

CHAPTER 2, LAW 3(D) - THE ANGER OF SADNESS

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

There are certain character traits which a person is forbidden to accustom himself in, even in moderation. Rather, he must distance himself to the opposite extreme. One such trait is haughtiness ...

So too is anger an exceedingly bad quality; one from which it is proper that one distance himself to an extreme. A person should train himself not to anger even on a matter regarding which anger is appropriate. And if a person wants to instill awe upon his children -- or if he is an administrator / provider ('parnais') and wants to anger at the community members in order that they mend their ways, he should only feign anger in their presence in order to castigate them, but his mind should be composed within. He should act as one impersonating an [angry] man while not being angry himself.

The early Sages said, 'Whoever angers is as if he has performed idolatry.' They said further that one who angers, if he is a scholar his wisdom will depart from him, and if he is a prophet his prophetic spirit will depart from him. [The Sages further stated,] 'People who have tempers -- their lives are not lives.'

Therefore, [the Sages] instructed us that one should distance himself from anger so much so that one accustoms himself not to feel even things which [would ordinarily] incite one to anger. And this is the ideal path.

It is [further] the way of the righteous that they are insulted / abused ('aluvim') but do not insult back; they hear themselves being disgraced and do not respond. They act out of love and rejoice in suffering. Regarding them does the verse state, 'And those that love Him are as the emergence of the sun in its power' (Judges 5:31).

Last week we discussed the evil of anger and in particular why the Sages equate it to idolatry. As we explained, anger at its root stems from a desire to control one's surroundings. I anger out of the frustration that things are not going my way: others aren't listening to me, I can't get anything done. And the basic fallacy of this is that I have no right to the expectation that things **should** go my way in the first place -- nor may I yell and scream until they do. Anger at its worst is idolatry -- the notion that I rather than G-d controls my world.

This week we will deal with a different issue. There is a glaring contradiction in the Rambam. In this law the Rambam states that unlike most character traits, anger has no place in our lives. Yet the

Rambam already stated clearly that anger is just as other traits, and one must accustom himself in the middle path. Here is a brief quote from Chapter 1, Law 4:

"The upright path is the middle path of all the qualities known to man ... How does one do this? He should not be a person of rage who easily angers nor a corpse with no feelings. Rather, he should be in the middle: He should only anger over serious matters regarding which anger is appropriate -- so that the same offense will not be repeated."

Likewise, in Law 2 of this chapter:

"How are such people [who are spiritually 'sick'] healed? A person who for example has a bad temper should act as follows: If he is struck or cursed, he should not take it to heart at all ('lo yargish' -- he should not feel it). He should continue to act in this manner for a long period of time until his trait of anger is uprooted from his heart.... Such people may then return to the middle path which is the proper one, and continue in it for the rest of their lives."

So the contradiction is about as glaring as can be. One need hardly be a Sherlock Holmes to notice that the Rambam contradicted himself practically in the same breath. Should we feel it when things go wrong, or should we utterly obliterate all traces of anger from our heart?

I believe the answer is that there is a basic difference between the two emotions the Rambam is discussing. We could perhaps best distinguish between the two with the English terms "anger" and "passion". I should not "anger" at another because he is not listening to me. But I should feel "passionate" about the fact that people are not behaving properly. It should bother me deeply when people are not behaving, when they are acting in a manner utterly contemptuous of G-d's values. In both of the above quotes, the Rambam stated that one should not be a person who does not **feel** it when things go wrong. We must have feelings -- and the worse the evil, the greater our revulsion should be. It of course is not the idolatrous sense that someone is disobeying **me**, but evil should disturb us, and disturb us deeply. And the worse the infraction of goodness and decency, the stronger our anger and horror had better be.

I feel that this is an emotion often lacking today, especially among those of us who have been raised and nourished on Western values. First of all, we are so thoroughly inundated with news of violence and immorality that very little fazes us anymore. (Here are a few recent headlines (copied when the first edition of this class went out in 2008, but I'm sure the same fare today): "17 feared dead in Congo crash," "Indian flood victims face months in camps," "Scores die in Sri Lanka as jets pound rebels," "10 shot, 6 killed in shooting rampage," "Mistaken-fire incident leaves 6 Iraqi troops dead," etc. etc. (And I'm sure if only three or four people are killed, it rarely even makes the world press (unless of course they're blacks killed by whites or Palestinians killed by Israelis).) And I'm sorry to admit it, but unless you read personal accounts of tragedy, it really takes a conscious effort for such headlines to evoke any emotional response.)

