

“ANGER MANAGEMENT”

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5771 – Wednesday, September 8, 2010

Congregation B'nai Jehudah – Overland Park, Kansas

Sermon by Rabbi Arthur P. Nemitoff

I was about seven years old. My friend, Eric, had a false glass eye and – every so often, just to gross us out – he would pop it out and display it in his hand. Along with a couple of other schoolmates, we walked home from school along the same street every single day. One day, Eric suggested we take a different route. I was filled with trepidation. I only knew one way to get home. But I didn't want to go alone. So, I quietly followed Eric and my other friends. Pretty soon, I was in unfamiliar territory. I had no clue where I was. That's when Eric and the others took off, running as fast as they could.

You can guess what had happened. They wanted to play a joke on me. I was lost, alone, and scared. I wandered the strange streets for what seemed like hours...but was really just a few minutes. Eventually, I found my street. When I got home, I went upstairs to my room. Alone, I broke down and cried...out of fear, humiliation, and anger.

The next day at school, during recess, I asked Eric if he could pop out his eye. More than happy to oblige, he held it out in his hand. I grabbed it, and threw it as far as I could into the nearby grass. Eric was stunned. He ran for his eye, picked it up, and got right into my face.

Filled with rage, he yelled, “Why did you do that?”

“I was angry,” I replied. “I was angry that you took me someplace I didn't know and then ran away. I was scared and felt alone.”

“But my eye?”

“Yeah, I know it was wrong. But it got your attention, didn't it?”

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Anger is a feeling we might experience when events in our world are not going according to our plans. Each of us has an inner idea of how things, events and people should be – and when that internal gyroscope is knocked off balance – we get angry. In essence, anger is the feeling we get when we want to control the world about us and we can't.

That seems to be the state of our lives today.

Many are angry over the economic malaise confronting our country and world. Others are angry with the President for what has or has not been done – to end our recession. Many are angry with Congress for being quagmired in the quicksand of partisan bickering. Democrats, Republicans, Libertarians, Tea Party, commentators on television, radio, the blogosphere, in print...all are angry. We are angry about jobs, about our retirement accounts, about health care, about the oil spill in the Gulf, the list goes on.

Truth be told, if that's all there was to our anger, we could handle it. A few deep breaths, a realization that times change and with them our fortunes, that we hold the power to decide who represents us in government and all we need to do is vote. Besides, some anger is healthy, even obliged. It was the righteous fuel for the civil rights movement in our country, for the end of apartheid in South Africa, for the elevation of women's rights. Anger, when channeled productively, can bring about positive change.

A particularly dangerous anger that boils inside so many today is the Islamophobia, the anti-Islamic rhetoric running rampant throughout America, manifesting itself in salacious claims that President Obama is

Muslim – which he is not – and hate-mongering talk about the proposed Park51, the Islamic Center and Mosque near Ground Zero in New York City.

We, as a Jewish community, are not immune. Each time I read the email that goes around talking about Nobel prizes won by Jews throughout the years, contrasted to those won by Muslims, I am deeply distressed. Not because the statistics are untrue. They are true. But what offends is how that email concludes: It begins: “There are a mere 12 million Jews in the entire world yet they have received 185 Nobel Prizes. The Muslims number 1.4 billion...or 117 times the number of Jews! Based upon this 117:1 Muslim-to-Jewish ratio, one might expect the Muslims to have 24,920 Nobel Laureates. They have nine!” The email concludes, “Unless the Swedes and Norwegians start awarding Nobel Prizes for plane hijackings, pizza shop bombings, civilian bus attacks, jihad suicides/homicides, drive-by shootings, throat-slittings, embassy attacks and other such acts of barbarisms, the embarrassing low level of contribution to the welfare of civilization and mankind by the [Arab] Muslim world will continue.”¹

When we are so angry – feeling unsafe and threatened – we do not listen. We react without thinking. It leads to aggression and acts of violence. Abraham Joshua Heschel once said, “In a controversy, the instant we feel anger, we have already ceased striving for truth and have begun striving for ourselves.” When, as a seven-year-old, I threw Eric’s eye in the grass, I was not seeking truth. It was all about my anger. In such moments, all we want to do is to strike out, hit as hard as we can. But what is the cost?

As Nicholas Kristof wrote, “When we’re scared, we do unconscionable things. It was fear...that led many Americans 150 years ago to persecute Catholics. Similar emotions were behind the killings of Mormons [in the 1880’s] and the internment of Japanese-Americans [during World War II].”² Whether we have been in favor, neutral, or opposed to our country’s “war on terrorism,” some of the costs involved because of our shared anger and fear have included the trampling of individual

civil rights. Consider the bus passenger en route to Chicago, who was put off with his bags in Toledo, Ohio, after he told the driver he was from Iraq. Or the San Francisco Bay Area man, who was barred from a plane for wearing a T-shirt that said, “We will not be silent” in Arabic and English.³

To understand the cost of our anger on a most basic level, we point to an increasingly common phenomenon – road rage. A few years ago, AAA published some sad statistics. In one seven-year period, about 4,400 “road rage” incidents involved the use of a firearm, knife, club, fist, feet or other standard weapon for the attack. Consider the two Massachusetts drivers who antagonized each other for several miles on the interstate. Then, they both pulled over to an access road and got out of their vehicles. At that point, one retrieved a crossbow from his trunk and murdered the other with a razor-sharp 29-inch arrow. Or the Seattle driver who shot and killed a 21-year-old college student, because the student was unable to disarm the loud anti-theft alarm on his jeep.

