

“Everybody Gets Angry”  
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Parashat Chukat 5771

Shabbat Shalom everyone.

Thank you so much for the warm welcome to the Temple Beth El community - all of you have been wonderful, and Ginny, Jude, and I continue to be thrilled to be here and excited about everything. I have faith that our excitement will continue.

We will learn much about each other in the coming weeks and months, and I look forward to many conversations. I have a passion for discussion and learning, and look at all of you as opportunities for great chats soon to be had.

When we grow close to people the benefits of our time together increase, as do our vulnerabilities to each other. Shabbat offers us a time to reflect on how well we do in even the closest of relationships. The people nearest us often get our best and our worst selves, our deepest love, and our hottest anger.

All of us work to leave our difficulties of the week behind us and enter into a Shabbat of wholeness and peace. We may find ourselves reflecting on those moments when we didn't perform at our best. I least like coping with anger, my own and that from my loved ones, and so often it is anger that requires the greatest energy and attention to overcome.

This week we read from *Parashat Chukat*, in Numbers, and return to one of the most famous, angry exchanges in our tradition: Moses' deed that prevents him from entering the Promised Land.

The story starts in a familiar fashion: the Israelites kvetch about not having enough water and wanting to return to Egypt, yet again. This occurs late in the journey, almost through the forty years of wandering and the Israelites still don't seem to trust Moses or God. God instructs Moses to speak to a rock and produce water to quench the thirst of the Israelites - the Torah continues, from Numbers, Chapter 20:

9 So Moses took the staff from before the presence of Adonai, as God had commanded

him.

10 And Moses and Aaron assembled the assembly facing the boulder. He said to them: Now hear, (you) rebels, from this boulder must we bring you out water?

11 And Moses raised his hand and struck the boulder with his staff, twice, so that abundant water came out; and the community and their cattle drank.

12 Now Adonai said to Moses and to Aaron: Because you did not have-trust in me to treat-me-as-holy before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore: you (two) shall not bring this assembly into the land that I am giving them!

Isn't this a little extreme? In one moment Moses violates God's trust so grievously that neither Moses nor Aaron will get to enter the Promised Land?

Jewish scholars throughout history question the reason for this punishment. Most of them rationalize God's actions by coming up with all sorts of reasons to explain God's harsh judgement against Moses and Aaron. A contemporary colleague, Rabbi David Hoffman explained this week that Moses failed as a leader because even after all of these years in the desert he still hadn't trained the Israelites to stop grumbling.

Moses and Aaron form only one part of this drama though - I think we should be questioning God's role too. I recognize questioning God seems risky, although it is a fundamental Jewish prerogative to argue, even with God, and as I mentioned, one of my passions.

God continues to be incredibly grumpy and difficult in this story. This situation seems like "one strike and you're out," and the violators are no regular criminals, these are Aaron and Moses, God's closest confidants who have served as the loyal buffer between an angry Creator of the Universe and a ragtag group of former slaves and their descendants shlepping through the desert. How can we explain God's knee jerk reaction and extreme punishment?

Here, God goes over the edge in a quick flare of anger and then we spend the rest of Jewish history justifying the divine over-reaction.

Many of us, I am sure, encounter anger like this as partners and spouses, parents and children. A small thing, at the wrong time, can set us off. A small thing, that we thought was nothing, can land us in hot water. Profound relationships often lead to serious friction, and such friction can lead us to say things we regret.

On top of that, we can often paint ourselves into a corner with our angry reactions. It seems so easy to imagine ourselves in God's shoes, coming up with the worst possible punishment we can in our momentary fit. Our profound closeness allowing us to stab our loved ones where it hurts most. Striking out at someone with harsh words that become very difficult to go back on.

And since this is God, there's no reversing this punishment without ruining the reputation of the divine, something which God has worried about before. We have an easier time than God does apologizing and coming back from the brink. Yet we must be careful with our loved ones, especially as parents, since our words often have an almost divine-like impact, and pulling them back often proves to be incredibly difficult.

Let's learn from God's negative model this week, and recognize when even God doesn't get it right. Let's admit our anger to ourselves before we act on it, whether we are frustrated with difficult people, like Moses who strikes the rock instead of speaking, or angry at those closest to us, like God, who severely punishes Moses without thought. Let's enter Shabbat with the hope of overcoming our initial angry responses and answering from our better selves.

Shabbat Shalom!