

Sermon on Anger Rabbi David Glanzberg-Krainin

I have a serious subject that I want to speak about to begin the New Year: I want to talk about **anger** and about how much **anger** has been unleashed in this country as a result of our upcoming elections. Knowing that this is a difficult subject, I want to begin with a short joke:

A husband says to his wife: “When I get mad at you, you never fight back. How do you control your anger?” His wife replies: “That’s easy. I clean the toilet bowl.” Her husband looks at her quizzically and asks: “and how does that help with your anger?” And she replies: “I use your toothbrush.”

As we come to this New Year of 5777, I can honestly say that I can never remember living at a time in which **anger** is so rampant. We have witnessed a political season this past year that will be remembered generations from now for the vitriol that has been unleashed. Political rallies have been filled with venom; Talk Show radio; Internet chat rooms; all the forms of media and communication to which we are exposed 24 hours a day, seven days a week provide us with a front row seat to the **rage** that is being unleashed in this country. Today, we are a nation divided. We are red vs. blue; we are the have’s vs. the have-not’s; we are the urban elite vs. the rural working class. Most Americans seem to be furious with some other group of Americans. But it is not simply that we are angry with each other; Americans, and in fact citizens of many Western democracies, are angry at what they believe are the **failing institutions** of democratic society.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has characterized this phenomenon as a **new politics of anger**. Rabbi Sacks argues that there is anger at the spread of unemployment, leaving whole regions and generations bereft of hope. There is anger at the financiers who brought the global economy to the brink of disaster and yet continued to reward themselves as if nothing had happened. There is anger at CEOs using public corporations for private benefit. There is anger that while a few have benefited disproportionately from the global economy, most people have seen their standards of living stay static or decline.

There is anger at the perceived impotence of governments to control the spread of extremism and terror. In the past year, we have witnessed *Jihadi*-inspired mass shootings in San Bernardino and in Orlando. There is anger in the African-American community about the number of young black men who have been shot by police officers. And there is anger from those who believe that police officers are put in untenable situations to control violence even as they put their own lives at risk—day after day—and have been targets themselves in places like Dallas and Baton Rouge.

It is, indeed, a time of great anger in the West. We all understand that when anger is left unchecked it has a corrosive effect on the fabric of society—further weakening **not only** our social institutions, but common decency as well. And this in turn undermines democracy itself. And so as we begin the countdown to November 8 and the elections that will soon be upon us, I think we all understand that the stakes are enormously high.

This morning I would like to offer an explanation for **why** so much anger exists at the contemporary moment. I will be using the thinking of political theorist Jonathan Haidt to help explain why much of the anger that we are witnessing is ultimately an anger that derives from **two conflicting worldviews**. Once we understand those conflicting worldviews, I want to then turn to Jewish tradition and understand how our tradition provides a roadmap for helping us to understand how we might better manage **anger** when we experience it and how we might put our anger to more productive uses.

So let me start with Jonathan Haidt's explanation of the source of the contemporary **anger** that is gripping most of Western society. From Haidt's perspective, citizens in most Western democracies can be divided into two groups: **Globalists and nationalists**. Let's start with those who would likely fit into the category of **globalist**. Haidt use the word **cosmopolitan** to describe the weakening of parochial ties and the openness to multiple worldviews that is often the result of prosperity and safety in democratic countries. The word **cosmopolitan** comes from the Greek word meaning "citizen of the world." According to Haidt: Cosmopolitans

embrace diversity and welcome immigration, often turning those topics into litmus tests for moral respectability. Globalists believe that the world becomes more vibrant and more dynamic when diverse groups of people engage with each other and learn from one another. From the **globalist** perspective, **parochialism** is bad and **universalism** is good. Haidt quotes the late John Lennon as having unintentionally penned the **globalist** national anthem in 1971:

*Imagine there's no countries; it isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for, and no religion too
Imagine all the people living life in peace.
You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one.
I hope some day you'll join us, and the world will be as one.*

In contrast, **nationalists** believe such attitudes are naïve at best, and dangerous at worst. In Haidt's words: "Nationalists see patriotism as a virtue; they think their country and its culture are unique and worth preserving. This is a real moral commitment, not a pose to cover up racist bigotry. Some nationalists do believe that their country is better than all others, and some nationalisms are plainly illiberal and overtly racist. But as many defenders of patriotism have pointed out, you love your spouse because she or he is yours, not because you think your spouse is superior to all others. Nationalists feel a bond with their country, and they believe that this bond imposes moral obligations both ways: Citizens have a duty to love and serve their country, and governments are duty bound to protect their own people. Governments should place their citizens' interests above the interests of people in other countries."

I'm imagining that some of us in this room would situate ourselves firmly in one of these two camps as either a **globalist** or a **nationalist**. At the same time, I imagine that there are some in this room who wonder why it has to be either/or. Can't one be **both** a globalist and a nationalist? I present to you Haidt's analysis **not** to divide the congregation into further sub-groups, but rather to help each of us—no matter where we would locate ourselves on the globalist-nationalist continuum—to understand that you can be a person on one side of the scale or the other who actually has **strong values**

underpinning your point of view. There are **real** reasons why people of good will could identify more readily with one of these two positions. That is why the first step in diffusing anger is the ability to acknowledge that people who do not share our point of view may have something important to say. And as hard as that is to do, it is that leap of empathy that we so desperately need from each other if we are to begin to heal the deep rifts that are developing in this country as a result of all of our anger. And this is why our Jewish tradition places such important safeguards around the expression of anger. Anger may be necessary at times; but anger in high doses has the potential to be enormously destructive.

So what is the danger of anger? The first observation that our Sages made about anger is that **anger tends to be all-consuming**. In fact, the Rabbis of the Talmud identified anger as a form of **idolatry**, which was, for them, the worst sin of all. The all-consuming tendency of anger leads to *the illusion of that clarity...* in which **WE** are the victims, and the **other**—the object of our rage—is fully guilty. When my anger consumes me in this way, almost any action on my part becomes acceptable, because we say to ourselves, **THEY** deserve it.

This explains, for instance, how we can gesture obscenely at a total stranger who cuts us off on the highway. How many of us stop to wonder whether the other driver actually even knows that he or she has just cut in front of us? Perhaps it was just a mistake. And even if someone might have cut us off purposefully, perhaps there was a reason. Perhaps the person driving in the other car was taking someone to the hospital for an emergency. None of this, of course, would mean that we would need to feel good about being cut off. But this is what makes anger so insidious: When I am only able to touch my own anger, the other person's story is irrelevant. Only my pain counts.

And if that's true on the highway, it's also true in our marriages, in our parenting, at our places of work, in almost every facet of our lives. Remember when a lot of our parents told us to count to ten when we got angry? Believe it or not, that strategy was attributed to Thomas Jefferson, who once wrote: "When angry, count to ten before you speak; if very angry, a

hundred.” Of course, along came Mark Twain after that to teach: “When angry, count to four; when very angry, swear.”

Most of us are probably considerably closer to living by Twain’s advice than by Jefferson’s. We count maybe as high as four before we swear – at our spouse for forgetting something we had asked, at our children for being forgetful; at our parents for their predictable patterns; at our co-worker for making a mistake; at the waiter for messing up an order—“Not OK,” we say!, or at our fellow congregant for a perceived slight.

It isn’t that we’re not justified for being upset. It’s just a question of whether our response is truly fair to the person whom we have deemed to slight us – and also whether our anger actually gains us more than it costs us. Aristotle once observed: “Anybody can become angry. That is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, and at the right time – for the right purpose and in the right way – that is not easy.”

The point of these holy days is to give us the courage to see ourselves as we truly are, so that we might take that truly difficult first step toward becoming the people we know we ought to be. Of course, this is true for each of us as individuals. But at this time of enormous unrest and upheaval, it is an extraordinarily important lesson for us to learn both as a Jewish community and as American citizens. So on this start to a New Year, what guidance might Jewish tradition give us in helping to master our **collective** anger, instead of allowing our anger to master us?

For some good advice, we might turn to our *Machzor* and remember the words that we sing in front of the *Aron Kodesh* before we take the Torah out of the Ark. It is at this point in the service that we sing aloud the 13 Attributes of God, the attributes that we should be striving to be emulating in our own lives. *Adonai, Adonai, El rachum v’chanun, erech apayim, v’rav chesed v’emet* – we seek to become more and more as we wish to envision God to be... compassionate, gracious, loving, true... and *erech apayim*, slow to anger.

What's interesting about this phrasing is that it doesn't propose "angerless-ness" as an attribute of God—and by extension, an attribute that we should strive to attain. The Machzor says that we should be "slow to anger." Why? Because we really can't control how frequently we're going to experience things that makes us angry. Sometimes—stuff happens—and we get angry. But **slowing down** when we feel the angry impulse is what prevents us from converting destructive feelings into destructive action. If we're **slow** to anger – if we make the experience of anger a more deliberate, time-consumptive exercise – we'll do less damage to ourselves and to others. We'll have time enough to ask ourselves: What is my anger about here? Have I actually been wronged? Might there be a reasonable explanation for what's happened?

If we give ourselves time to ask and answer these kinds of questions, we'll hesitate before saying the *one thing* we know will blow the situation sky high. We'll re-read that email message one more time before clicking "send." We'll pause before lifting our hand and doing something that we'll forever regret. This is why one of Judaism's greatest medieval sages, Nachmanides, wrote way back in the 13th century: "Distance yourself from anger." He didn't tell us to *suppress* it or *cure* it. Just give yourself some time, some distance.

So how does that work at a time of such anger and polarization in our politics? How does that work in our nation and in our Jewish community—where it is so hard for so many of us to even talk to each other—much less avoid getting furious with one another? It means doing just what Nachmanides tells us: It means not **dismissing** the person whose point of view we do not share. It means counting to ten when we hear a position that is one with which we totally disagree and **asking a question**: "Can you help me to understand your position? You should know that I truly disagree with your position, but I want to understand how you have come to that point of view."

I acknowledge that such a conversation may sound contrived, but there is an essential *religious message* at the heart of our tradition's understanding of the dangers of anger: Anger is

not only a form of idolatry in which all that I can see is the validity of my own position. Anger is also a form of arrogance that makes it impossible to believe that anyone else might have any access to the truth. And the toxicity that such arrogance breeds makes the world an inherently less safe place to live.

My friends, I am afraid that the political discourse of these elections—the amount of anger that is being unleashed—has the potential to tear something deep in the social fabric of this nation. We risk turning against each other and pitting ourselves against one another instead of turning toward each other and realizing that we have so much work that we need to do together.

Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz once wrote, “Long ago, I conquered my anger and placed it in my pocket. When I have need of it, I take it out.” He didn’t **do away** with it. But neither did he allow it to take him apart. Instead, he carried it with him in his pocket. It was his to use. It didn’t use him. He didn’t waste it perpetuating grudges... or refusing to forgive... or controlling the people he loved...or dismissing the ideas of the people with whom he disagreed. He just kept his anger in his pocket. And when he needed it – when it had a purpose to serve – he took it out, and allowed it the possibility of actually doing some good.

Let each one of us as Americans and as Jews remember Rabbi Pinchas’ advice. It is **not** that we should never be angry. But the stakes of letting our anger **dominate** how we live truly threatens our future as Americans—and as Jews. Mastering our anger will not be easy; but nothing truly significant ever is. May our pockets expand in this New Year—and may our anger diminish—so that together, we can get to the real work of solving the complex problems that demand our attention—and that necessitate our good will.

Kein yi’he ratzon

Shana tova tikateivu; May you all be inscribed for blessing in the Book of Life