

Three nights ago, Saturday night, I was sitting in a quiet hospital room with a couple of parents, watching their son sleep. He would head home in a couple of days, so there was less tension now. We made idle conversation. Plenty of pauses. We know one another well; pauses were not a problem.

During the previous days I had been ruminating on what to say this morning. "Ruminating" is too gentle a word. "Freaking out" is more accurate. I don't procrastinate but I was trying to think of a topic that was significant, appropriate to the occasion, and timely.

I confessed my dilemma. I asked, "How would you characterize this moment we are in." We were all silent. Then the dad said, "Angry. Everyone seems angry." The mom agreed. Right now, a lot of people seem to be angry. These are two even-keeled, cheerful people. When they said angry...I noticed.

I thought of Eric Ross, for whom our sanctuary is named and who died six years ago, in his early nineties.

Eric had to leave his native Germany as a teenager, when the Nazis took power. He had to leave behind his parents, Albert and Regina Rosenberg, and his entire family. He would never see any of them again. They all died in Auschwitz.

This penniless, uneducated refugee, knowing no one, speaking no English, built a large prosperous business. He devoted himself to that business, and then he devoted himself to philanthropy. He gave generously, with a willing heart, and was honored to do so. He lived modestly. His South Orange ranch house was comfortable, but no one could ever accuse him of being lavish.

I didn't get it. I asked him, "Eric, aren't you angry? How can you live this way? You deserve ever luxury imaginable? The Nazis, the world, took away your family, destroyed your life. You should be angry, so why aren't you?"

Ever terse, he answered: "I could be...but what's the point?"

The ability to shed pointless anger is a blessing.

But the anger today feels different. We are angry. We feel it in the air. Facebook posts. The words and tones on television. The voices of our colleagues, our friends and ourselves. We are angry. But what are we angry about?

We are angry about this election. We feel shortchanged. Every election contains an element of which candidate is the “least bad.” In this election, it feels like that’s the only criterion. Is this the best we can do?

And we are angry about school shootings and taxes and mistreatment and undeserved privilege and discrimination and government. Groups differ, but the overall rage is clear. A recent NBC survey found that half of us are angrier today than we were a year ago. Why are we so angry?

A clue may be found in a book published in 1931. Written by Cambridge historian Herbert Butterfield, it was entitled *The Whig Interpretation of History*. Butterfield argued that many erroneously believe history is supposed to be an ever-increasing march to enlightenment. If you believe that things should get better and better, then it is infuriating when they do not. But what does it mean for things to get “better and better?”

An American born in 1930 had a life expectancy of less than 60 years. An American born today has a life expectancy of over 80 years. We are getting healthier. Infant mortality, half a per cent. Smallpox, gone. We know all this. And it doesn’t matter. Because if my own experience is that I think health care is expensive, and I can’t get in to see the doctor I want when I want, and the procedure I think I need isn’t covered...I’m not going to be mollified by statistics. I am not a statistic.

This spring, in a commencement addresses just down Route 1 at Rutgers, President Obama discussed history the change in America since he graduated from college, thirty-three years ago:

*“...by almost every measure, America is better, and the world is better, than it was 50 years ago, or 30 years ago, or even eight years ago. Since 1983....crime rates, teenage pregnancy, the share of Americans living in poverty — they’re all down. The share of Americans with college educations has gone way up. Our life expectancy has, as well. Blacks and Latinos have risen up the ranks in business and politics. More women are in the workforce. They’re earning more money.*

*If you had to choose one moment in history in which you could be born, and you didn't know ahead of time who you were going to be -- what nationality, what gender, what race, whether you'd be rich or poor, gay or straight, what faith you'd be born into -- you wouldn't choose 100 years ago. You wouldn't choose the fifties, or the sixties, or the seventies. You'd choose right now."*

The president is right. Everything he said is a fact. And note that in the period he discussed, during more of those years there was a Republican president than a Democratic president! Quantitatively, we are better off than we were.

But if I don't feel that way...I don't care. And I'm angry.

Rabbi David Wolpe gave wonderful voice to this in a *Time* magazine column earlier this year:

*"Improvement in world health may not mean that much to me if my own health care is less comprehensive than it was 10 years ago. Because we know so much more about disease, we are relentless in our discussion of wellness, diet and longevity. We have instant access to every catastrophe in the world, and so we obsess over creating perfect security. We live in an age of unlimited expectation."*

*He adds, "From childhood the sense that someone has received more than we have arouses anger. Unfair! This is a danger whenever goods are unevenly distributed, as they are in every society that has ever existed. In modern capitalist economies, the resentment is exacerbated by vast wealth and the window the media provide into the worlds of the "haves."*

Let's add, nearly every individual in this room, I am sure, is a "have." At times, even we feel like "have nots." Right or wrong, that makes us angry.

Anger is largely a foreign emotion to me. It may be the way I am wired. My wife suspects it comes from being the youngest —by several years— of four children. As she puts it, "my feet never touched the ground." I was taught the world is a place that loves you, and strangers are merely friends you have not yet met. My children confirm that, among their friends, I was strict, but not inclined to lose it. (I suppose that means when I did, it was memorable!)

But my point is...even I feel angry.

When we stood before the open ark earlier, we read words from Chapter 34 of Exodus. Moses is on Mount Sinai for the second time and he has just finished carving the commandments into a new set of tablets. God comes down in a cloud, the cloud surrounds Moses, and Moses hears these words. "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness...."

These are important words. God describes himself. He wants Moses to adopt those characteristics for himself and to teach them to the people. Compassionate, gracious, slow to anger....

