

A Teaching from Rabbi Weintraub:

Don't Lose Yourself When You "Lose It"

Shabbat Chukkat-Balak | 12 Tammuz; July 3 - 4, 2009

In Chapter 20 of Numbers, we read of an apparently unforgivable sin committed by Moses. The people are once again complaining because of a lack of food and water, and G-d instructs Moses to speak to a rock to "bring forth water". Instead, Moses strikes the rock. For this sin, Moses is condemned to die in the wilderness and never enter the Promised Land. Why should Moses, who sacrificed his life for the Children of Israel, be denied the fulfillment of his one wish? Given the many recent, nasty rebellions, can we not understand his outburst as provoked?

Anger is a normal emotion. It is not a sin to feel anger. The big problem in Jewish ethics is when anger takes over a person's personality. The Talmud says "one who loses his temper has all sorts of hellish forces controlling him" (Nedarim 27a). When we get into a rage we surrender our free will, which is the greatest gift given to human beings and fundamental to a life of Sh'mirat Mitzvot, observance of the Torah's commandments.

Today, we have sadly become comfortable with anger. We value its expression because we thereby release "pent up feelings" which might otherwise "fester inside and harm us". This simplistic view is dangerous. It is often the case that when aggression is sanctioned, it is not displaced but only encouraged; rowdy soccer fans are a prime example. Conversely, anger is more subject to our control than we imagine. In tennis, about 25 years ago, the tantrums of John McEnroe were contrasted with the civility of Bjorn Borg. In fact, Borg as a teenager displayed a horrible temper as a tennis player, which he changed only after punishments by his parents and tennis club. As for McEnroe's tantrums, these were not "wild and uncontrollable" but calculated to garner media attention and court advantage.

Of course, it is inhuman not to feel angry sometimes. Maimonides wrote that we should "be angry...for a grave cause that justifiably calls for indignation, so that it shall not be done again" ("Laws of Character Development 1:4). We can get angry over evil, unjustifiable suffering, the oppression of the poor, the abuse of G-d's Torah and other outrages. But we have to protest, again following Maimonides, in the right way, for the right reasons, with the right person, at the right time. We can become angry with strategy and purpose, and even with compassion, as when a parent disciplines a child. The first step is realizing that ultimately we control our temper, not vice versa.