

# Torah Table Talk – *Pirke Avot*

## Learning to Control One's Anger

*Parshat Mattot-Mas'ei*, Numbers 30:2 – 39:13

**Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt**

**With love to their grandchildren**

**Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren z'l, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily**

The long journey through the wilderness was coming to an end, but so was Moses' career as the leader of the nation. It was the fortieth year of their wandering and the generation that had left Egypt had all but died off in the wilderness. Moses began to make plans for the next generation. He appointed Joshua as the new leader of the nation. He created the framework for the division of the land. And he took care of old scores that needed to be settled so that the nation could start out with a clean slate.

This was to be Moses' last official act. He would conclude his career with an act of vengeance. But before it is over, Moses loses his temper one more time. From the very beginning, Moses often finds it hard to control his temper and keep righteous indignation in check. We see this when, as a young man, he strikes down an Egyptian taskmaster who is beating a slave. We witness his anger once again when he smashes the tablets upon seeing the people worshipping the golden calf. And again, when the people clamor for water, Moses loses his temper and yells at the people ("Listen you rebellious one's.") and he hits the rock with his staff. In each case Moses' anger is certainly understandable – but not necessarily justifiable. The expression of anger may serve to defuse our rage, but it often causes more damage than good. We see that once again when Moses loses his temper with his military leaders during the campaign to destroy the Midianites.

**Pirke Avot 3:15** Rabbi Eliezer said: Let the honor of your fellow be as dear to you as your own. Be not easily moved to anger. Repent one day before your death.

**Pirke Avot 3:6** Hillel used to say: A brutish man cannot fear sin; an ignorant man cannot be pious, nor can the shy man learn, or the impatient man teach.

## Sources

### Numbers 31:14 - 24

Moses became angry with the commanders of the army, the officers of the thousands and the officers of hundreds, who had come back from the military campaign...Eleazar the priest said to the troops who had taken part in the fighting, 'This is the ritual law that the Lord has enjoined upon Moses.'

### Leviticus Rabbah 13:1

Rabbi Huna said: Moses became angry in three instances, and [following each] a law escaped his memory. The instances involved a law about observance of the Sabbath, a law about the purification of unclean metal utensils, and a law about the conduct of a mourner prior to the burial of his dead.

What is the proof that, through anger, Moses forgot to speak of a law about the observance of the Sabbath? [From what happened when the manna was eaten after it first came down.] At that time, we are told, "some of them left it until morning . . . and Moses was angry with them" (Ex. 16:20). Having become angry, a law escaped his memory, and he forgot to speak of a contrary law affecting the Sabbath, for [when the Sabbath came] he said to them, "This is what the Lord hath spoken: . . . 'Eat today [what was left from the prior day], for today is a Sabbath unto the Lord'" (Ex. 16:23 and 16:25). [Moses did not say, "This is what I have spoken," but, "This is what the Lord hath spoken," for he had forgotten to speak of it.]

What is the proof that, through anger, Moses forgot to speak of a law regarding the purification of unclean metal utensils? From what happened following the war against Midian. We are told, "Moses was angry with the officers of the host" (Num. 31:14), and in his anger a law escaped his memory, so that he forgot to speak to them of a particular law governing [the purification of unclean] metal utensils. Since Moses did not speak of it to them, Eleazar the Priest had to do so in Moses' stead, as Scripture says, "Eleazar the Priest said unto the men of war: 'This is the statute of the law which the Lord hath commanded Moses' " (Num. 31:21), implying that Eleazar meant: "It was to my master Moses--not to me--that God gave the command."

What is the proof that, through anger, Moses forgot to speak of a law about the conduct of a mourner before the burial of his dead? [When Nadab and Abihu died, their brothers Eleazar and Ithamar refused to eat consecrated food.] At that time, we are told, "Moses was angry with Eleazar and with Ithamar" (Lev. 10:16), and, having become angry, he forgot to speak of the law that, prior to the burial of his dead, a mourner may not eat consecrated food. At that, Aaron set forth to Moses an argument *a fortiori*: a man is asked to declare of the tithe, which is of lesser sanctity: "While in mourning, I have not eaten of it prior to the burial of my dead" (Deut. 26:14). How much more by far should a restriction in eating a sin offering, which is of greater sanctity, apply to such a mourner! As soon as "Moses heard that, it was pleasing in his sight" (Lev. 10:20), and he issued a proclamation to the entire camp of Israel, saying, "I made an error in the law, and Aaron my brother came and set me straight."

### **Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 30b-31a**

Our Rabbis taught: A man should always be gentle like Hillel, and not impatient like Shammai. It once happened that two men made a wager with each other, saying, 'He who goes and makes Hillel angry shall receive four hundred *zuz*. Said one, 'I will go and incense him.' That day was the Sabbath eve, and Hillel was washing his head. He went, passed by the door of his house, and called out, 'Is Hillel here, is Hillel here?' Thereupon he robed and went out to him, saying, 'My son, what do you require?' 'I have a question to ask,' said he. 'Ask, my son,' he prompted. Thereupon he asked: 'Why are the heads of the Babylonians round?' 'My son, you have asked a great question,' replied he: 'because they have no skillful midwives.' He departed, tarried a while, returned, and called out, 'Is Hillel here; is Hillel here?' He robed and went out to him, saying, 'My son, what do you require?' 'I have a question to ask,' said he. 'Ask, my son,' he prompted. Thereupon he asked: 'Why are the eyes of the Palmyreans short-sighted?' 'My son, you have asked a great question, replied he: 'because they live in sandy places.'

