

There is a story about a very angry girl, who would often lose her temper and say and do things she later regretted. She couldn't seem to find a way to change her behavior, so her mother gave her a bag of nails and told her that every time she lost her temper she must hammer a nail into the fence around their yard.

The first day the girl hammered 14 nails into the fence. Over the next few weeks, as she learned to control her anger, the number of nails hammered daily gradually dwindled. She discovered it was easier to hold her temper than to drive those nails into the fence.

Finally the day came when the girl didn't lose her temper at all. She told her mother about it, and the mother suggested that the girl now pull out one nail for each day that she was able to hold her temper. The days passed. Finally, she told her mother that all the nails were gone.

The mother took her daughter by the hand and led her to the fence. She said, "You have done well, my daughter, but look at all the holes in the fence. The fence will never be the same. When you say or do things in anger they leave a scar just like these holes."

Anger is an extremely powerful emotion. When we are angry, we feel alive, energized, and powerful. Think that you can't fight city hall? When you are sufficiently angry, not only do you feel like you can fight city hall, but you feel as if you can win. Anger is a powerful and seductive emotion. It stimulates a physiological response in our bodies -- sending adrenaline coursing through our body to prepare us to fight. When you are angry you feel motivated to strike out, to defend yourself, your children, your family, your friends, your honor. Think about the "Incredible Hulk" comic book character, who well illustrates this dark side of the emotion of anger.

Of all things for which we need to do teshuvah, repentance, on Rosh Hashanah, I would venture to guess that most of them were done when we let anger overcome our more level-headed thinking.

The idea of doing teshuvah to ask forgiveness for how we have treated others, and to learn to do better. Ultimately, when it comes down to the heart of the matter, in the business of judging our relationship with God, or God's judgment of our standing in the world, we are alone. We have no partner, family, or aid in our defense -- it is just each of us as individuals standing before God. In front of us is a book signed with our own hand, in which is written a record of our deeds.

The teshuvah process normally works quite well. We look at that book which reminds us often painfully of our failings, and we make amends. Sometimes, however, when the teshuvah process reminds us of our failings many of us react defensively and angrily. It doesn't matter whether criticism is initiated by others against us or by ourselves in a process of teshuvah -- our defenses rise. As we remember our failings, we also recall the failings of others. True, we might admit to ourselves, we have sometimes shaded the truth -- but look at what my brother, spouse, ex-spouse, my friend, my business partner, did -- they lied, cheated, stole from me, ignored me when I needed help . . . . We might think to ourselves, 'What I did was small potatoes compared to what was done to me -- I was justified in my behavior -- it's the other person who suffers the greater guilt.' Taking it a step further -- 'I, who am asking for forgiveness, am vastly superior to person X who has hurt me so badly, and who has never asked for forgiveness.'

The teshuvah process, which ought to be a humbling experience of self-negation in the face of our sin, can easily be perverted into a self-aggrandizing experience of comparing our minimal sins to the maximal sins of others.

As a rabbi, I regularly come across situations in which one person has hurt another and has never apologized or asked for forgiveness, and the aggrieved party holds onto and nurtures that hurt and anger for years, or even decades. It is not uncommon to find slights which were delivered, intentionally or not, a long time ago, festering in a person's heart. It most often arises when I sit with siblings or other relatives preparing for a funeral, and the tension of that unresolved situation hangs over us like a dark cloud of burning resentment or anger.

Sometimes, memory is a curse as much as a blessing. The memory of wrong actions we have taken may motivate us to seek forgiveness and change ourselves. However, the memory of wrong actions taken against us may instead block our ability to be in stronger, more loving relationships with those around us, and ultimately may also block the path to our own teshuvah.

Anger is a spiritual cancer -- it takes root and unless it is deliberately treated, it grows until it takes over our entire emotional being. It clouds our judgment, takes over our life, and in extreme cases it may lead to verbal or physical violence.

The Jewish attitude towards anger is understandably negative, but focuses not on the emotion itself but on the behavior resulting from becoming blinded with anger. Consider the story of Moses and the rock. The Israelites were without water. Moses asks God for water. God tells Moses to speak to the rock and it would produce water. Once before in a similar situation God had told Moses to hit the rock to produce water. This time, Moses was so angry with the Israelites for their constant complaining and lack of faith that he missed the distinction between hitting the rock and talking to the rock. His anger distracted him, caused him to lose focus and strike the rock - one can imagine that he was really thinking about striking the complaining Israelites - and as a result he was punished by God and not allowed to lead the Israelites into the land of Israel.

