

## Dealing with Painful Emotions & Anger at G-d – Part 1 – JewishClarity.com

What is the **Torah view of anger**? Although the Rambam (*Hilchot Deyot* 1:4-7) wrote famously about the “golden mean” — that we should always strive for the midpoint with our character traits, avoiding the extremes at both ends — two traits are exceptions to this rule — anger and arrogance. With both anger and arrogance, the Rambam says that it is actually wrong for us to take the middle road. And after spelling out just how terrible anger is, he concludes (*Hilchot Deyot* 2:3), possibly based on the *Zohar* (*Beresheet* 2:16) — “*Kol hako'eis k'ilu oveid avodah zara* — One who gets angry...it is as if he worships idols!”

Our text of the *Gemara* (*Shabbat* 105b) seems to be quite different — “One who tears his garment, breaks his vessels, or scatters his money from anger — should be viewed **as if** he worships idols. This is the method of the *Yetzer Hara*: Today he tells you — “Do this”, and tomorrow he says — “Do that,” until he finally demands — “Worship idols,” and you will [**then**] go and worship.”

While, according to the **Rambam**, even anger that is not expressed in action is viewed as idolatry, the *gemara* qualifies this in three different ways:

- a. Only anger expressed in **action**.
- b. Only action which is **destructive**.
- c. The anger itself isn't viewed as idolatry, but rather anger will likely **lead one** to idolatry

**Pirke Avot** (5:14) lists four different types of temperament:

- a. Easily angered and easily pacified — his gain is offset by his loss.
- b. Hard to anger and hard to pacify — his loss is offset by his gain.
- c. Hard to anger and easy to pacify — a *chasid* (pious person).
- d. Easy to anger and hard to pacify — a *rasha* (evil person).

Based on this *mishnah*, the **Medrash Shmuel** points out that **everyone is subject to anger**. Even Moshe, our greatest teacher and leader, got angry. The issue, therefore, seems to be, not whether one will ever become angry, but rather how easily or often it will occur, and how one will then deal with it.

In terms of anger directed at G-d, there are different perspectives:

- a. Rebbitzin Feigi Twersky pointed out that even anger is an indication of a **relationship**.
- b. In a similar vein, Rabbi Zelig Pliskin said that anger towards Hashem is possible only for one with a **deep emunah** (awareness of G-d). **However**,
- c. Rabbi Shalom Carmy, a Rabbi at Yeshiva University, emphasized that there is always an intrinsic problem with anger. He quoted Aristotle who said that every case of anger involved a **moral** judgment — i.e., to be angry at X, I must believe that I was **unjustly** harmed by X.
- d. Rav Yisroel Reisman, a prominent *Rav* in Brooklyn, expressed a similar point — Rather than labeling anger at G-d as “bad,” he characterized it as **incorrect**, since it is some degree of rejection of *hashgacha pratit* — personal Divine supervision.

### Anger vs. Pain

There is a fundamental distinction between anger and pain. It is important not to confuse our pain with the thought that we have a legitimate complaint against G-d. Our numerous expectations in life often cause us to devalue the blessings that we have, as well as to complain when our expectations are not met.

In fact, two of the classical codifiers of the *mitzvot* (the *Smag* #17 and the *Smak* #5) count a requirement to look for the righteousness in all of G-d's actions as one of the 613 *mitzvot*. This is based on the verse (*Devarim* 8:5) — “V'yadatah im l'vavecha ki ka'asher y'yaseir ish et b'no, Hashem Elokecha m' yasreka” — “And you should know with your heart, that just like a man chastises (gives *yissurim* to) his child, G-d your L-rd chastises you (gives you *yissurim*).” By comparing *Hashem* to a parent, this verse is clearly telling us that although *yissurim* are painful and difficult, they are given to us by G-d out of love and for our benefit.

When speaking about anger at G-d, therefore, the issue is how we should deal with pain in our relationship with G-d, and how the Torah views our efforts to deal with this pain.

## Thought Evokes Emotion

The *Piaseczner Rebbe* and author of the *Aish Kodesh* (*Hashem yikom damo* — *Hashem* should avenge his blood), discussed the strong relationship between thoughts and emotions. How one **views** something will directly determine how one **feels** about it. This awareness is important in dealing with the various challenges of life.

