

Matot Masei 2016 Dvar Torah

Take a second and think about a time that you got angry and later regretted it. Maybe you didn't have the facts right, jumped to conclusions and had to apologize later. Have you ever been surprised by the intensity of your anger? Maybe you asked yourself, "Where did that come from"?

I had a boss several years ago who was clueless. He didn't understand the work I was doing and gave me no support. He ultimately eliminated my position. I was so angry because he was such a jerk and it was so unfair.

At least that's the story I told myself which allowed me to feel righteous indignation while taking no responsibility for our failure to work well together. Over time, I have been able to reflect on the situation and see my role in the mess. Anger comes from the stories we tell ourselves. Once I understood the story more accurately I no longer felt angry about it.

In this week's double parsha, there are two episodes that I think can teach us a lot about anger and maybe force us to ask whether Moshe had anger issues!

31:14 It says, "Va yik tsof Moshe: Moses was angry with the commanders of the army. I looked up the shores of Va Yik Tsof, kuf, tzadi, fey : It connotes to fly into a rage. So what got Moshe so angry?

In Verse 31:3 Moses tells the people, "arm yourselves to inflict God's vengeance against Midian." You recall that the Midianites had lured the Israelites into idolatry and immorality.

What does that mean to inflict God's vengeance? Kill the men? The women? Everyone? The animals? I think it is pretty clear that it is not clear what Moses means.

After the battle, an enraged Moses (Va yik sof) confronts the leaders and demands to know why they let the women, who whored with the Israelites, live? And then Moses commands them to kill everyone except the female children who haven't been with a man.

Really? The leaders were supposed to know that this is what Moses meant? If they had killed everyone, one wonders whether Moses would have been angry that they killed the little girls!

So why was Moses so unreasonable and angry? I wonder if this is an example of kicking the dog because of a bad day at the office. Let me explain.

Look at how God told Moses to avenge the Midianites. In 31:1, God says, take vengeance against the Midianites and afterwards you will be gathered to your people.

Wow! Avenge the Midianites, and by the way, then you die!

One can only imagine Moshe's emotional state and wonder if he is taking out his anger at God on the leaders of the army.

How often is our anger displaced like this? Either because we are unaware of our repressed anger or perhaps because we can't express our anger at the true source.

The second example of Moshe's anger is in Chapter 32: The tribes of Reuben and Gad ask to settle the land on the east of the Jordan because it is better for grazing and Moses goes nuts. Listen and decide for yourself what story is Moses telling himself that causes this response. Read 5-9 and 14-15.

Look at all of the accusations Moshe makes in response to their request.

1. They are shirking their responsibility to help conquer the land.
2. They are actively undermining the mission.
3. They are going to make God angry and he will destroy the entire people:
4. And the key theme in my mind is, "You are just like your fathers" and this is going to end disastrously just like it did for them.

We have all experienced issues that keep recurring and lead to anger and scripted arguments. When certain old wounds are reopened, the fight starts and we think we know exactly what the other person is thinking, feeling and is going to say. We can sometimes replay the tape in our brain.

I suspect that is what was behind Moshe's reaction. I give a lot of credit to the tribes of Reuben and Gad for de-escalating the situation, reacting calmly and assuaging Moshe's fears. Without getting defensive, they reassured him that his assumptions about them were wrong.

In the book "The Dance of Anger" it states, "anger exists for a reason and deserves our respect and attention.... but we need to figure out what we are really angry at", which can be complicated. The two examples in this week's parsha are good demonstrations of this.

In the case of the war with the Midianites, I suspect Moses was angry not only at God for telling him he is about to die, but also angry at the Midianites and the Israelites because of the humiliation he suffered. Recall that at the end of Parshat Balak, two weeks ago, an Israelite man was having sexual relations with a Midianite woman right in front of Moses who was helpless and weeping until Pinchas killed the couple and saved the day. Nothing can get us angry quite like feeling powerless and being humiliated!

In the case of the tribes of Reuben and Gad what else was Moses angry at? It seems that he was afraid that his entire mission was going to fail. It failed 40 years ago because of the spies. Now he is afraid he will fail again and his entire life's work will end in failure. So he hears what he expects to hear from the tribes. That they are just like their fathers!

There is a book called Crucial Conversations that I think can help us better understand Moshe's behavior and our own behavior. A crucial conversation is defined as one where the stakes are high, opinions differ and emotions run high. These two examples would fit. The book stresses the importance of dialogue which is the free flow of meaning, getting all the relevant facts on the table. Clearly with the tribes of Reuben and Gad, Moshe got angry before that had a chance to happen; and after the Midianite war

there wasn't even a conversation. Moses is the only one speaking in the entire episode. The leaders are never given a chance to respond.

I mentioned that the stories we tell ourselves determine our emotional reactions. The book highlights several archetypal stories. One is the villain story. It allows us to be angry at another without thinking about mitigating factors or our role in causing the conflict. That is the story I told myself with my boss. It seems like Moses viewed the tribes of Reuben, Gad and the leaders fighting the Midianites as villains which prevented a real conversation.

Another common story is the helpless story. Telling ourselves that there is nothing we can do about our awful situation. I told myself that story too. As you might guess, the villain and helpless stories often go together. Moses also seems to have viewed himself as helpless in the Pinchas story which lead to the anger in this week's parsha.

We all succumb to these stories at different times. Anger makes all of us do things we regret and keeps us from reaching our goals. Like Moses, we also often need to look to earlier episodes in our lives to understand our emotional reactions.

Anger is complicated! But if we can always question the stories we tell ourselves and be on the lookout for the archetypal stories, we can recognize when we are falling prey to them and then tell ourselves new, and hopefully more accurate stories.

Let me leave you with a few questions. What self-serving stories are you telling yourself? Which of your relationships need healing? What emotions are keeping you from reaching the promised land?

Shabbat Shalom.