Anger is a barrier to teshuvah. The emotion itself is not a sin, but rather leads us away from the path of a right relationship with God and other people. In the psychology of repentance, this raises a question: Can one give up anger without forgiving? Do we really want to go through life bitter and angry at someone who may have caused intentional hurt but shows no desire to ask for forgiveness? Much of the secular literature on forgiveness coming from a Christian perspective suggests that the way to rid ourselves of bitterness and anger and heal our inner selves is to forgive others.

From a Jewish perspective, we learn in Mishnah Yoma [Yom Kippur] 8:9:

For transgressions between human beings and God (בֵּין אָדָם לַמֶּלֶכֶת), Yom Kippur effects atonement, but for transgressions between human beings (בֵּין אָדָם לְהַבְרִיּוֹת), Yom Kippur effects atonement only if one has appeased one's friend.

A person will not be forgiven by God for a sin against another person without first asking forgiveness from the injured party. This encourages the injured party to withhold forgiveness and hold onto the injury, waiting for the day that the sinner will come forth and ask forgiveness. It is generally understood to be meaningless in our tradition to provide blanket forgiveness to those who have not asked.

The question becomes, if we don't forgive, then how do we move on without carrying negative feelings around inside of us?

The strongest Jewish source on this question is from Leviticus 19:18: "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge ..." This verse suggests that no matter how angry we might be, acts of revenge motivated by anger are wrong.

Realize first that each one of us is created in the image of God, which means that we have the power to choose how to behave. If someone has chosen to behave against you badly, they have committed a sin. It is their sin, and you bear no responsibility for that sin. Know that God will remember that sin until they make appropriate reparations to you.

You have a choice. You are angry at this person for the sin that he/she has committed against you. Your choice might be to continue to carry around those feelings of anger and bitterness. But you can make a different choice. You might not forgive the other person, but you might say to yourself, "I am angry, and some part of me will continue to be angry until they apologize. But I do not choose to let that anger enslave me and run my life. At the same time as I am angry, I also feel sorry for this person. He/she is carrying around this sin - and probably others - and God will remember. This is incredibly sad, that a person has to go through life carrying sins because he/she is too stubborn or blind to realize the power of repentance."

I am not suggesting that we purge anger from our repertoire of emotion. A person who is never angry may be overly passive, may lack passion. Anger is a strong motivating force to fight injustice. A person with the capacity to get angry is also passionate about what he/she believes. But like salt or tabasco sauce, a little bit goes a long way.

Going back to the story of the girl who solved her anger management problem by putting holes in a fence -- she asked her mother, "How can I repair the fence? Will it have to remain damaged forever?"

"Yes and no," said the mother. "The fence can never be what it was before, but it doesn't have to become like new to be a good fence. If you do your part and change, and patch and repaint the holes in the fence the best you can, and maybe plant some vines that will grow up and around the fence, then it can become a beautiful fence once again.

"The fence is just a concrete symbol of the people who were damaged by your anger. Your anger has put scars and dents into the people you love. However, unlike a fence those living people respond to the way you have changed. Your relationship with them may never be exactly the same as it was, but it can nonetheless be made whole again. If you do your part and change and the other person is receptive to your efforts, God will do something wonderful. God will promote a healing that will make both of you better. This process is called atonement. It means that the changes that come about from repentance and forgiveness lead people to higher levels of relationship than was the case before."

"What happens if the other person doesn't respond?" asked the girl. "Can I ever make it whole?"

"You should try on three different occasions," said the mother, "but you can't force the other person to accept your changes. In that case remember that you made a lot of holes in the fence, and there are lots of boards that need fixing; find another person and mend that relationship. That is the miracle of atonement. God responds to our attempts to change by helping us change,

and by giving us new and wonderful opportunities for atonement. This is why we have a Day of Atonement at the beginning of every new year; so each new year will be better than the last.”

May this Rosh Hashanah lead each of us towards a wonderful and meaningful Yom Kippur; may we heal all of the broken relationships which are in our power to heal; and may we no longer be burdened with anger from those broken relationships which we cannot heal. Amen.