But even more significantly, the notion of of live-and-let-live tolerance, of relativism, are so

prevalent that we begin to feel we have no **right** to stand for anything. It's not politically correct to imply that certain lifestyles or even opposing religious beliefs are simply wrong (even if those opposing religions have no compunctions maligning us in the harshest terms). We mustn't feel too strongly or speak too loudly about what we believe in because it would deny others their freedom of conscience, infringe on their personal liberties, or at the very least make them feel bad. But in the process, our own beliefs suffer. There's much room for tolerance and love of mankind, but this must never impact on the strength of our own convictions -- and the knowledge that we hold the truth.

My teacher R. Moshe Eisemann (of Ner Israel Rabbinical College, Baltimore, MD) once told us that years ago, when he had a daughter studying in seminary in Israel, her school took part in a pro-Sabbath-observance rally. He told us that his daughter participated in it basically **expecting** to be turned off. This was in part because she had the same impression as we of religious rallies in the Holy Land: the image of a bunch of unbridled "ultra-Orthodox" ruffians blocking traffic, throwing rocks, burning trash bins, tussling with police, etc. (Needless to say, these are the very few rotten apples who give us all a bad name. And of course, the media, always looking for action (especially make-the-religious-look-bad action), is always gleefully there to report it. And thus, in spite of throngs of non-violent, law-abiding protesters, this is the unfortunate image of an "ultra-Orthodox" rally we have.) And especially considering that my teacher is very much the gentle, loving, anti-extremism sort, the daughter attended not exactly expecting to "enjoy" herself.

It turned out that she spent the entire rally marching alongside an elderly Jerusalemite woman, who did nothing but cry (literally), while calling out "Shabbos! Shabbos!" This pious elderly soul felt so passionately about the sanctity of the Sabbath that the thought of its desecration -- in the Holy Land itself -- brought her to tears. And yes, she had to march and proclaim her protest. But it was not the angry march of the young: "We're going to ram our beliefs down their throats! How **dare** they disregard our standards of observance!" It was the passion, the intensity and the sensitivity of a woman who truly loved the Sabbath, and who burst with hurt and emotion that other Jews could lack so Jewish an instinct. And my teacher's daughter returned having had an inspiring and uplifting experience.

Likewise, we should feel emotional and passionate about what is truly valuable to us. We cannot live as stones. We should be saddened -- and angered -- to see gross infractions of decency and G-d's will on earth. But again, the real trick is that our passion does not become the anger of idolatry. If I am deeply disturbed that a child is not listening -- and it happens to be **my** child who is not listening to **me** -- then we have a dangerous situation indeed. At such times anger is quite appropriate. But is it the idolatrous sort -- because **my** will is being trifled with (and besides, I've been having a very frustrating day), or is it the sincere sort -- that I want the child I love to behave better?

And this is a question we must constantly ask ourselves. Most of what angers us is not that Joe stranger is not observing the Sabbath as I feel he should, but it's that my own family, friends and associates are not doing as I say. Now it's true -- under such circumstances I may exhibit anger for

the right reasons. But there's a very fine line here. And as we all know, the true challenges of life are when there's a very thin line between greatness and viciousness. To quote my teacher R. Yochanan Zweig's example, say I hit my kid for misbehaving. If I did so -- even with a passion -- because I feel strongly he needs to learn to behave better, it's a good deed and an appropriate act of discipline (depending what your policy on corporal punishment is, but leaving that aside). If, however, I did it to let out my own frustrations, it's child abuse -- and quite possibly idolatry. The precise same act. And it may be the most beautiful act of parenting or the ugliest one of violence.

Equally dangerous is that we can so easily fool ourselves and justify ourselves a million times over. **I** only do the right thing. When **I** anger it's not because I'm taking it personally but because the other fellow deserves to be yelled at. ("It's not the money; it's the principle of the thing!" -- But somehow principles only seem to bother us when money is at stake.) And if we say it enough times, we might even believe it ourselves. But in our heart of hearts we must know. Keep in mind that the above-quoted Rambam said that regarding our children and underlings we must only **pretend** to be angry; we must be entirely composed within. Perhaps when it comes to our children and people about whom we may so easily take it personally we must never trust ourselves.

So again, although as the Rambam earlier wrote we must not be stones and we must feel zealousness when appropriate, we must always know what is truly making us tick. Our behavior may look appropriate on the outside and we may even convince ourselves we are sincere. But in our heart of hearts we no doubt know the truth. We must know if our thoughts and our motives are pure. Because in the final analysis that is what truly matters to G-d.

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