“Everyone knows very well that if someone hurts him in any area of his life, but he immediately immerses himself in something else, with no chance to think about the harm that this person did to him, then he will feel no anger, and strong feelings [of revenge] won't express themselves inside of him. If, however, he gives these feelings some space, and thinks about this person and the harm that he did to him, and [allows] these thoughts to express themselves, then he will not only feel anger, but it will burn within him very intensely. This feeling of anger will [ultimately] overpower him until he will no longer be able to control it.”

“Our emotions are expressed only when we allow ourselves the space to think about them. Only through continuously thinking about the harm that one's enemy caused him, will one's feeling of anger grow and express itself; and if one doesn't think these thoughts, [then] one will not feel this anger. [We are] not [speaking about] thoughts that are weak; they will need to be extremely strong. This all comes to tell us that the expression, strength, and breadth of our feelings are all dependent upon our thoughts.” *Hachsharat Ha'Avreichim* (*Preparation for Yeshiva Students*)

Rav Shapira, the current *Piaseczner Rebbe* and nephew of the author of the *Aish Kodesh*, illustrates this principle with the following example:

Imagine that there is a person who never speaks with me. I may assume that he doesn't like me, and will, therefore, be likely to dislike him as well. I may think that he is angry with me, and this will cause me to be angry with him. The reality, however, may simply be that he is shy or lacking in self-confidence. If I would realize this and understand that he has no negative feelings towards me, then I would probably end up with no bad feelings towards him either. My thoughts about the situation literally **determine** what my feelings about it will be.

[This can also work in the opposite direction, with our emotions impacting how we perceive things. When one is depressed, everything that happens is seen in its worst possible light. But what seems devastating may in fact be a minor inconvenience, or even a tremendous growth opportunity. This is exactly how the Sages explain what happened with the spies in Israel. It was specifically their lack of self-confidence and their desire to find problems with the Land that resulted in their perception that the Land was bad for the Jewish people.]

A powerful example of the impact that our thoughts can have on our feelings is provided by Victor Frankel, a psychiatrist in Vienna before the Holocaust, who later developed a system of psychotherapy based on his experiences in the concentration camps. He explains in his classic work, *Man's Search for Meaning*, that with a strong awareness of meaning in one's life, one will be able to deal with even the most horrific types of challenges. And, at the other end of the

spectrum, one that lacks meaning in his life can be overcome by even the most trivial events. He wrote:

“...any attempt to restore a man's inner strength in the camp had first to succeed in showing him some future goal. Nietzsche's words, “He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how,” could be the guiding motto for all...efforts regarding prisoners. Whenever there was an opportunity for it, one had to give them a **why** — an aim — for their lives, in order to strengthen them to bear the terrible **how** of their existence. Woe to him who saw no more sense in his life, no aim, no purpose, and therefore no point in carrying on. He was soon lost.”

Rabbi Pliskin explains that anger is caused by one's perception that — “This is bad, and I don't like it.” Resentment is simply a lesser form of anger. The cure is, therefore, the different perception of — “*Kol mah d'avid Rachmana, l'tav avid* — All that Hashem does, He does for our benefit.” Rabbi Pliskin also points out that another key to dealing with anger is to internalize the message of the first chapter of *Mesilat Yesharim (Path of the Just)* — all of *Olam Ha'zeh* (this world) is only *nisyonot* (tests and challenges) to prepare us for *Olam Haba* (the world to come).

## Anger at G-d

How does Judaism view a person who rebelled or lashed out against G-d as a result of not being able to withstand intense pain?

Rabbi Moshe Tendler explains that an individual's reaction to extreme pain or anguish cannot be used to evaluate his personality or moral and ethical perfection — extreme pain is an experience that surpasses human endurance. The *Gemara (Ta'anit 18b)* states that “Chananya, Misha'el, and Azariya were all *tzadikim gamurim* (completely righteous)” who had all lived up to their fullest potential. Nevertheless, the *Gemara (Ketubot 33b)* discusses Chananya, Misha'el, and Azariya accepting death rather than bowing down to the idol (the statue of the King) with the following observation — “Had Chananya, Misha'el, and Azariya been tortured, they certainly would have bowed down to the idol.” Severe acute pain can overpower the wills of even the most perfect, righteous men. When an individual is subjected to intense intractable pain, his behavior cannot be viewed as an expression of his personality or ethical nature, rather his experience is superhuman and does not in any way reflect on his personality... This is not the patient talking. Pain has a voice of its own. Sometimes pain is so powerful that it drowns out even the voice of Hashem.

