

ANGER MANAGEMENT

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Hashem, in the beginning of parshas Pinchas, promises Pinchas eternal reward for having killed Zimri and his co-conspirator Kozbi and thus prevented the Jewish nation from falling further into sin with the Moabite women (25:11):

Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Aaron the Kohen removed My wrath from the Children of Israel by avenging My vengeance among them, so that I did not destroy the Children of Israel with My vengeance.

What is the idea of Pinchas, "avenging Hashem's vengeance?" Rashi writes (ibid.): "He (Pinchas) became enraged (when in fact) I should have been the One Who was angry!" What does Rashi mean? If Hashem should have been angry, why indeed didn't He get angry? And what's the idea of Pinchas somehow embodying the anger of Hashem, as if he is in some way taking Hashem's place?

The Belzer Rebbe zt"l offers a most exquisite explanation of the entire episode: In last week's parsha Bilaam is hired by Balak, King of Moab, to curse the Jewish nation. Rashi (Bamidbar/Numbers 23:8) explains that while the curses of Bilaam themselves had no special power, Bilaam's expertise was that he was able to determine when Hashem was angry. When Hashem is angry, the time is ripe for anyone, including Bilaam, to utter a potentially damaging curse.

It is written (Tehillim/Psalms 7:12), "G-d gets angry every day." How long, asks the Gemara (Berachos 7a), is Hashem's anger? Just one moment, as it is written (Ibid. 30:6), "For His anger lasts a moment." Bilaam was the only human ever able to divine the moment of Hashem's anger; thus, the danger of his curses.

"Remember, My nation, what Balak King of Moab schemed against you, and what Bilaam son of Be'or answered him... that you may recognize the kindness of Hashem. (Michah 6:5)" The Gemara (ibid.) says that this refers to the fact that for the entire period during which Bilaam attempted to curse the Jews, Hashem avoided even the standard, daily, "moment-of-rage," thus foiling Bilaam's plans.

How are we to understand the concept that, "Hashem gets angry once a day?" We don't usually think of anger as something one plans out in an organized fashion. Imagine if a teacher were to tell his class, "Okay boys, I'm telling you now: Once a day I'm going to get really angry. It doesn't matter whether you're good or bad - I'm still going to get angry once a day. And I'm not going to tell you when..." Now, while the analogy to the teacher may not be perfect, for there has likely not been a day since the creation of the Earth that man has not done something (or many things) deserving of

Hashem's wrath, all the same, the idea of a once-a-day pre-arranged rage seems strange.

First we must understand that Hashem is the source of everything, both physical and metaphysical. Every aspect of creation contains both the potential for good and bad. Take anger for example: While in general considered a "bad" trait, consider a world completely devoid of anger. Anger is often the catalyst for positive, necessary change. Without anger, we would not have the ability to arouse ourselves to take a stand against evil. Without some form of anger, people would have free rein to do whatever they pleased without having to fear punishment or retribution. Hashem created anger, just like He created trees and mountains. It is up to us to decide how we are to utilize this aspect of creation.

The Gemara (ibid. 5a) makes note of another critical use of anger: "One should always enrage one's Yetzer Ha-tov (good disposition) against one's Yetzer Ha-ra (bad disposition)." Basically, our ability to do battle with the evil inside ourselves also takes the form of anger. Arousing oneself to change, an inherently difficult task due to the complacent nature of man, is accomplished by "enraging" our desire to do good against the bad within us.

It is for this reason that Hashem must express anger once a day: Since He is the source of anger (as He is the source of everything), were He not to give expression to some form of anger Himself, we would lose touch with the concept of anger, which could have a negative impact on our ability to overcome our inner evils.

With this, we gain a far deeper understanding of Bilaam's cunning. He realized, to his surprise, that Hashem was avoiding His "moment- of-wrath" in order to foil Bilaam's plans to curse the Jews. Ever sly, Bilaam realized that if Hashem wasn't getting angry, then there was a general lack of anger in the atmosphere, thus impeding the Jews' ability to battle their base desires. If you can't beat 'em - the saying goes - join 'em. So Bilaam took a different tack: He gave up on cursing the Jews, instead taking advantage of their inherent weakness to entice them to sin. He thus suggested to Balak that the Moabite women might prove a temptation too great for the Jews, in their present state, to overcome.

Indeed, his plans bore fruit. The Jewish nation, who in Egypt had managed to completely avoid any form of intermarriage (see Rashi Vayikra/Leviticus 24:11), now found itself unable to resist temptation, and began intermingling. Twenty-four thousand Jews died as a result of their sin.

Pinchas realized that the plague would not stop unless the Jews somehow regained their ability to overcome their desires. Yet since this was dependent on Hashem's anger - which at this moment was impossible due to Bilaam's threat - what could be done to rectify the situation before all was lost? Pinchas searched within himself for some form of anger which he could bring to expression. With great sacrifice and effort, he grasped onto a thread, and built upon it, until he was able with tremendous wrath and fury to pursue Zimri and his co-conspirator and vengefully kill them with his spear. Pinchas, as Rashi says, got angry with the anger Hashem should have had - thereby re-

infusing the world with a source of "holy anger," and putting a stop to the sin and its resultant plague.

So, the next time you want to get angry about something which really may not be worth it, stop for a moment and consider that it's a shame to waste one's anger over small issues, when in fact we could be using it to avoid sin and improve our character and ourselves.

Have a good Shabbos.

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