

Dear Chavraya,

As a child attending summer camp, a large sign on the wall of the dining room continually drew my attention. I was fascinated by this sign and found myself trying to understand it through the time I was in camp and well beyond, continuing to think about it even until today. In large letters, the words on the sign recognized the inevitability of anger, but offered a way of response from within, "Don't Turn Off Anger, Channel It." Somehow reassured that it was okay to feel anger, I was not sure what it meant to channel it. Years later, Mister Rogers offered some clarity in the way of practical advice in the moment of anger, sing a song, bang the piano keys, all about finding ways to redirect the powerful emotions seeking resolution. Over time, I came to realize how important it is to talk about anger, not to pretend it isn't there, to find ways beyond the heat of the moment to talk with the person or people who triggered my own angry feelings.

I thought about that summer camp sign this morning, smiling at the realization of how it had stayed with me through all the years. As I was learning *Daf Yomi*, the daily page of Talmud whose new cycle began this week, I entered a conversation with the rabbis about anger. Having already ascertained that God prays, they ask, *mai m'tzalei/what does God pray?* Perhaps they too had been to my old camp and had seen the sign on the dining room wall and wondered about what it means to channel anger. As much about us as about God, as much about our responses to people as about God's, so they imagined God's prayer: *May it be My will that My compassion conquer My anger, and that My compassion overcome My strict attributes, and that I respond to My children with the attribute of compassion, and that for their sake I go beyond the strict letter of the law/lifnim m'shurat ha'din* (B'rachot 7a).

In this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayechi* (Gen. 47:28-50:26), there is a painful reminder of a terrible and terrifying moment of anger, its instance as one of Torah's harsh passages, one, as all of them are, that is hard to make our way through. On his deathbed, Ya'akov Avinu, Jacob our father, blesses each of the progenitors of the tribes. We realize quickly that his words are not so much blessings, as they are reflections on the nature and needs of each of his sons. When he speaks to Shimon and Levi together, he harkens back to the horrifying moment (Gen. 34) when they took their swords and slaughtered Sh'chem and Chamor and all of their people; Sh'chem who had raped their sister, Dinah, who it seemed then loved her and sought to marry her; Sh'chem who had agreed to be circumcised, and so convinced all of the other men of his people in facilitating the marriage. We don't know of Dinah's own agency, not a word of her insight or desire, only the violent response of her brothers, not clear whether concerned at all for her or only for their own honor. Weak from the circumcision, they were all slaughtered; their city plundered and destroyed, their women and children taken. Certainly unable to channel it, we are told that the events caused Shimon and Levi *to burn fiercely with anger / va'yi'char lahem m'od* (Gen. 34:7).

At the time of that explosion of anger, Ya'akov was concerned primarily for the wellbeing of his family, worried only that the deeds of these two sons would put the rest of the family in danger as others sought revenge. Now on his deathbed,

he is more reflective, more able to see the moral enormity of what Shimon and Levi had done. Speaking to these two, he says: *Shimon and Levi are brothers, instruments of violence are their means of acquiring gain..., 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. 59:5-7).

Notably, it is the anger of Shimon and Levi that their father curses, not them. Hope for change is offered, that they might yet learn to channel their anger, to direct their passion and outrage in a more positive way, too fierce, too cruel in the way of slaughter and destruction. That they are scattered in Israel means that they are among us, that they are part of us, of each one and of all of us as a people. It becomes for all of us to consider the way of redirecting their anger and finding other instruments and ways than those of violence for expressing anger and resolving conflict. Scattered among us, perhaps in small doses their anger can become an antidote to our own misdirection of anger and its violent expression.

In a powerfully moving teaching, we learn how the rabbis saw the possibility of channeling such fierce anger, thereby offering a way for all of us to find ways of repair and redirection. They are each given a path of *tikun/repair*, Shimon to become a teacher of children, and Levi to serve in the Holy Temple and minister to the needs of the spirit, that holy work on behalf of others may awaken a gentler side within themselves. Of Shimon we are told that *it was set for him that he shall be a teacher of little children/m'lamed tinokot, and in such a setting he shall teach himself to be moderate in his words and in his deeds, and so shall his anger be repaired/y'tukan al y'dei zeh kaso*. Of Levi, we are told that he too shall be given a path to repair, *that his service shall only be in the realm of the spiritual/rak ruchani'ut lavad..., and that with God as his portion he shall dwell in houses of study where they engage with Torah, and so shall his anger and wrath find repair/al y'dei zeh y'tukan kaso v'evrato...* (Sefer Chochmat Ha'matz'pun).

In their teaching that God prays to overcome anger and give precedence to compassion, and in the way of Shimon and Levi's repair of anger through service to others, we learn ways to redirect our own anger and channel it to good. Whether or not the rabbis saw the sign that so fascinated me in my old camp dining hall, they too are seeking to answer the question that still comes to me all these years later, rather than turn off anger, how shall we channel it? As the rabbis long ago offered prayer and service as a path to repair, may we seek our own ways of channeling the anger that is ours to redirect. With all the energy of so much anger channeled to good, paths of repair shall open in the world and be the answer to a child's wondering upon a sign: "Don't Turn Off Anger, Channel It."

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor