



Rosh Hashanah 2009

**“DER TSOREN IZ IN HARTSEN A DOREN:
ANGER IS LIKE A THORN IN THE HEART”**

**Reflections
by Ilana Gruebel**

I am mad as hell and I am not going to take it anymore!!

I don't get mad I get even!!

My father's motto was, "It's not what you say it's how you say it."

My mother's response to anger was chase my brother and I around with her one pointer finger out, and the other hand behind her back, seeking to tickle us into submission. When she was really angry she would add in some thespian accent. "If I hated you as much as I loved you. I would kill you." This broke her anger and ours.

But despite all these angry "words" and memories about anger, I must admit I was concerned that there was little to say about the selected topic of anger. But after speaking with my local "summer" family (Paula, Liana and Daniel) while Kyra and Gabe were away, I realized there were mountains to speak about.

What actually is anger?
What makes people angry?
How do people express their anger?
And how do others respond to it?

My "anger antennae" has been on high frequency ever since. Everything around me would lead me to a thought or remark about anger, so much so I would question everyone about the topic repeatedly. It definitely started to anger them to listen about anger incessantly. That's my public apology to my family for their patience and sense of humor for having to listen, talk and analyze anger for the last 7 weeks.

With my radar tuned, I saw that newspaper stories were replete with references to anger by public and not so public people, over public and not so public issues. Here are just a few:

A case of road rage that left 5 dead.

The incident when Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates got angered by what he believed was a racial slight by the Cambridge, Massachusetts police.

A civil protest by women recently released from prison over a NYS Corrections policy of shackling women inmates while they are giving birth. (The policy has recently been stopped.)

Town hall protests over health care reform.

The loss of match point at the US Open women's tennis semi finals because of an angry remark.

And the list goes on...

These made me realize that the topic of anger seemed boring and basic to me because it was all encompassing. It is very personal. It is very public. It is everywhere and it is very powerful. That's when I realized that there were few better topics for self reflection on Rosh Hashanah than anger. We could reflect on those times we lashed out excessively and try to make amends to the people who we lashed out at. And Rosh Hashanah also provides a time to reflect on how anger can be used in constructive and creative ways to seek to remediate problems.

Anger, maybe like all emotions, is a natural energy force like water, wind, and fire. Like nature left unchecked, anger can have destructive and hurtful results. But anger marshaled into positive action can be a useful and effective way to create momentum to lead to positive change. Anger as a "primal" force cannot be really be created or destroyed, only molded or shaped. Anger is both the feeling one senses when provoked, and anger is the "public" reaction displayed. It is how we marry the two that is the key.

In my quasi-judicial role in Family Court, many of the litigants I see are required to participate in "anger management classes" and have been taught "behavior redirection strategies" and "aggression replacement training". But how do you know whether no more outbursts of anger marks the success of one of these techniques, or just that the person has not faced any provocation. How do omissions get measured? The litigants are told they have to learn to control their anger, and I and public figures are "judged", no pun intended, by our displays of anger. In my professional capacity, I am "assessed" as much by my demeanor as my skill and knowledge. Is this appropriate?

Our public figures are advised to have metered responses. Visceral reactions and remarks are scrutinized and invite unwanted criticism. Shortly after the episode with Prof. Gates, President Obama was criticized for his off-the-cuff reaction when he described the incident "as a act of stupidity" on the part of the police. Was this a visceral reaction out of anger or history or both? Yes, he may not have had all the facts, but he was asked to comment in public to the media, based on what facts he had and based on his life experiences. He retracted his statement saying his words had not been calibrated."

Henry Wolfson, senior media and campaign consultant for Mayor Bloomberg, has assisted several different political leaders learn how to be measured in their responses, and Valerie Jarrett, President Obama's Senior Advisor and Assistant for Intergovernmental Affairs, was observed to never let her "emotional thermometer get above room temperature." Should all people who deal with the public be able to master the art of their emotions, particularly the emotion of anger? And should we expect the same in our intimate relationships? Is there room

for a strong remark? We all know that you can't unring a bell, no remarks can be taken back. The remark can be explained, and their impact dissipates after time, but they never go away.

Controlling one's anger does raise a fundamental question: Can someone else make a person angry? Or is it just that another person can provoke a person, and it's only if the other person feels and/or reacts with anger, that there is anger? If this is so, then we can only hold ourselves held accountable when we have angry responses. But... What about repeated provocation or abuse? And what is an angry response??? A visceral lashing out? Or a metered conversation over beers? A protest march? A calculated plan of revenge or a rash attack?

There are many circumstances that provoke people to respond with anger. But in thinking about when people lash out in anger, I think they all revolve around feeling helpless, victimized, and marginalized, either individually or as a part of a particular group or class. And people feel anger when they feel threatened. Sometimes it is the threat of physical harm that will anger people, and sometimes it's an emotional affront. For some, a single incident can ignite a reaction, and for others, it is only after repeated remarks or attacks that one responds. It can be "attacks" that have repeatedly come from the same source, or different sources. The provocation could occur over a short period of time, or a longer period of time. The precipitating factor need not necessarily be the most severe, just the "proverbial straw" that broke the camel's back.

