

Two summers ago, I met Ray. He was Vietnam vet who never received proper psychological care after returning home from the war. He was homeless and dying in his early sixties. I also met Miriam that summer. She was 92, and had buried 4 husbands and raised 5 children. She had spent her life taking care of people, and was now dying friendless and loveless in a facility. I was working as a Hospice Chaplain, and my heart was breaking every day at what I witnessed.

Something happened to me internally during that time. I began to feel very angry at God. I've had anger at God before – anger about large scale injustice and poverty in the world – but this time the injustice I saw was deeply personal. It wasn't an anger that made sense to me, because I've never actually believed in a reward and punishment theology, that says good people don't get hurt. My rational views about God – inasmuch as there can be such a thing – allow for the randomness of human life – I thought. It was as if I was discovering that God had failed a deep-seated expectation that I hadn't even been aware I was holding. So I would sit with Ray and with Miriam, hold their hands, hear them repeat the same stories and try to listen with a heart full of compassion, but in my own prayers, at the end of the day, all I could do was explode at God, for allowing so much pain to exist. For creating human life without a “viable exit strategy.”

There is no satisfying way that God *could* have answered my anger. But, strangely, the more anger I felt at God, and the more regularly I expressed that, the more I felt able to face the work, and the more I felt as if I was receiving some sort of strength or blessing from the divine. My expressions of anger were a genuine kind of prayer. I was not apathetic. I was not shutting down. I was turning to God, even through that anger, and receiving strength to do the work.

The nice thing about yelling at God, in my experience, is that God doesn't get defensive. God doesn't yell back. God just keeps listening, God says, "lay it all on me." So in a way, this time in my life when I was yelling at God most often, wound up being the time in my life when I felt most connected to God.

Anger has been a part of our relationship with God since the beginning. And it goes both ways. In this week's Torah portion, Ki Tissa, we see Divine-human anger in reverse. The Israelite people commit a great betrayal committed in this portion, by creating the golden calf. God's first response is to threaten to wipe out the entire Israelite nation.

And Moses, standing on top of Mount Sinai, hearing this threat, plays the heroic role of arguing against God's consuming rage, saying, "You can't act like this! Think of what you promised these people; their ancestors. Think of their reputation!"

After that initial wave of passionate anger, when God instructs Moses to return to the top of Mount Sinai for the inscription of the second set of tablets, to replace the first that Moses smashed in response to the sight of the Golden Calf, a very confusing ritual drama plays out. It says that Moses invokes the Divine name, and then God passes before him and proclaimed, Adonai, Adonai, compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abundant in lovingkindness and truth; extending kindness to the thousandth, forgiving iniquity, transgression and error, and cleansing. This may be more familiar in the Hebrew: Adonai, Adonai, El rachum v'chanun, erech apayim v'rav chesed v'emet, notzeir chesed la'alaphim, nosei avon va'fasha v'chatah v'nakeh.

It may be familiar to you from Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur or the Torah service during any of the other festivals. It is also part of the Torah reading for the fast days on the Jewish calendar, which when you think about it, is really strange.

...Because our liturgy takes it entirely out of context. We always finish with the line ‘v’nakeh”, “and cleansing” – but actually, the sentence continues “lo y’nakeh, pokeid avon avot al banim, al shileishim v’al ribeyim, which could be translated as “But not *always* cleansing; visiting the iniquity of parents on children, on the third and fourth generations.” We remove it from that context to invoke Divine mercy *multiple times a year*.

The thing is, we are supposed to take it out of context. In the Babylonian Talmud, in Masechet Rosh Hashanah, page 17b, Rabbi Yochanan teaches that this is the moment when God taught Moses how to pray, saying, “Whenever Israel sins, let them carry out this service for me” – meaning, let them invoke these words – “and I will forgive them.” If we hold by this narrative, God acknowledges the Divine potential for both mercy and vengeance; but then empowers us to draw out the mercy. We have the power to raise up the attributes of mercy and downplay the vengeance.

According to Rabbi Yochanan’s view, God learns from the initial rage, not only deciding *not* to destroy the people, but recognizing that transgression will inevitably continue, and that God can go either way: merciful or vengeful. And God creates a tool by which the pool can nudge God towards mercy. Somehow, the intense betrayal and the consequent anger evoke in God a desire to have a more effective connection with the people Israel. And God offers this ritual formula as a way to effect that connection.

Something about that rage produced a Divine longing to connect – in God.

The experience that I had during my hospice summer also reflected this. The more I felt rage at God, the more I felt like connection to God was important. My expression of anger didn't make the situation better, or any more fair, but it did help me face the work and be a better chaplain.

Anger is a deeply important part of relationship. The Mishnah in Sanhedrin 3:5 defines a person's enemy as anyone who has refused to speak them for three consecutive days, out of loathing. According to this ancient Jewish wisdom, anger is what not causes enmity – refusal to communicate is.

When God gives Moses the recitation of the thirteen attributes, God is saying, "I am angry with you, and I know I will get angry again, and I still want us to be in relationship." I've been wanting to reconnect with that anger lately, given how angry I feel about our political system, about racial injustice. I want to reconnect with my ability to take it out on God.

Can we do that? Can we do this with God, and with each other?

I think that this wisdom is really transferable beyond the relationship between human and divine, to human and human. Healthy relationships are not those in which people always agree and always get along. To be in a healthy relationship means to be angry sometimes. And the test of a healthy relationship is not whether we can avoid ever angering each other – but whether we can talk about it afterwards. Whether we can remember that the point of expressing anger is so that we can do the work we need to do together.

May it be so.