

Chukat: Why We Get Angry

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Many are familiar with the "golden mean" or the middle path of the Rambam. Regrettably, some misunderstand this as a prescription for religious mediocrity. Under no conditions did the Rambam endorse lukewarm religious adherence or "middle of the road" religious passion. Lethargic or middling religious experience is anathema to the Rambam. What the Rambam does advocate is balanced and well-adjusted character development. As we sculpt our *personalities*, there is a tendency to develop our traits in "extreme" degrees; the easiest way to build a quality is to radicalize it. Opposed to radical or extreme character traits, the Rambam encouraged a more temperate calibration: no trait should be developed to its extreme but, instead, should be moderated or adjusted to the middle "mean". For example, a person should not act too solemnly, but also, should not behave too exuberantly. Instead, they should strike a healthy balance between jubilation and seriousness. Likewise, a person shouldn't be too frugal but, just the same, shouldn't recklessly squander funds. A third example pertains to our interface with our physical world. Too much indulgence can lead to hedonism or decadence and too little can invite ascetism or extreme self-deprivation. While religious passion and experience must be extreme and intense, personality traits should be balanced.

Having proposed the middle road and having warned against radical character traits, the Rambam does support radicalization in two areas of human character. A person should labor toward extreme humility, eliminating even traces of arrogance and haughtiness. Humility is a gateway to integrity, honesty and selflessness and healthy relationships. Secondly, the Rambam cautions against any trace of anger or temper. Anger is a temporary insanity which overwhelms our reason and clouds our moral conscience. It is, literally, a foreign force which invades our reason and even manifests in physical changes: our palms begin to sweat, our heads become dizzy, and we feel overheated. Mishlei (14;29) portrays the emotion of anger with the term *kozer ruach*, or shortened breath. Amidst anger-induced hysteria, all moral restraints vanish, and we become capable of unthinkable crimes. Realizing the unrestrained danger of anger, the Rambam urged "elimination" not moderation.

Anger is so menacing precisely because it threatens everyman. It also afflicted the greatest moral human being to ever walk our planet- Moshe Rabeinu. He had waited forty years, watching as the older rebellious generation faded into history. A new generation ascended, arousing great expectations for more faith and less confrontation. When those expectations were dashed at the “rock”, Moshe’s anger flashed. It certainly wasn’t the type of rage or fury we are familiar with. Judging Moshe by our own conventional standards is both morally inappropriate and intellectually dishonest. The anger Moshe expressed would be common for most people, however, for a person of Moshe’s stature it was unacceptable. Aside for the anger itself, Moshe’s tone at the rock set a poor example for this younger generation who looked to him for guidance and for moral example. Unable to fully repress his anger – even for a passing moment- Moshe was replaced with a new leader.

In general, we experience two very different types of anger. Typically, our anger is felt toward our adversaries, rivals, or just strangers who happen to inconvenience us or harm us. We become angry at the situation, or we express our anger toward people we believe have slighted us or compromised our interests. Road rage is an example of this type of anger: one motorist has little or no relationship with another motorist. Feeling victimized by aggressive or inconsiderate driving, can bring a person to verbal or even physical violence. In this instance anger is directed at a “stranger”.

The second type of anger is directed to people we are close with or share a relationship with. We care about the people we are close with, and that care and concern often generates expectations. When these expectations aren’t met, we are addended, frustrated, or both, precisely because we care so deeply. Sadly, our frustration sometimes bleeds into anger.

Obviously, Moshe, the consummate leader, cares deeply about the people who he constantly defends. When the nation fails to live up to his expectations, he is understandably frustrated, and, ultimately, allows his frustration to vent as anger. This occurs most blatantly at the “rock”, but his irritation was discernable during two episodes before this incident and during one episode afterwards. Forty years before the rock incident, Moshe had descended Sinai, bracing the luchot in his arms,

only to witness the religious depravity of the golden calf. Angrily, he shattered the luchot. A few months later, during the inaugural celebration of the mishkan, tragedy struck, as the two sons of Aharon were incinerated by a Heavenly fire. Presuming that various sacrifices were improperly suspended, Moshe angrily expressed his disagreement. Finally, after a crucial war with Midyan, Moshe greeted the victorious soldiers returning from battle, but notices that his specific instructions were ignored. Facing these careless soldiers, Moshe is angered.

In each of these instances Moshe's anger was a product of his deep concern for his people and the heavy consequences of their flawed behavior. Additionally, in each instance, Moshe faced a fragile situation or an emergency. He confronted the egel rebellion, the tragedy of death on a celebratory day of inauguration and a critical war with a sworn enemy. It is one thing to remain composed when we are otherwise in a state of clam. Under normal circumstances we possess enough inner tranquility to bear our anger and bear our frustration. Living through a crisis, it becomes more difficult to maintain our calm. Sadly, Moshe was unable to completely transcend these moments, and his relationship with the Jewish people was damaged.

The midrash narrates a scene toward the end of Moshe's life. He apologizes to the nation for the pain he has caused them while trying to prod them toward greater religious experience. They forgive him and beg Moshe to forgive their own truculence. Moshe grants them forgiveness and all the anger subsides. It is a sad and poignant scene to cap Moshe's career of extraordinary dedication, care and emotional investment.

Afterword

My Rebbe, Harav Aharon Lichtenstein, urged us to navigate moral challenges by considering how our "role model" would behave in a similar situation. Abstract distinctions between "right" and "wrong" is less helpful in the heat of a moral struggle. Though we often can identify proper behavior, frequently, our conviction fails in the heat-of-the-moment. Imaging the behavior of our role models produces more compelling moral guidance. Personally, I have found this strategy very

helpful in many areas of self- improvement. Particularly in battling anger, this approach has proven extremely effective. We are all familiar with people who manage anger skillfully. Thinking about their response may help us steady or own behavior.