

Rabbi Beth H Klafter
5870 Rosh HaShana Day One
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Open for Us the Gates of Tears that Our Anger Will Flow

A young parent was pushing a carriage through the park. The baby was crying. The parent said softly, "Take it easy, Alex. Calm down, Alex." The crying continued. Handing the baby a toy, the parent said, "Take it easy, Alex. Calm down, Alex." The crying became louder. The parent handed the baby a bottle, saying, "Take it easy, Alex. Calm down, Alex." As the crying became even louder, the parent picked the baby up out of the carriage. An older person in the park who had been watching the scene approached them, you are doing very well. You talk to your baby with a calm and soothing voice." The older person looked at the child, still crying, and said, "What's wrong, Alex? Why are you crying?" The parent looked surprised and said, "I'm Alex. The baby's name is Max."

Sometimes, I don't know whether to laugh or to cry or to scream. In the year just ended, my emotions have been deep and they have been intense. I am so angry. And I am so sad.

I am stunned and despondent and enraged by the narrative that surrounds us. I imagine our matriarch, Sarah, may have felt the same way.

The Torah tells us that Sarah laughed when she heard that she would bear a son in her later years. She named him *Yitzhak*, Isaac, meaning "laughter." (Genesis 17 and 21:6)

Then, as we read this morning, "There came a time when God put Abraham to the test." And Sarah? Wasn't she being tested as well?

She isn't mentioned in today's verses. In fact, in the Genesis chapter which follows only her death is reported. A legend explains that when Sarah learned that Abraham planned to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, she began to weep copious tears and cried out in her anguish three times, three times, corresponding to the shofar's three longer notes of Tekiyah; followed by three softer sobs corresponding to the three short notes of Teruah. This is one explanation as to why we hear the blasts of the shofar today. (Midrash Bereshit Rabbah, 58.5)

We can assume that Sarah's emotions were raw and complex: did she cry in deep sadness or in rage as Isaac was led up the mountain? Perhaps she did both.

In the Torah, though we don't read about Sarah's tears, according to later commentaries, many other tears did fall that morning.

A Midrash, a legend, about this morning's portion describes the scene:

“After he bound Isaac on the altar, Abraham leaned his knees upon him with all his strength. And God, sitting upon the throne on High, saw how the hearts of the two were the same and tears were rolling down from the eyes of Abraham upon Isaac and from Isaac down upon the wood, so that the wood was submerged in tears... The angels then broke out into loud weeping... The tears of the angels fell upon the knife, so that it could not cut Isaac.” (Legends of the Jews 1:5:235 and Yalkut on Genesis 22.9)

These were the tears of sadness, of outrage and, ultimately, of Isaac’s salvation.

Tears flow throughout the Hebrew Bible:

- Jacob wept in joy as he kissed Rachel (Genesis 29.11)
- When Esther pleaded with the King on behalf of the Jewish people she wept with fear. (Esther 8.3)
- And our people wept with longing, by the waters of Babylon, as we dreamt of our homeland in Zion. (Psalms 137.1)

Tears tell a story. “There is a sacredness in tears,” wrote Washington Irving, “They speak more eloquently than ten thousand tongues.” Weeping is one way human beings express profound feelings.

Despite this, we sometimes view crying as a sign of weakness -- our own crying or the tears of others. We may try to swallow tears, to hold them back in some situations. Women who cry are seen as powerless and vulnerable; men who cry are thought to be soft and even unmanly to some.

Tears make us uncomfortable.

On the other hand, we have been taught: “The truly righteous person is one who owns their own heart and a person who owns their heart can access their tears.” (Pietzener Rebbe, Chief Rabbi of Poland)

At this sacred season, we occupy ourselves with accessing our hearts and our souls. This is the process of *teshuvah*, turning, repentance. While we can always repent and seek to improve ourselves, at this season, especially, repentance is encouraged. During the ten days between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur, prayers of *teshuvah* enter through metaphoric gates on high, *Shaaray Teshuvah*, Gates of Repentance (the name of our red prayerbook). The concluding service of Yom Kippur is called Neilah, literally, “closing.” At the final blast of the shofar, the Gates of Repentance will close.

