

Kol Nidre, 5787/2026
Blum Community Hall
Anshe Emet Synagogue
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Would you believe me if I told you that just days before the high holidays, I, your rabbi, was accused, sincerely, of being both a liar and a thief?

“The accuser?” you may be wondering.

It was my dry cleaner - ahem - my former dry cleaner.

Short story long: I dropped off a pair of pants for cleaning earlier this summer. After going 4x over the course of a few weeks and continuously being told they weren't ready, I assumed they were lost, and I grew frustrated. You can imagine my surprise when, after finally handing me my pants on visit #5, they proceeded to ring me up. I asked if there was no customer courtesy for all of the inconvenience? No, they said. That will be \$6.95. I handed over my card and left in a huff.

Days before Rosh Hashanah, my phone rang.

“Hello, this is the dry cleaner, you never paid your \$6.95 balance.”

“Hmm, that's strange, I am sure that I did,” I replied. “But in any event, I went 5 times and it was a very frustrating experience.”

“Oh, I'm so sorry.”

We hang up.

30 minutes later my phone rings again. The voice in my phone screamed at me: “Yes, hello, Benjamin. I spoke to the cashier from that day, and he said you never came 5 times! If you don't have the money then that's your problem, but do not accuse us of losing your clothes. You are a liar and a thief and we're going to tell every cleaner in the area to watch out for you!”

And the line went silent.

I want to tell you now that this is a sermon about anger. And we'll return to my cleaner story a bit later. For now, let's take a deep breath. Remember, I did at least get my pants back.

Why do I want to talk about anger? Because to put it simply, we are angrier now than we used to be, and I want to call it out before it becomes even more entrenched.

Anger, I would argue, is the supervillain of Yom Kippur.

Other holidays have their own big bad wolves:

Passover has Pharaoh.

Chanukah has the Greeks.

Purim has Haman.

Today has its nemesis as well, and its name is the Yetzer Harah. The Yetzer Harah is the impulse towards evil that each of us carries. When we lie, roll our eyes, and gossip; when we neglect to call our family and friends; and when we fail to start the habits of self-care we hoped to, we are acting according to the will of our Yetzer Harah. We are all here today on Yom Kippur because, inevitably, the Yetzer Harah has distracted, tricked, or overpowered us this past year.

But today, we fight back. According to the Talmud, on Yom Kippur alone, [the evil inclination] loses its power over us.

The 2nd century sage Ben Zoma, in Pirkei Avot, understands that the Yetzer Harah is not merely about acting in wicked ways, but specifically about succumbing to the seductive pull of anger. “Eizehu Gibor - Who is mighty?” he asks. “The one who conquers their Yetzer harah, their [evil] inclination.” But listen to his prooftext from the Book of Proverbs: “The one who is slow to anger is better than even the mighty.”

True strength, says Ben Zoma, is in self-control.

The calm matador always prevails over the raging bull. On Yom Kippur, we all enter the ring.

And while all the other Jewish holiday antagonists are external, Yom Kippur’s supervillain lurks inside. Rabbi Abraham Twerski calls it: “The enemy within.” These other holidays tell the story of: “They tried to kill us, we won, let’s eat.” And I think Yom Kippur is actually doing the exact same thing. Our Yetzer Harah is just as cruel as Pharaoh, just as conniving as Haman, just as mighty as the Greeks. Throughout Yom Kippur, we launch a spiritual campaign against it, and prove, please God, that we can conquer it. We summon the faith of Moses, the courage of Esther, and the passion of

the Maccabees, as we face *our* formidable foe just as they faced theirs. And then yes, finally, we will eat.

Our tradition insists that there is a spiritual and ethical imperative to challenge our angry impulses, but the battle has grown fiercer in recent years, as everyday fury has grown more pervasive and persistent.

Here are just a few stats and stories to paint the picture that we already know, because we live it every day:

According to AAA, road rage is up, with a staggering 96% of drivers admitting to engaging in aggressive driving behaviors last year. In the last 10 years, honking out of anger rose 47%.

And recent years have even introduced the concept of “air rage” into our vernacular, which is when disgruntled airplane passengers display unruly behavior on flights. And for good measure, even “cruise rage” is part of our parlance - which shows that a cloud of anger constantly hovers around us, whether on land, air, or sea.