Anger should be channeled and not suppressed because unattended to, anger builds like volcanic lava ready to erupt. Then a person is likely to explode with often dire consequences, either physical or emotional or both. Ideally, people learn how to absorb but not internalize the provocation. Absorb it and respond after consideration of circumstances, the Who, What, Where and Why of the provocation. Consideration, for example, of what is motivating the instigator: is it to provoke me into a response that will ultimately harm me emotionally or physically? Is it motivated by their own ignorance or their own anger at me or a situation, or is it neither? Is it just a remark that I am hearing as provocation because of my history with this person or society? It would be great if we could run through this rubric before each response but I think there are times we get so incensed – when a raw nerve is touched – that we respond immediately and without any time to think it through.

My therapist friends and relatives and I agree that most people are hard wired to a particular level of anger that can be adjusted, but just a bit, and only with hard work. However, this does not excuse people from responsibility for their angry reactions. IF anything it makes each person even more accountable for his or her reaction. IF how a person responds to provocation is controlled by how they are "wired" and what they have taught themselves or have been taught about controlling anger, then a person is fully accountable for their anger.

Accountability means that there are consequences for expressions of anger. For toddlers and children it may be a "time out" or loss of a privilege. For teens and adults, depending on the extent of the expression of anger and harm "felt" or caused, the consequences may be a verbal or emotional back lash, a warning, punishment in the form of loss of privileges, or physical restraint or prison. Sometimes the consequences are aimed to just be punitive or stop the anger.

Sometimes the consequences involve a reprimand of a congressman for breaking decorum during a presidential speech, or losing match point for poor sportsmanship.

At the same time, holding someone accountable should be meted out with a level of empathy. Sometimes the precipitating factors should compel tolerance for a certain displays of anger. Tolerance for both personal displays of anger and group displays of anger that are tempered. But one needs to be cautious to not let the anger escalate to a point that it starts to “pose a threat to the angry person and/or a threat to others”. Whether it be a child or adult on an angry “rant”, outbursts should only be tolerated so far. And if a person is “hard wired” to be explosive, than there should be zero tolerance for any expression of anger.

The town hall meeting or civil protest, while it remains peaceful should be tolerated, but not when it becomes an “angry mob.” If it escalates too far then it needs to be contained. But how does one know if the person or group is about to “blow”? Our police officers are faced with this assessment on a daily basis. I would not trade to be in their shoes!!

For me at work, or at home, or with friends, when the conversation is on a collision course towards an angry clash, or someone is on a rant, I try and have an outer body experience and “step outside myself” Like cartoons where there is the “virtual” person that steps out of the “person” and looks from the outside in. This helps me to not internalize the provocation and respond angrily. Often it works, but sometimes.... well I do react with anger. And this is how my daughter, Kyra, describes my “anger barometer”:

First, Kyra points out, I bang or harshly drop something down. Then, when I try and deny it claiming it was an “accident”, my son, Gabe, without missing a beat, and matter of factly, points out how from a physics standpoint the noise level was too high to be consistent with an “accident”.

Then, says Kyra, I may raise my voice a bit.

But if I am really really angry she can tell because I will then speak in a very soft voice.. just monotone...

Kyra’s description is an accurate portrayal especially when I am at work. As I start to raise my voice, I stop!! I lower voice and speak without affect to send the message that it may be the calm before the storm. This takes massive energy. Maybe it’s the angry energy, diverted??

But maintaining the ability to feel anger is important though. In “Notes from my Father”, Barack Obama talked about observing people who had lost the confidence to get outraged. They had been so beaten down. To loose your ability to feel anger is to be stripped of spirit. So one needs to maintain the capacity to feel angry. Angry feelings marshaled into positive action can be a useful and effective way to create momentum to lead to positive change.” We can effectuate change with expressions of anger in all forms, from “protest marches to town hall meetings” to broadcast dissatisfaction and advertise alternatives. Such expressions of anger are powerful, and cannot be ignored. Those in power hopefully will respond after careful consideration. Sometimes however, there are those in power who are so fearful of people’s collective anger that they

respond not after thoughtful consideration of how to incorporate the concerns being expressed, but by squelching even peaceful expressions of anger. For example, there were thousands of civil protesters who were arrested at the National Republican Convention in New York City in 2004. Many were wrongfully held in jail but were ultimately vindicated after a class action lawsuit was decided favorably for the protesters. The wrongful detention of people shows how threatened some are by peaceful expressions of anger, which demonstrates why these peaceful expressions of anger should be used frequently to effectuate change.

From angry protesters to personal anger, I have come to appreciate the magnitude of anger and that it is omnipresent. Angry outbursts happen so frequently that I was updating this talk until the last minute. I hope that I have given you things for self reflection about anger. If I have left you with more questions than answers I hope it gives you food for thought and not drive you to become angry at me.