There is another set of gates, *Shaaray D’maot*, Gates of Tears, which never close. Tears can flow at any time. Experiencing and expressing our deep and raw emotions is always possible.

The rabbis of the second century explained:

“Despite the fact that the Gates of Prayer were locked, the Gates of Tears were not locked. The one who cries before God may rest assured that their prayers will be answered, as it is said, ‘Hear my prayer, Adonai, give ear to my pleading, keep not silence at my tears.’” (Mishnah Berachot 32b:5, also Bava Metzia 59a:5)

Hearing this description, the people then asked, “If the Gates of Tears are never locked, why are gates needed?”

The answer is found in this allegory:

“In a very poor village, because there is always a village, there was a terrible fire. Thankfully, no one was hurt, but many homes were damaged. The villagers helped one another rebuild as much as they could. But they did not have enough resources for all the work that had to be done.

The rabbi from the village went to see the rabbi of the nearby city. Hearing about the fire, the city rabbi gathered the community together. As the rabbi described the damage of the fire, the rabbi wept. The rabbi’s tears moved the people of the city to donate to help the villagers.

Months later, the city rabbi gathered the people together. The rabbi again wept, ‘Compassionate friends, you were generous to help the villagers rebuild their homes. Now I come to ask you for financial help again. This time for my family. We desire a larger house with a grand entryway and an elegant staircase.’ This time, instead of reaching into their pockets, the more the rabbi cried, the more the people laughed. ‘I don’t understand. When I came to you, crying for strangers in the village, you gave generously. Now I am crying, asking for funds for your beloved rabbi, but you refuse to help.’

The lesson is that when a person’s tears come from the heart, for the sake of that which is right and just, the Gates of Tears are open; but when the tears are for the sake of frivolous luxuries, the Gates of Tears are guarded by the celestial beings.”

Like Sarah, Abraham, Isaac and even the angels, I find myself needing to cry these days -- not for a new home. I cry from deep within my heart; I cry for humanity at this new year.

I weep for personal reasons, as we all do at times: for my parents who are gone; for private defeats and struggles; for health challenges my loved ones are facing; for friendships faded over time.

I weep out of sadness at the anguish in our world today: at the faces of children in cages; at the victims of Hurricane Dorian being turned away from our shores; at the report of yet another mass-shooting; at images of our precious earth being destroyed.

I cry, gazing at a world I do not recognize. I weep for my own children, for the world's children and grandchildren.

As my tears flow, I envision them entering the Gates of Tears, *Shaarey D'maot*. I understand now that my tears of sadness are also tears of rage and frustration.

I am very angry lately: angry about the rampant injustices; about those who speak with falsehoods; about the lack of reverence for every human life. I am angry at the absurdity of current discourse; angry because my rights are being threatened; angry because I feel overwhelmed and powerless.

I am angry about feeling so angry.

Anger was certainly not familiar to me during my childhood. In my family, we were pretty good at joy; we didn't seem to fear much; we were excellent at sadness. But anger? Not so much. I barely recall anger being expressed in our home.

In fact, there is a story about a five or six-year old me: I always loved swimming as a kid. One summer day, I was running on the concrete alongside a pool. My mother raised her voice which I rarely heard, yelling at me to stop. The story goes that I turned to her and asked, "To whom are you speaking?"

The authors of a book called, The Moral Psychology of Anger, explain what I sometimes feel, "Anger is bewildering in certain ways. It seems natural and necessary but it is also unpleasant and disruptive."

Anger is a primal force in our souls and in the universe. Feeling outraged about a situation in the world is our moral compass alerting us that something is off course. It is our ethical core waking us up -- like the sound of the shofar -- reminding us to pay attention; to do what we can to repair and make things right. This type of rage is sometimes called, "righteous indignation." Being indignant about the lack of righteousness surrounding us.

In his book, Changing the World from the Inside Out: A Jewish Approach to Personal and Social Change, (2016) David Jaffe characterizes anger as either 'hot' or 'cold.' 'Hot anger' is the anger of Moses, smashing the first set of Tablets as soon as he saw the Golden Calf. It is reactive, explosive and immediate.