That is the cost of our anger. As Hal Lewis, president of Spertus College, reminds us, “In the rabbinic calculus, anger is variously linked to arrogance, egomania, and contempt for others. Perhaps most egregious of all...anger is analogized to idolatry because an enraged individual supplants God’s agenda with his or her own.”⁴ Or in Heschel’s words, we end up “striving for ourselves,” as opposed to seeking truth and justice.

Pirkei Avot, Ethics of our Ancestors, offers a seemingly simple antidote. It asks the question: Who is strong? One who can control himself, is slow to anger, and is able to master his spirit.⁵

It is not easy...to pause and ponder, to think before we speak and act, to understand and love instead of giving way to primal desires to anger and rage...either on a personal or communal level. It is hard to listen to the advice of Martin Luther King, Jr., who said: “Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”⁶ Though we have been hurt and harmed, if we can learn to process our anger,

rather than it processing us – if we can be reflective and humble – if we, when finding ourselves filled with anger, can act with the core values our congregation aspires toward – open hearts, kedusha, and derech eretz – with openness, holiness, and common decency – the results may be surprising, even awe-inspiring.

Perhaps one of the finest illustrations of how we might manage our anger happened in 2005, when Israel made the decision to unilaterally pull out of the Gaza Strip. To do so, the government had to relocate thousands of Israeli residents, who were there because the same government – years earlier – urged them to establish new lives in Gaza. Anger and fear were present in full force. However, when the actual disengagement occurred, casualties were avoided and what was anticipated to take weeks or months was accomplished in a matter of days. What was the secret? The army pursued a policy of “nechishut v’regishut,” determination and sensitivity. With steeled will and tenacity, the military...[did] not lessen their resolve even in the face of personal attacks, moral indignation, and charges of Nazism. On the other hand...sympathetic unarmed soldiers allowed angry residents to vent red-hot emotions. Some even paused to pray with residents before completing their mission.”⁷

Nechishut v’regishut...determination and sensitivity. We should not fear standing up for what we believe or withdraw from defending what is most precious. However, it cannot be accomplished successfully with anger and resentment. If we rely on those emotions alone, then – as the Talmud cautions us – we are blind to the presence of God in our lives and others.⁸ As a result, we – hubristically – take upon ourselves the role of God.

The answer is nechishut v’regishut. The nechishut – the determination – is essential. But it must be tempered with regishut, sensitivity.

Many years ago, the Jewish Theological Seminary published an ad in the New York Times as commentary on Israel and her neighbors. Today, it is a much broader

prescription for the anger in our lives. It was called “My Memory Fails Me.” The text reads:

“Things happened.

We both experienced them. You saw them your way - I saw them my way - colored by fear, by pride, by the fact that I am myself and not you.

So our memories of what happened were very different from the start. And then, before we knew it, memories hardened into myths and myths into dogma. Now we find ourselves divided. We stare across the chasm, but we don’t see each other.

I’m tired of being alone on my side of the chasm. I’m using up so much energy fearing and resenting you...What would it be like if we could see each other’s pictures of the history we share? If we could see each other?

What we need here, you and I, is a little humility and a lot of housecleaning.

Humility to say, “Only God sees history whole and knows the whole truth. All I have is my perception. It’s valid, it’s precious, but it’s fragmentary. Maybe I ought to try seeing as God sees, from all the angles.”

Housecleaning: Memory is selective, and I’m carrying around years of slanted, narrow memories. I can’t see past them. It must be the same for you. What we need to do is let some of them go. Trade a few. Listen.

Maybe, if I ask you how things look to you, between us we’ll see something we never saw before...[each other!]”

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Whether our anger is focused on the state of our lives, the safety of Israel, the world’s geopolitical situation, or even the driver we encounter along the road, let us choose this year to embrace nechishut v’regishut...determination and sensitivity. If we do, perhaps we’ll see something we never saw before.

¹ <http://www.masada2000.org/nobel.html>

² Kristof, Nicholas; “Is Islamophobia the New Hysteria?;” <http://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/09/04/is-islamophobia-the-new-hysteria/>

³ “The Cost of Islamophobia,” <http://www.dontfearislam.com/?p=45&language=en>

⁴ Lewis, Hal; From Sanctuary to Boardroom; Rowman & Littlefield; Maryland; 2006; p. 120

⁵ Pirkei Avot 4:1

⁶ King, Jr., Martin Luther; Strength to Love; Fortress Press, Philadelphia; 1963; p. 53

⁷ Lewis, op. cit.; p. 123

⁸ Talmud, Nedarim 22b