He departed, tarried a while, returned, and called out, 'Is Hillel here; is Hillel here?' He robed and went out to him, saying, 'My son, what do you require?' 'I have a question to ask,' said he. 'Ask, my son,' he prompted. He asked, 'Why are the feet of the Africans [negroes] wide?' 'My son, you have asked a great question,' said he; 'because they live in watery marshes.'

'I have many questions to ask,' said he, 'but fear that you may become angry.' Thereupon he robed, sat before him and said, 'Ask all the questions you have to ask,' 'Are you the Hillel who is called the *Nasi* of Israel?' 'Yes,' he replied. 'If that is you,' he retorted, may there not be many like you in Israel. 'Why, my son?' queried he. 'Because I have lost four hundred *zuz* through you,' he complained.

'Be careful of your moods,' he answered. 'Hillel is worth it that you should lose four hundred *zuz* and yet another four hundred *zuz* through him, yet Hillel shall not lose his temper.'

### **Babylonian Talmud Kiddushin 40b**

Bar Kapara taught: A man who is bad tempered achieves nothing but his bad temper.

### **Babylonian Talmud Pesachim 113b**

Our masters taught: There are three kinds of men whose life is no life: those who are [too] compassionate, those who are [too] prone to anger, and those who are [too] fastidious.

### **Babylonian Talmud Ta'anit 20b**

When his disciples asked Rabbi Adda bar Ahavah, "To what do you attribute your long life?" he replied, "I never lost my temper in the midst of my family."

## **Commentary**

Moses was tired. He knew that his life was drawing to a close and that soon the people would enter the Promised Land without him. But there were unpleasant tasks to finish. Moses gathers fighters from each of the tribes and under the leadership of Pinchas the Zealot, they are sent to wipe out the Midianites. When they return with booty from their campaign, Moses loses his temper with them for not obeying his exact words. Moments later, we find Eleazar explaining the law 'that Moses had commanded;' they were to destroy non-metallic utensils. Why was it necessary for Eleazar to repeat the law if Moses had already taught the people what to do? And why does Moses lose his temper here?

According to the sages, whenever Moses lost his temper, he also forgot the law that he was to teach the people of Israel. Here it is certainly understandable. Moses was worried that with this campaign he would become a lame duck leader with no other tasks to complete. What's more, he knew how dangerous the Midianites and the Moabites had been. The seduction of the Israelite men had nearly destroyed the nation. Moses wanted to end things properly – so he lost his temper when they seemed to be disobeying God's commandments one more time. Anyone might lose his or her temper under such circumstances. But the loss of temper was destructive to his ability to lead just the same. According to the sages nothing good ever comes of such anger.

Hillel is the quintessential example of a person who was calm and composed at all times. In the story above, two men make a wager about whether or not it is possible to make Hillel lose his temper. The man constantly returns to Hillel with questions that are not only ridiculous but insulting since Hillel is a Babylonian.

The message found in these sources is contained in *Pirke Avot*. A short tempered person makes a terrible teacher not only because he will intimidate his students but because his anger will cause him to lose the ability to have the presence of mind to teach others. Rabbi Eliezer in combining these three thoughts suggests that one of the ways that we honor another person is by remaining patient and understanding with them even when they challenge our patience. Finally Rabbi Eliezer ends by reminding us to repent "one day before one's death." The Talmud tells us that his students asked how this was possible since no one knows the day of one's death. To which he answered: "All the more; let him repent today lest he die on tomorrow; let him repent on tomorrow lest he die the day after. That way all his days will be spent in repentance! (*Avot D'Rebbe Natan* 15)

### **Questions to Ponder**

1. Why do you think Moses lost his temper in this particular incident in Numbers during the Midianite campaign? Do you think his anger is understandable? Is it justified?
2. How do you feel after losing your temper? Does losing your temper make you feeling better (like allowing steam out of a pressure valve) or does it leave you feel worse?
3. How does your expression of anger affect your judgment?
4. What did the sages mean when they said that a person, who loses his temper, is too compassionate or too fastidious, "has no life?" Do you agree with this statement – why or why not?
5. Is losing one's temper ever justifiable? If so when?
6. If you were Hillel how would you have responded to the questions he was asked?

---

Mark B Greenspan sponsored by the Oceanside Jewish Center in New York. For more information on TTT contact me at [Haravmark@optonline.net](mailto:Haravmark@optonline.net). If you would like to subscribe to Torah Table Talk please send an e-mail to [Tabletalk@oceansidejc.org](mailto:Tabletalk@oceansidejc.org). To remove your address from this list, send a blank email to [tabletalk-unsubscribe@oceansidejc.org](mailto:tabletalk-unsubscribe@oceansidejc.org). To see an archive of TTT go to <http://www.oceansidejc.org/rebmark/RabbiGreenspan.html>. To download TTT you need Adobe Acrobat Reader; <http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html>

***"All it takes to study Torah is an open heart,  
a curious mind and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."***

**Copyright 2009 Rabbi Mark B Greenspan**