What Jaffe calls 'cold anger,' on the other hand, is the anger we can sit with. It can create something new. With it we can seek repair and reconciliation. Like fire, rage can destroy or can create; it is up to us to decide how to express it and how to harness its power. The challenge whether in our personal lives or in the public sphere, is the 'fine-line balancing act' between the extremes.

To put it in another way, Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Like the spark that ignites the fuel in an engine, anger is the stimulus that initiates action."

Even God's behavior in the Torah displays that kind of balancing. The Hebrew word for anger, *apam*, occurs 39 times in the Torah. Thirty of those times refer to God. One of the divine attributes is "*Erech Apayim*," being slow to anger, a phrase which we hear throughout these holy days:

*"Adonai, Adonai, Eyl rachum v'chanun, **Erech apayim** v'rav chesed v'emet."*

The Lord, the Lord God is merciful and gracious, endlessly patient, slow to anger, loving and true. (Exodus 34.6)

Being 'slow to anger' is being able to express anger in the right measure, at the right moment. "*Erech Apayim*" allows us to control our anger and not be controlled by it. It is through this type of anger that God instills in us the power to make change; this anger is God's catalyst for justice. "Anger is one of God's most precious gifts to humanity," asserts Ari Lipman in his article, "The Blessing of Anger."

Much has been written recently about anger; in particular about women and anger. On an interpersonal level, in the workplace and in public life, many of us, women especially, have been taught to curb our anger, just as we are discouraged from shedding tears in public. Holding back our emotions, though, cuts off our relationship with ourselves and the world.

Rebecca Traister, columnist and author published a book, exactly one year ago. It is called: Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger. She articulates how women, especially, have been penalized for expressing our rage. Traister advises, "What is good for us is opening our mouths and letting [anger] out, permitting ourselves to feel it, say it, think it, And [then to] act on it."

Indeed this is a positive directive for everyone - all along the spectrum of genders - to embrace and to express our anger.

In one of her novels, the late Toni Morrison told us: "There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and presence. An awareness of worth. It is a lovely surging."

Rebecca Traister's title Good and Mad, is a play on words. It is "good and mad" as in "I am **very mad**." It also offers the possibility that I can be 'good' and I can be 'mad.' I had never realized that the two are not mutually exclusive.

Traister explains how female anger has brought about change in our nation, from the suffragists, to the Women's March in Washington, DC. She concludes that women's anger "has always been at the heart of social progress."

We all, women and men, younger and older, need to harness that kind of anger today - outrage that motivates change; the divine attribute of *erech apayim*, being thoughtful and deliberate in our anger. This anger fuels our engines - whether personal or communal.

In our personal lives, loved ones disappoint us; we make mistakes or hurt one another. Fierce, reactive anger often distances us from people we love and is unlikely to resolve a conflict. It is also not helpful to swallow our feelings. We need to find the balance of temperatures for our anger to restore healthy relationships in our lives.

So, too, in the public arena, there is much that enrages many of us. We have seen how explosive anger can turn violent and destructive in the worst and most tragic ways. On the other hand, anger that overwhelms us to complacency will not change the troubling world. We need to embrace and express "righteous indignation," that rage driven by morality and ethical standards to begin to repair the brokenness and injustice in our world and our planet.

With Abraham and with Sarah, we, too, are being tested. How shall we respond?

We need to be **good**; and we need to be **mad**.
We can allow tears of sadness to flow through the gates;
as we embrace tears of anger, God's precious gift,
an anger that leads to action, to change and to justice.

Then we can sing with the Psalmist:

*I will extoll you, Adonai, for you have drawn me up
Adonai, my God, I cry for help
And you have brought healing. ...
For anger is in this moment
And God's favor is for a lifetime.
Weeping may tarry for the night
But joy will come in the morning. (30:1-5 adapted)*

On this first day of the new year, may we weep together and may we join our hands and our words together with anger and with power to bring justice and joy into 5780. AMEN

SOURCES INCLUDE

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