

Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



The Parasha Post of the Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital

Parashat Vayetzei
December 10, 2016

פרשת ויצא
י' בכסלו תשע"ז

Torah Reading: *Bereshit* [Genesis] 28:10-32:3

In this *parasha*, Yaakov flees to his uncle Lavan's household and lives there for several years, marrying Lavan's daughters, Leah and Rachel, and establishing a large family.

Yaakov gets very angry twice in this *parasha*. The first instance occurs in Chapter 30, verse 2: "– וַיַּחַר-אֶף וַיַּחַר-אֶף יַעֲקֹב, בְּרַחֵל; וַיֹּאמֶר, הֲתַחַת אֶל-לֵהִים אָנֹכִי, אֲשֶׁר-מָנַע מִמֶּנִּי, פְּרִי-בֶטֶן.": Yaakov became very angry with Rachel and he said, 'Am I in place of God who has withheld from you the fruit of your womb?'"

The second instance is in Chapter 31, verses 36-42:

וַיַּחַר לְיַעֲקֹב, וַיִּרְבַּב בְּלָבוֹן; וַיַּעַן יַעֲקֹב, וַיֹּאמֶר לְלָבוֹן, מַה-פָּשַׁעִי מִה חָטָאתִי, כִּי דָלַקְתָּ אַחֲרָי. כִּי-מִשְׁשָׁתָּ אֶת-כָּל-כְּלִי, מַה-מָּצָאתָ מִכָּל כְּלִי-בֵיתְךָ--שִׁים כֹּה, נִגַּד אַחֲרִי וְאַחֲרֶיךָ; וַיֹּזְכִּירוּ, בֵּין שְׁנֵינוּ. זֶה עֲשָׂרִים שָׁנָה אָנֹכִי עִמָּךָ, רַחֲלֶיךָ וְעֵזְרֶיךָ לֹא שָׁכְלוּ; וְאֵילֵי צֹאנְךָ, לֹא אָכַלְתִּי. טֶרֶפָה, לֹא-הִבֵּאתִי אֵלֶיךָ--אָנֹכִי אַחֲטָנָה, מִיָּדַי תִּבְקָשָׁנָה; גִּנְבֹתִי יוֹם, וַיִּגְנַבְתִּי לַיְלָה. הֵייתִי בַיּוֹם אֲכַלְנִי חֶרֶב, וְקָרַח בְּלַיְלָה; וַתִּדַּד שְׁנֵתִי, מֵעֵינַי. זֶה-לִי עֲשָׂרִים שָׁנָה, בְּבֵיתְךָ, עֲבַדְתִּיךָ אַרְבַּע-עֶשְׂרֵה שָׁנָה בְּשֵׁתִי בְנִתִיךָ, וְשֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים בְּצֹאנְךָ; וַתַּחֲלֶף אֶת-מִשְׁפָּרְתִּי, עֲשָׂרַת מִנִּים. לוּלִי אֶל-לֵהִי אָבִי אֶל-לֵהִי אֲבָרְהָם וַפְּחַד יִצְחָק, הִזָּה לִי--כִּי עָתָה, רִיקָם שְׁלַחְתָּנִי; אֶת-עֵנְי וְאֶת-יְגִיעַ כַּפִּי, רָאָה אֶל-לֵהִים--וַיֹּזְכֵר אִמְשׁ.

And Yaakov was very angry, and fought with Lavan. And Yaakov answered and said to Lavan: 'What is my wrong-doing? what is my sin, that you have hotly pursued after me? As you have felt about all of my stuff, what have you found of all your household stuff? Set it here before my brothers and your brothers that they may judge between the two of us. These twenty years I have been with you; your ewes and your she-goats have not cast their young, and the rams

of your flocks I have not eaten. That which was torn of beasts I did not bring to you; I bore the loss of it; of my hand you required it, whether stolen by day or stolen by night. Thus I was: in the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night; and my sleep fled from my eyes. These twenty years I have been in your house: I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock; and you have changed my wages ten times. Except [for the fact that] the God of my father, the God of Avraham, and the Fear of Yitzchak, had been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away empty. God has seen my affliction and the labor of my hands, and gave judgment last night.'

The Torah does not take Yaakov to task for these outbursts; therefore, it appears to give tacit approval to his expressions of anger. However, two major medieval Jewish thinkers warn us away from anger.

Maimonides [12th Century Spain/Egypt], the master of *shvil hazahav*, the golden mean of characteristics, states in *Mishneh Torah Hilchot De'ot* - Chapter 2, Law 3(c):

There are certain character traits which a person is forbidden to accustom himself to, even in moderation. Rather, he must distance himself to the opposite extreme. One such trait is haughtiness... **So too is anger an exceedingly bad quality; one from which it is proper that one distance himself to an extreme.** A person should train himself not to anger even on a matter regarding which anger is appropriate. And if a person wants to instill awe upon his children – or wants to anger at the community members in order that they mend their ways, he should only feign anger in their presence in order to castigate them, but his mind should be composed within. He should act as one impersonating an [angry] man while not being angry himself... The early Sages said that one who angers, if he is a scholar, his wisdom will depart from him, and if he is a prophet, his prophetic spirit will depart from him. [The Sages further stated,] 'People who have tempers – their lives are not lives.' Therefore, [the Sages] instructed us that one should distance himself from anger so much so that one accustoms himself not to feel even things which [would ordinarily] incite one to anger. And this is the ideal path.

Similarly, Nachmanides [13th Century Spain/Palestine], in his *Iggeret HaRamban*, his letter written to his son Nachman, says:

Get into the habit of always speaking calmly to everyone. **This will prevent you from anger, a serious character flaw which causes people to sin....** Once you have distanced yourself from anger, the quality of humility will enter your heart. This radiant quality is the finest of all admirable traits.

Maimonides and Nachmanides understood that we do not control our anger; it controls us. Almost more than any other emotion, anger causes us to do things and say things without forethought that we would never dream of doing or saying otherwise.

Pop psychology talks about anger control and anger management, but both of these approaches have problems. Controlling one's anger means not acting on it; this can have physical ramifications such as high blood pressure, ulcers, or heart attacks and strokes. Managing one's anger means that we express our feelings appropriately, but that is often impossible in the heat of the moment.

The rabbis suggest that we simply train ourselves not ever to become angry. If we see the world as a manifestation of God and the Divine will, if we reframe our perspective to realize that we cannot change anything with uncontrolled emotional responses, but rather only with well-thought-out plans and actions, we may all live more serene lives during which we can transform the world for the better.

Is this approach realistic? Not always, but it seems to be what the rabbis believe we should strive for.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- What makes you angry? Why does this specific thing make you angry?
- Is there ever a good reason to lose your temper? If so, what might it be?
- Think of a time you said something or did something in anger that you regretted later. How might you handle the situation differently next time?