It seems a little hypocritical for God to refer to Himself as slow to anger. As we noted last night, in the Torah he gets angry plenty. We recalled an instance when he is ready to destroy the people, and it appears Moses' intercession that saves them. So how can we justify God calling himself "slow to anger?"

If we read carefully, we discover He is. He is patient. When he tells Moses he is ready to start over again with Moses to create a whole new people, God has bent over backwards to be patient with the people. Time after time he has shown divine patience, divine understanding, given our ancestors every chance, before he blows.

And when God's anger does blaze forth, it is only because there is no alternative. Never, never, does God become angry simply because He is angry. When God is angry, he addresses the situation.

Take Korah, who fomented and led an insurrection against Moses. He was an irresponsible, egotistical, self-promoting demagogue. Korah impugned Moses' integrity, ridiculed and embarrassed him in public. God was furious. He took care of Korah. If the people were to survive, there was no alternative. This was not God just displaying his might. He was angry for legitimate reason. But anger for anger's sake? Never

We say we are angry. But I wonder if what we call anger, what we sense as anger, might really be something else. Fear. We are angry because we are scared.

These are scary times. This election is not making anybody feel good. We are unsettled. The world is an unnerving place. Psychologists tell us that anger often has roots in fear; anger is our reaction to situations we cannot control. We get

tense. We lash out. We become hyper critical. And the irony, of course, is that that is the worst possible reaction we could have.

Two centuries ago, Nachman of Bratzlav, grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, and one of the most profound of the Hasidic rebbes, thought long and hard about fear. He wrote these words, creating an image now long enshrined in song:

*Kol ha-olam, gesher tzar ma'od, v'ha-ikar, lo l'fached klal.*

The whole world is a very narrow bridge  
and the main thing is to have no fear at all.

A narrow bridge is a scary place. Nachman saw moments in life as a narrow bridge. That was unavoidable. A life that is not frightening does not exist.

And precisely because that is so, to live a life without fear is one of our greatest and most important challenges. We must fight not to let paralysis, or anger, be an option.

On June 18, Miles Chalnack became a Bar Mitzvah. The Chalnack family is ruthlessly committed to the outdoors. Campers, hikers, mountain climbers all, with a fierce devotion to the Adirondacks. Like his older brothers, I expected Miles to take an environmental direction in his D'var Torah. He did. But he also broke new ground.

Miles and I met to review his rough draft, start editing it, and give him the opportunity, right here, to practice his delivery. In the D'var Torah, Miles mentioned that he was a vegetarian. I thought that was cute. I assumed it had to do with being kind to animals. I got ready to give him a little homily on *ba-al tza-ar hahayim*, the Talmudic principle on preventing pain to living creatures, so I said to him, "you feel strongly about the treatment of animals?" He said, "No. It's not that."

Now I was curious. Miles explained to me that a carnivorous diet was not sustainable for the world. That if I were to examine world population trends, and compare the amount of space and resources needed to raise animals, as opposed to what was necessary for the same amount of nutrition to come from plants, it would become clear to me that eating meat was irresponsible.

Miles knows nature. Miles knows about carnivorous and herbivorous and understood that different of God's creations, humans included, were programmed to eat in certain ways. Eating meat was not the issue.

The issue was, it couldn't continue. Eventually, meat would become scarce, and when scarcity arrived, only the rich, the powerful, the "haves," would have it. For him, it was a moral issue.

That Shabbat he taught us a powerful, uneasy moral lesson. And later, I realized there was an additional lesson. If Miles had chosen to be angry at me, at his parents, at our generation and previous generations that had led the world in a certain direction without restraint and reason, he had every right. But I think he simply could not be bothered being angry. Whether he deliberately thought this through or it was pure intuition, at some moment he realized, it was not about being angry at earlier generations. It was not about being scared at the danger ahead. It was more important. It was about what he was going to do.

That is the question we need to pose. What am I angry about? What am I scared of? And what am I going to do about it? If I am angry because people are hungry, what am I going to do to feed them? If I am angry that the political system stinks, what am I going to do to see people of integrity and merit elected? If I am angry about global warming, as we all should be, what steps can I take?

It is easy to throw up our hands. What can one person do? And let's face it. Self-righteous indignation feels really good. As Eldridge Cleaver said, "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem." He probably didn't know that he was echoing the Talmud: you don't have to finish the work, but you're still obligated to pitch in.

In both our own lives and in the world, ever challenge will not be surmountable. But in our hearts we know. So many are. That's what a Jew is supposed to do. We don't throw up our hands. We get them dirty.

The conversation Saturday night was a remarkable. I didn't mention it, but the family in question was Steven and Erica Gendel, and their son was Josh, whom many of us know. Josh is home now, but Saturday was his 52<sup>nd</sup> day in the hospital. Steven and Erica were pretty fried, but as ever, gentle, cheerful and funny. Josh was born with a number of physical maladies, and alas neither he, nor his parents, are strangers to the hospital.

And it was so strange to hear them wonder at the anger they saw around them, because they surely have cause to be angry at the world. But I have never heard them be angry. In fact, it's kind of funny to listen to them talk about others they know who feel life has shortchanged them, when Steven and Erica know in a way few do that those others should be counting their blessings. And Steven and Erica certainly know fear. But they move forward on that narrow bridge with energy, commitment and joy.

We live in an age of unlimited expectation. But that is no road to contentment. Relative to the rest of the world, pretty much every person in this room is incredibly lucky.

Like God, let us be slow to anger. And let us recognize our fear. Let us always try to use them, to make something, whether it's our world or ourselves, to make something better than it was before.