

Yom Kippur 5782/2021

Transforming Anger into Blessing

What is the most popular expression of anger in popular culture? Some might say the short, red, humanoid anger emotion from Disney's *Inside Out*, but I argue it is Dr. Bruce Banner, the Hulk, who has been an iconic character for decades. The key moment in understanding him, and a key lesson for us at Yom Kippur, and during this season, comes in the *Avengers* movie, when Dr. Banner arrives in New York, with the alien army already causing chaos, Captain America says to him, "Now might be a really good time for you to get angry." And he responds, "That's my secret Captain, I'm always angry."

Of all the emotions we have all felt over the past 18 months, fear, uncertainty, anxiety, and loneliness, to name a few -- anger, at least at first, did not make my list. But it is there, like a cancer it hides inside us and it is magnified by all the other emotions and stressors we feel. Even Dr. Banner is able to keep his slow boiling anger under control and unleashes it only when necessary, but we all do not have his level of control.

We are living in times when anger brews in a world turned inside out, and it's not only related to Covid19, but , among other things, to the steadily increasing polarization of our society, the demonization that's followed in its wake, the expanding scope of environmental disasters we've witnessed – fire and water, and the impact of all these stressors taken together. And in Israel last spring we witnessed the greatest peacetime loss of life in Israel at Meron on Lag B'Omer, a day of bright light turned into darkness, over the summer a new round of rockets attacks on Israeli cities, 13 American soldiers and Afghan allies murdered in Kabul, and so much more.

Anger is with us. We may not be feeling it right now, but it's there, and the healthiest way we are going to make it through this New Year together is to be honest and open about it, and, to decide how we can turn this emotion into an ally rather than a divisive and toxic enemy.

The Rabbis teach us as human beings we are known by three qualities that define us. We are known *b'kaso, be'kiso, be'koso*, by our anger, by how we use our financial resources, and, finally, by our cup – our ability to control our impulses, meaning our temperance . How does our anger define us? We may get angry about things that on the surface are passing annoyances, stubbing a toe, someone cuts us off on the road. And we may get angry about real issues of depth and complexity in connection with our values and desires to improve this world. Anger is an emotion that shows we care about something that happened or is happening. We do not get angry about things to which we are in all other ways indifferent. The Rabbis are teaching us

heaven judges us by whether our anger is mainly about minor and inconsequential things or, about the more significant and lasting issues of our lives, our communities, and beyond.

Anger, like power, need not be a negative force all the time. If we are angry about things that matter, about the fact that our world does not yet reflect God's fullest vision of what a holy, just world can be, a world overflowing with blessing and the radiance of God's Presence – that's a good anger. That is anger free from demonization, free from hatred for ourselves or others.

In this spirit, allow me to share the story of how two people helped a third overcome his unbridled anger and hate to open the gates of healing and blessing where we could not have imagined before. You may have already read it in *Chicken Soup for the Jewish Soul*, about a Cantor, his brave wife, and a Klansman whose lives came together in Nebraska.

Cantor Michael Weisser and his wife Julie moved to Lincoln, Nebraska thirty years ago. While unpacking, their phone rang, and the voice said, "You *will* be sorry you ever moved in to that house, Jew boy!" Then the line went dead.

Two days later they received a thick brown mailing with a card that read, "The KKK is watching you, Scum." The mailing included anti-Semitic caricatures of Jews, blacks, and other race traitors and threatening messages, including, "Your time is up!" and "The Holofoax was nothing compared to what's going to happen to you."

The police identified the source of the mailing as Larry Trapp, an avowed Nazi and the state's grand dragon of the Ku Klux Klan. Trapp, 44 years old, was diabetic and in a wheelchair, but still he was thought to be responsible for fire-bombings of several African American's homes around Lincoln and the burning of an Asian refugee assistance center. Authorities had become aware he was discussing plans to bomb Cantor Weisser's synagogue.

After the hate mail, and new local calls to recruit for the Klan, Julie Weisser began to wonder about how lonely this man must be, how isolated in all his [anger driven] hatred. She would sometimes drive past his apartment complex, and while infuriated and revolted by him, she was intrigued how he could become so evil.

She told Michael of an idea she had: She was going to send Trapp a letter every day, along with a Bible passage from the Book of Proverbs, a book that teaches lessons on how to treat our fellow human beings.

Michael liked the idea but didn't want Julie to identify herself in the letters for fear of reprisal. So she held off on her plan, and then Trapp launched a white supremacist series on a local TV channel with a call-in hotline. Michael would call the KKK hotline and say things like, "Larry, do you know the first laws Hitler's Nazis passed were against people like yourself with physical deformities, physical handicaps?"

Michael asked Julie, if he ever picks up the phone, what should I say?

Julie answered, "Tell him you want to do something nice for him. Tell him you'll take him to the grocery store or something. Anything to help him. It will catch him totally off guard."

Trapp, feeling increasingly annoyed by Michael's calls, one day picked up the phone and shouted, "What do you want? Why are you harassing me?"

"I don't want to harass you Larry, I just want to talk to you.

"What do you want, make it quick."

"Well, I was thinking you might need a hand with something, and I wondered if I could help. I know you're in a wheelchair and I thought maybe I could take you to the grocery store or something."

There was silence. "That's ok. That's nice of you, but I've got that covered. Thanks anyway, but don't call this number anymore."

Before Trapp could hang up, Michael replied, "I'll be in touch."

Trapp was feeling confused. A young person helped him get his wheel chair onto an elevator at the eye doctor. When he asked where she was from, the voice said, "From Vietnam."

That night, he found himself crying, thinking of his assaults on the Asian community.