The Oxford University Press’ word of the year for 2025 was “rage bait,” which they defined as “Online content deliberately designed to elicit anger or outrage...typically posted in order to increase traffic or engagement.” I’m sad to say that we are all little fishies who can’t help but swim to the bait and get hooked. The algorithm feeds on our fury.

And of course, this toxic environment created by algorithmic social media has only exasperated our political order that is essentially fueled by anger.

Steve Jarding, a Democratic campaign guru who teaches at Harvard’s Kennedy School, puts it bluntly: “The essence of campaigns today is anger and fear. That’s how you win.”

Remember when Michelle Obama tried the “When they go low, we go high” thing a few years back? A couple of years later came the rebuttal from fellow Democrat Eric Holder: “When they go low, we kick ’em!”

Being angry and baiting others into anger are now bipartisan realities. It is a sad and juvenile race to the bottom.

Rambam, Maimonides, our great Medieval teacher, offered a program on cultivating proper virtues or what we today would call emotional intelligence.

He argued that all proper character traits are the actualization of a Golden Mean, a Shvil Hazahav, a moderate middle path between two extremes. For example, true happiness sits between hedonistic enjoyment and ascetic withdrawal. And courage is the happy place between paralyzing fear and bloated overconfidence. And so on with all other traits and feelings. If only we could find the moderate middle path, we would all live healthy, fulfilling lives.

However, there are two exceptions to his schema. Two character traits that he saw as so destructive that he didn't think they could even be pursued in moderation.

One was pride, and the other was anger.

Like a dangerous drug that hooks you and spins you out of control, Rambam saw anger as so vicious, so uncontrollable, so destructive, that he deemed it irredeemable.

As Mark Twain would later put it: "Anger is an acid that can do more harm to the vessel in which it is stored than to anything on which it is poured." It is corrosive, toxic, and to be avoided at all costs.

While I can appreciate the warning, I can't say I fully agree with the conclusion that anger is necessarily so noxious. I actually believe that anger has its place in our lives and in our world. And in truth, I don't think it is realistic or even healthy to counsel against feeling and expressing our anger.

Anger bottled up leads to resentment, stress, and irritability. Many of us can relate to the experience of feeling like a balloon that fills and fills with hot air until it finally goes pop. It is not a great version of ourselves.

And anger is one of the 5 stages of grief, which is to say that when we are ready to confront the reality of a loss, we do not typically do so with a hug or a handshake, but more likely with a shout and a shove.

As any clinician would tell you, anger is a perfectly normal and often necessary step towards healing. Anger can be a means to an end, a tollbooth we must pass through in order to make it out of the gridlock of grief and back onto the open roads.

And in Judaism, anger animated the mission of our great prophets, who stood up against evil and its twin sibling, indifference.

Prophets like Elijah, Micah, Amos, and Jeremiah rebuked and reprimanded the Israelites until they were hoarse in the throat and red in the face. As Heschel put it, “The prophet’s words are outbursts of violent emotions.”

The prophets saw the world aflame and could not stand idly by, so they shouted right and left hoping someone would hear them and heed their words. Without tapping into their anger, they probably would have slumped back into the business-as-usual patterns of complacency and indifference, and unjust forces would have endured unabated. Without prophets, there is no progress. And without anger, there are no prophets.

This prophetic imperative based in righteous fury has inspired activists and catalyzed social movements throughout history. And in our broken world, their model continues to resonate today.

And so, we get angry. We shout at our TV. We post and argue in the comments sections. We raise our voices at the Shabbas dinner table.

And yet, our world is still broken. So we have to pause and wonder how much productive work our anger is doing for ourselves and our world.

Trust me, I know, there is truly so much to be angry about. The rallying cry of, “If you aren’t outraged, you aren’t paying attention” has echoed for years, and it is well-placed. It is. We don’t want to sleepwalk into a world in which our worst fears are realized: the normalization of antisemitism, the erosion of democracy, the destruction of our planet through natural disaster or AI apocalypse.

And yet.

Anger is burning us out. It is dividing us further. And its desired outcomes of justice and reconciliation don’t feel closer now than they did 5, 10, 15 years ago.

Anger may be justified, but we can’t trick ourselves into thinking that it is good for ourselves or for the world to constantly be so activated.

