

GOD'S ANGER MANAGEMENT THERAPY.

D'var Torah for Parshat Shlach Lekha 5781

He was furious with them. He was so furious with them that he decided it was time to kill them and start the organization over. Then his henchman came over to calm him down. "Let me at them!" he growled at him, as he sharpened his weapons on his whetstone. "Take it easy," the henchman responded. "Imagine what your competitors would think if you simply rubbed them all out. They would jeer at you, 'Good going, boss-man! You can't even manage your own people.' Just cool it and handle your anger a little more constructively." Magically he was pacified. "OK," he cooed, "I'll leave them alone, but they will never, do you hear me, never get a piece of what I promised. Maybe their kids will, but not them."

Moses never enjoyed having to talk an angry God down off a ledge. He left God, the Boss, with a sense of great relief.

If I hadn't told you in the last line of this dialogue that the speakers were God and Moses, you might easily have mistaken it for a scene from the Sopranos. However much pious reinterpretation we could use to rationalize God's intense fury at the Israelites for their faithlessness during the incident with the spies, about which we read in this morning's Torah portion, Shlach Lekha, this biblical scene paints an unflattering, though somewhat familiar,

picture of the Most Holy One. We encounter the raging God and Moses, God's pacifier, in earlier scenes of Numbers, and still earlier when Moses thwarts God's raging intentions to obliterate the Israelites after the sin of the golden calf. Moses seems to have the magic touch in cooling divine anger, and getting God to take a calmer, more compassionate perspective about the wayward Israelites.

Lest you be scandalized by my unsentimental reading of God's all too human expressions of intense emotion, be aware that our sages were quite intrigued by God's anger, and Moses' ability to tame it. Reflecting upon the human struggle to balance justice and anger on the one hand with compassion and patience on the other, our ancestors saw this balancing act as a reflection of the larger dynamics of God's life and the life of the world. They taught that God built this dynamic balance into the workings of the universe. Like a weary, frustrated parent struggling to determine when to be angry and punish, and when to be patient and grant clemency, God also struggles constantly with these two divine personality characteristics when dealing with us. We humans need help at times when our anger overtakes our compassion, and so does God, as it were. No individual in the history of the Jews has been more capable than Moses at getting God to "calm down."

A somewhat cryptic verse in this morning's Torah portion is a window on this unique relationship between God and Moses, and how our tradition has understood it. Ten of the twelve spies sent by Moses to scout the promised land return with a disheartening report that throws the Israelites into a frenzied attempt to go back to Egypt. God is incensed by their faithless rebelliousness, and God vows to Moses: "I will strike them with pestilence and disown them, and I will make of you a nation far more numerous than they!" Moses then pleads with God to exercise self-restraint: "Therefore, I pray, let my Lord's forbearance be great!" What an amazing statement. The submissive, deferential tone of this request aside, Moses is telling God to "chill out."

The Talmud tells us that, in fact, Moses first made this appeal to God when he went up to Mount Sinai to receive the ten commandments. He said this well before the Israelites angered God with their rebellions, almost as a way of forewarning God that God too needs to follow the commandment of calm self restraint. Later commentators such as Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, assert that this one line warning of Moses was part of a longer blessing that he invoked upon God, the text of which is also found in the Talmud: "May it be Your will, God, that Your compassion overcome your rage, that your mercy influence all of your other characteristics, that You deal with Your

children mercifully, and that you judge them in a flexible, generous manner.” (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Brachot 7a)

These assertions are spiritually creative and refreshing, and radically so! Not only do we need God’s laws and help to allow our mercy to overcome our anger and strictness, but God also needs our help to do just the same. For Jews, there is no such thing as a static, absolutely-self-sufficient God. For all of God’s limitless transcendent power, God needs our help to balance divine justice and mercy as they operate in the universe. Yet, how do we help God to do this? We are not Moses, so we are not able to talk directly to God and to bless Him. However, we are God’s hands, and we therefore have nearly unlimited ability to work on God’s behalf in the small settings of our daily lives. When we wisely use anger and judgment to see justice done, we help God to do so. When we put aside our anger and allow compassionate patience to flow through us in our dealings with others, God, as it were, is doing the same. When we balance these two aspects of our own personalities and emotions, God’s world becomes more balanced. It is easy to despair when we encounter the anger, belligerence, and injustice that exist in human society. It is easy to believe that we have no real power in this regard over our fellow human beings, let alone the Holy One, the complexity of whose cosmic personality is unfathomable. These traditions

about Moses and the anger of God remind us that the greatest, holiest changes in the universe begin right here at home with you and me, the hands of God.

Shabbat shalom