Although he had spoken to Michael and told him he was rethinking things, a few days later he was on TV again shrieking about kikes, half-breeds, and the Jewish media.

Michael was furious, and in a follow-up call, Trapp said, "I'm sorry I did that...I've been talking that way all my life....I can't help it...I'll apologize..."

The next day, the Weisser's phone rang, Trapp said, "I want to get out, but I don't know how."

They asked to come over to break bread together, he hesitated, then finally agreed. While preparing to leave, Julie looked for a gift to give, and decided on a silver friendship ring of intertwined strands, something Michael never wore. He said, "I've always thought those strands could represent all different kinds of people on earth."

At the visit, he yanked off his two swastika rings. These rings had defined his hate as symbols he wore for so long, rings that as his diabetes advanced caused him physical pain as his hands swelled. Julie gave him the ring they brought. They all broke down crying. In November of 1991, he resigned from the Klan, and wrote apologies to the many people he had threatened or abused. Julie cared for him through his last year of life. In June of 1992, he converted to Judaism with a ceremony at the very synagogue he had once planned to blow up.

At his funeral, Michael Weisser said, “Those of us who remain behind ask the question, ‘O Lord what are human beings...We are like a breath, like a shadow that flies away...And yet somehow, we know there is more to our lives than what first meets the eye.’”

Larry Trapp had been full of anger his whole life that fueled his hate and led to pain and suffering of others and warped his soul. Michael and Jullie Weisser could have dismissed him, or cut off his ways of communicating his rage against others, but they responded with compassion. Clearly we all need to be safe in our compassionate efforts, and in this case they were careful, and through their intervention they turned anger into an open heart, and enabled a human being to do teshuvah, repentance, for the pain he caused to others. Trapp had been a hateful white supremacist, that’s what he cared about, and that appeared to be all he cared about. The Weissers imagined there could be more, another side to him, a second soul hiding behind the thick layer of rage. His apartment, full of Nazi and hate paraphernalia was a shrine to his hate. Our ancestors were aware of the potential destructive depth of this type of rage. They teach us in the Talmud that becoming full of anger is equivalent to idol worship. What idol does anger cause us to worship? It causes us to worship ourselves. In other words, only what we are incensed at matters.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel reminds us even God has anger. We see it expressed on several occasions in the Bible. In an effort to explain God’s anger in the Torah, Heschel teaches us God’s anger is ‘not an irrational, sudden and instinctive excitement, but a free and deliberate reaction of God’s justice to what is wrong and evil...Its meaning is instrumental: to bring about repentance, its purpose...is its own disappearance.

This afternoon, we’ll read about how Jonah gets angry with people and with God. When the residents of Nineveh repent immediately on hearing Jonah’s announcement that they have to repent and change their ways. Instead of considering himself the most successful prophet ever, he gets angry with God who sees the people change their ways and has a change of heart. He felt he couldn’t rely on God’s word anymore – God’s message was ‘In 40 days Nineveh will be destroyed’, and now the people of the city have changed. God’s answer to Jonah in the end is compassion overcomes anger, but Heschel teaches us, beyond justice and anger lies the mystery of compassion.

And that is a mystery for us that is worth everything to us in the New Year. Compassion is the reason we are here. It is on every page of the machzor. Some may write this off as naivete or weakness, but as we can see God’s compassion follows serious and soul-searching trials. It is the more difficult path, but it is the more lasting path, the path of blessing.

How can we follow God’s example and use our anger for the good?

If we're going to get angry about something, make it about something significant, something holy. Yom Kippur is a day to remind ourselves what we should be angry about.

Our righteous anger is a precious resource. While we feel it, we need to direct it in ways that are relevant and meaningful to us otherwise we risk it burning out when spread too thin. We will not all agree on our goals, and as a result we may find that our own righteous anger comes against another's, even right here within our own community. The lesson of Yom Kippur is we can still be part of the same community, if we can really listen to each other, and open our hearts

For those of us who are fasting, it is important to be aware of our mood and behavior today. Without the usual nourishment our senses are heightened and we may feel a little less patient and thoughtful. A recent term for feeling this way is 'hangry', anger caused by hunger. A congregant of mine once explained how he grew up going to a synagogue on a city street, and often, when they opened the windows to cool off the sanctuary on a hot Yom Kippur day, the smell from the pizza parlor across the street would waft through...goodness...what meditation and self-control they must have had there to get through that day. If we can be aware of our responses today, and slow down our reactions with some deep breathing, we may be able to pinpoint the little things that trigger us so we can then focus on getting angry about the big things.

Uncertain times, loneliness, fear, the force of bad habits and the difficulty of breaking them, all can cause us to rage, to strike out at the seeming disorder. That was the story of Larry Trapp, and like his name, he was trapped in this cycle of anger and hate. Today, Yom Kippur, is a day we expose our own fears, angers, uncertainties, and pain, like an open live wire threatening shocks to anyone who gets too close when our armor is stripped away. This place, and this time, are safe havens for us to think, to feel, to breathe, to decide what is worth getting angry and doing something about, and to decide what is unworthy of draining our hearts and souls of their precious energy.

Our ancestors teach us we are judged by God on 3 things, *b'kaso*, *b'kiso*, *be'koso*, and the first one *b'kaso*, is, what is the nature of our anger?

What will we choose to be angry about this year? How will we use this precious resource in a way that motivates us to act on what we care deeply about in a way that ends by dousing our righteous rage with the cooling water of compassion.

Today is a day for us to begin to decide.

Tzom Kal, wishing an easy & meaningful fast to all those who are fasting, and may we be written and sealed in the Book of Life.