And we must remember, that while anger animated our prophets, it also led Cain to kill Abel, Joseph’s brothers to sell him into slavery, and Moses to hit a rock, which resulted in his inability to join his flock of Israelites as they arrived at the Promised Land. Anger wedged brothers apart, and caused the mightiest man to fall.

And if their stories weren't cautionary enough, anger nearly led God Godself to destroy the entire Jewish People after the sin of the golden calf.

A heartbeat after standing in awe at the Revelation of Sinai, the Israelites immediately break the first two commandments: "I am the Lord your God." And, "You shall have no other Gods besides me." The sages likened it to having an affair on your wedding night. So was God angry? You betcha. God was *justifiably* furious. God was ready to end the Torah right there and start again from scratch.

But Moses did something incredible, audacious, and entirely chutzpadik. Moses said to God:

לָמָּה ה' יִחַרְרָ אַפֶּיךָ בְּעַמֶּיךָ - Why should You be so angry?

שׁוּבוּ מִחֲרוֹן אַפֶּיךָ - Turn away from Your anger.

Moses, a mere mortal, steps in as crisis manager, therapist, and coach to the Divine. Rabbi Abbahu in the Talmud is so struck by the image, he says אֵל מְלֵא מִקְרָא כְּתוּב, אי אָפְשָׁר לְאומְרוֹ - were it not written there in the Torah, it would have been impossible, even heretical to describe such a scene.

But that is what happened. Moses intervenes, and God calms down and ultimately forgives. The covenantal story between God and Israel continues.

And the very day that God overcame God's rage and forgave the Israelites was, in fact, today: on Yom Kippur. That was the first Yom Kippur in history. Today could have been our communal yahrzeit thanks to a fit of Divine anger, but instead, it is a day marked by renewal and repair. Yom Kippur, then and now, acknowledges the reality of anger but also the possibility of conquering the Yetzer Hara, that enemy within, and seeing calm heads prevail.

Year after, we act like Moses, summoning the audacity to stand before God in hopes of moving God back to that tender place of mercy and forgiveness.

This afternoon we will read the book of Jonah, commonly referred to as the angry prophet, because he didn't understand why mercy should prevail when people act wickedly. He wished all of Nineveh would just be destroyed. Every year on Yom Kippur, we watch as he relearns the core lesson of Yom Kippur: anger and destruction are not the way; forgiveness and healing are.

God can let go of anger and find a place of mercy and forgiveness. Jonah is challenged to do the same. And so are we. Yom Kippur demands that we learn from God's

example, softening the anger and vindictiveness that we feel, and finding the strength to forgive each other and ourselves.

While anger has its place, healing and growth rely on our ability to see it, to name it, and to move through it and beyond it.

After all: Eizehu Gibor? Who is strong? The one who overcomes their anger. Or put differently: When they go low, we go holy.

So what happened after my dry cleaner threatened to blacklist me to the Lakeview East dry cleaning community?

Well, I'll be honest, I shot off a befuddled and aggravated text to my wife. In other words, I vented. And I considered marching over to ask them to call me a liar and a thief to my face.

But I took a deep breath. I walked over to the cleaners. I said, "Hi, you called earlier about an unpaid balance?" "\$6.95!!" she said with wide eyes, making me feel like I was Larry David in an episode of Curb Your Enthusiasm.

"Yes, it seems like my card didn't go through. I want to make sure to pay the balance."

She rang me up. I paid. I went home. I am going to find a new dry cleaner. But I didn't lose my pants, and I also didn't lose my principles.

Eizohu Gibor? Who is mighty? The one who takes a breath, pays his bill, and goes home to enjoy the rest of the evening with his family.

Even this small example wasn't easy, and I know that we all face much higher stakes situations. We need to continue to channel our anger in righteous and generative ways, but we also need to take care of ourselves and not allow anger to overwhelm and overpower us. We need to do an anger self-assessment and ask: Is my anger justified? Is my anger actually able to be helpful? And at the end of it, am I ok? We need to find the Shvil Hazahav, the golden mean, that allows us to use our voices without also losing our minds.

I want to wish us all a G'mar Chatimah Tovah, may God's anger and our own make way for a healthier path forward. May we all be sealed in the book of a calm, patient, and peaceful life.

Amen.