

Dear Chavraya,

Gathered around the Kiddush table following the service last Shabbos, an important time for sharing words of Torah and life with each other, one of our number asked my thoughts on anger in relation to the narrative of Yosef and his brothers. Is anger justified, what about righteous indignation? There seemed to be a wrestling with Yosef's remarkably forgiving attitude to his brothers, apparently harboring no anger at all in regard to their former cruelty toward him, now the viceroy of Egypt, then a vulnerable youth cast into a pit and left for dead, drawn out and sold into slavery. Rather than take the revenge that was in his power to exact, Yosef sought to determine if the brothers had changed, orchestrating a situation that approximated that of so long ago. As Yehudah rose on behalf of the brothers to plead for Binyamin, now the youngest and most vulnerable, Yosef knew they had changed. Revealing himself as the brother they had left for dead, he reassures them that although they meant him harm, God had turned their evil deeds to good. Offering further reassurance, in this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayechi*, the Torah describes Yosef's reaching out to his brothers in exquisitely beautiful words, *he comforted them and spoke to their hearts/va'y'nachem otam va'y'daber al libam*.

In the manner of the Torah's teaching, we are challenged by Yosef's way of response to his brothers. How would we respond? How do we respond to hurts of far lesser extent done to us? Would at least some degree of "righteous indignation" not have been reasonable, even called for? The danger in such response is that righteous indignation, suggesting the moral rightness of one's cause and claim, too often becomes self-righteous indignation and prevents us from hearing the other, precluding the possibility of engagement for the sake of repair.

As a feeling, anger will arise as a natural response to the experience of hurt and affront, whether to ourselves or to others. The challenge is in what we do with anger. As a child in summer camp, I was fascinated by a banner that hung in the dining hall, "Don't turn off anger; channel it." Yosef had reached such a high level of awareness that he seamlessly channeled anger into what needed to be done to overcome it and facilitate change, hardly lingering on the anger itself. It is an essential dynamic and goal of nonviolence as a way of life and change, to engage anger and hurt in the way of transformation, not to destroy, but to bring the other along with us to a place of greater wholeness. Unless we arrive there together, there is no wholeness. That there is a common root in Hebrew for wholeness and peace is instructive, only when there is *sh'laymut* shall there be *shalom*. The goal is not to ignore anger, but to acknowledge it, seeking to understand its cause, then to direct its energy toward its own transcendence. The challenge is to train our selves to pause in the moment of experiencing anger in order not to react destructively, but in that very moment to begin the process of redirection.

As the Book of B'reishit draws to a close with *Parashat Vayechi*, we are reminded of a shameful instance of explosive anger, the slaughter of the Sh'chemites by Shimon and Levi for the rape of their sister Dina, after lulling the Sh'chemites into a false sense of friendship. It is one of the most distressing moments to

wrestle with in Torah. Reflecting life in all of its raw and seamy reality, it is again the Torah's way of teaching to challenge us to engage with painfully real lessons about ourselves, and our own capacity for violence. We engage the painful challenges, in Torah as in life, for the sake of finding the path to transcendence. As Ya'akov blesses his sons from his deathbed, he describes Shimon and Levi as *brothers for whom instruments of violence are their means of acquisition.... My will must not enter into their council, my glory must not join in their assembly, for in their anger they murdered men...; a curse, therefore, upon their anger, for it is too fierce, and their outrage because it was too cruel. I will divide them in Ya'akov and scatter them in Israel* (Gen. 49:5-7).

Toward redirecting anger, that of Shimon and Levi and our own, the thirteenth century commentator known as Chizkuni, redirects Ya'akov's curse. Perhaps noticing that it is not anger itself that Ya'akov curses, but the way of its expression and extent, Chizkuni startles at first, as indeed the redirection of anger is meant to do, saying, *this is not a curse, but rather a blessing/eyn zeh k'lala, eleh b'racha*. As though speaking for Ya'akov, he then offers words of blessing for Shimon and Levi, though they are really meant for each of us, *May it be that they not succeed through their anger/y'hi ratzon shelo yatzlichu b'apam/that they not habituate themselves to be bad-tempered people*. In the same way, a Musar, or Jewish ethical teacher, suggests the need for a path of repair by which to redirect our selves from anger's dangerous ways of expression (Sefer Chochmat Ha'matzpun). The way of repair for Shimon is to become a teacher of young children, *so he shall teach himself to be moderate in his words and in his deeds/yitlamed l'hiyot matun bidvarav u'v'ma'asav/and in this way his anger shall be repaired*. In this, the Musar teacher says, *is a strategy for the repair of his deficiency/tachbulah l'tikun chesrono*. Of Levi's path to repair, it is to engage in spiritual matters, to serve in God's sanctuary, to immerse in the study of Torah. To be servants of God becomes the calling of the tribe of Levi, *in this way, their anger and wrath shall be repaired/she'al y'dei zeh y'tukan ka'aso v'evrato*.

So we are challenged to train ourselves in the way of moderation and patience, to be teachers of children and servants of God in the sanctuary that is the world. Each time we meet the challenge to recognize and redirect anger there comes a sense of personal triumph, impetus and inspiration to keep trying. As though to remind us that the transcendence and transformation of anger is possible, that it only involves a subtle shift, the crossing of a narrow line, the word for anger and for patience in Hebrew is of the same root, virtually the same word. *Af*, literally meaning *nose* or *face*, is the word for anger. As though drawing out anger until it diffuses, the word for patience, using a plural form, is *erech apayim/long suffering, patient*, literally "a long face." It is a face pained by anger and short temper shown to others, the face of one who is hurt to the quick, saddened to the point of a "long face," by seeing, let alone causing, shamed redness in the face of another.

The anger that Ya'akov curses in dividing and scattering Shimon and Levi is scattered among us. Its residue remains for all of us to confront and struggle with, waiting to become a blessing through our own work of transformation. Acknowledging the anger within and among us is the first step in turning the

curse into a blessing. Of two names for the same person, the name Ya'akov represents the individual and the name Yisra'el the nation. The challenge for both is to learn ways of response to hurt and slight that allows us to transcend anger and the misdirection of its energy through violence. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch describes Ya'akov's words to Shimon and Levi as a "curse upon all acts of cunning and violence...", and it sets down for all time the doctrine that even in public life and in the promotion of the common good not only the ends but also the means used to attain these ends must be clean." It is the way that anger has been expressed that Ya'akov curses. In the channeling of anger toward the possibility of wholeness, Yosef offers a model. To the degree that we strive to transcend anger in the way of Yosef, we shall turn anger's curse into a blessing, its fiery heat to light and warmth, channeling its destructive energy into a force for good.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor