that night as the shock wore off, the full impact of what she had seen jolted her. She went outside, screaming out in the middle of the night. She knocked on doors that might easily have opened with weapons pointed at her face, and cried out: "What kind of people have we become that we allow children to be killed on our streets?" Within four hours, the city was awake and 16,000 people had signed petitions for peace."⁶

⁵ Rabbi Ken Chasen, "The Anger in Our Pockets", www.leobaektemple.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/erevyomkippurkcsermon2012.pdf.

⁶ Kathleen Fischer, [Transforming Fire: Woman Using Anger Creatively](#), 122.

It is from this same anger, the anger of injustice, the anger of loss and grief, the anger of fear that so many activist movements have emerged.

So too the #BlackLivesMatter movement emerged from the pain and fury of lives brutally shortened. As activists, moms, dads, sisters, brothers, allies flooded into the streets of Ferguson, of Baltimore, of Charleston, and so many other places crying out, “What kind of people have we become that we allow children to be killed on our streets?” And without justice.

Injustice is infuriating. These crises have earned our anger. So how do we respond? Do we pay \$19.99 to beat things with a bat? Do we protest in the streets? Do we seek vengeance? What does Judaism suggest we do?

Jewish tradition’s view on anger is multi-vocal. The Talmud, for example, is anti-Anger Room. It teaches that “If one tears his garments in anger, or breaks his vessels in anger, or scatters his money in anger, he should be in your eyes as one who serves idols.”⁷ Anger is equated with idol worship. The Mussar tradition of ethical living teaches that “when a person loses his or her temper, he or she becomes overwhelmed and overpowered by...anger....yield[ing] to this raging...[and] in effect “serving” the power of anger. By authorizing anger to domineer and control [the self], the angry person supplants and negates the governing role of God. More simply, you can have only one god on the altar. If it’s anger, it’s not God.”⁸

That view of anger - which is focused on Anger Room anger - is that overwhelming, jaw-clenching, nostril-flaring anger. Its bright red, all-consuming, hot anger.

The anger of activism, however, may offer us a slightly cooler option. In a biography of Ernesto Cortes, A grassroots Latino political organizer, author Mary Beth Rogers describes it for us. “I am...angry, but I’m learning to use my anger.’ For her, that meant learning how to turn her hot anger down a notch or two and make it cold, controlled, and careful.”⁹ Her Book is called *Cold Anger*.

Cold anger “is born of significant grief with the purpose of setting things right,” writes Rabbi David Jaffee. Cold anger “...is generative and purposeful.” Cold anger, however, means taking

⁷ Rabbi David Jaffe, [Changing the World from the Inside Out: A Jewish Path for Personal and Social Change](#), Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 105.

⁸ Alan Morinis, The Mussar Institute, Ka’as/Anger Curriculum.

⁹ Excerpted from Sermon by Rabbi Dusty Klass, Yom Kippur 5775; “Cold Anger: A Story of Faith and Power Politics”, by Mary Beth Rodges.

the long range. It means being ever patient that your careful, cold anger activism *now* will somehow tip the scales of justice *some day*. Taking the long range, however, is really hard to do when people around the world suffer as I speak. They simply do not have time for our cold anger. They do not have time for God's attribute of *Erech Apayim* - slowness to anger. And it makes me angry that I do not know what to do about that.

Of the many times that Moses found himself in the presence of God, perhaps the most powerful moment was in the presence of a mere bush. Moses noticed it was afire, but not consumed. That is our goal. Perhaps the very nature of anger is that in the glowing embers of its fire, the warmth of holiness resides.