The classical source for this lesson is the story of Iyov (Job), the ultimate example of the *tzadik* that seems to have suffered unjustly. Despite his statements that were clearly **blasphemous**, i.e., denying Divine justice, *techiat hameitim* (revival of the dead), *hashgacha* (Divine Supervision), etc., the *Gemara (Baba Batra 16b)* tells us that Iyov received no punishment for saying these things. Rava, therefore, declares —

“*Mi'kan — she'ein adam nitpas b'sha'at tza'aro*” — “From here we see that one is not held accountable [for harsh words spoken] during the time of his pain.”

Rashi explains that this person is not held accountable for having spoken harshly because he spoke out of *tza'ar* and *yissurim* (pain and difficulties), not from *da'at* (clarity).

The *Gemara (Brachot 31b–32a)* tells us that a number of great individuals spoke quite harshly to Hashem, either out of their personal pain, or for the sake of the Jewish people. It refers to this as — *hitiach devarim klapei ma'alah* — flinging one's sharp words upward towards G-d.

Chana — “You created me to be able to nurse a child; now give me a child to nurse!”  
Eliyahu — “You (Hashem) turned the hearts [of the Jewish people] backwards” — i.e., You allowed them to turn away from You. Even though G-d Himself later agreed with Eliyahu, it was still considered to be *hitiach devarim k'lapei ma'alah*, and improper for him to have expressed this

before G-d as a complaint.

Levi — After he decreed a fast for rain and no rain fell, he then challenged G-d — “*Ribono shel olam* (Master of the Universe), You have gone up on high and are not taking care of Your children!” Because of this disrespect, he later became lame.

Moshe — “*Ribono shel olam*, the gold and silver that You lavished upon Israel caused them to make the Golden Calf.” Here also, G-d Himself later agreed with Moshe that this was a mitigating consideration, although not a total defense, for the Jewish people.

The *Gemara* even teaches that Moshe “seized” *HaKadosh Boruch Hu*, like one who seizes a friend by the garment, and threatened — “I will not release You until You forgive and pardon them!”

While these may not have been actual expressions of **anger** at G-d, they certainly do show that great Jews have sometimes expressed much pain and frustration to G-d.

Perhaps the most well-known source which describes one speaking harshly to G-d is the famous story of Choni HaMa’agel (*Ta’anit* 19a) —

It once happened [during a time of severe drought] that [people] asked Choni HaMa’agel to pray for rain... He prayed but no rain fell. What did he do? He drew a circle, stood within it, and said before G-d — “Master of the Universe, Your children have turned their faces toward me, because I am so close to You. I swear by Your great Name, that I shall not move from here until You have mercy on Your children.” Rain began to trickle. He said, “That is not what I requested, but rain [to fill the] water holes, ditches, and caves.” It began to fall with fury. He said, “That is [also] not what I requested, but rains of good will, blessing, and benevolence. [The rains then] fell normally until the Jews had to leave Jerusalem for the *Har HaBayit* (Temple Mount) because of the rains. The people came and said to him, “Just as you prayed for them to fall, pray that they cease”...

Shimon ben Shatach sent to him “Were you not Choni, I would decree a ban of *nidui* (ostracism) upon you, but what shall I do to you? You misbehave towards the Omnipresent and He fulfills your will, like a son who misbehaves towards his father and his father fulfills his will. Concerning you the verse says — “May your father and mother rejoice, and may she who bore you be glad.”

**The question, therefore, seems to be not whether it is permissible for one to express pain and frustration to G-d, but rather how exactly one should do it.**

**This should be *I'zechut ul'illuy nishmat Ruchama Rivka, a"h, bat Asher Zevulun***