



Frothing With Rage

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Moshe has an anger problem. He is usually able to keep it under control. By nature, he is a quiet man, a brooder. He carries out his duties faithfully—as both a mouthpiece of God and a defender of the people. But the tension between these two roles pulls at him constantly, keeps him agitated. Sometimes the pressure gets too high... and he explodes.

His fury boils up again in this week's *parashah*, just after the Israelites have gone to battle with the Midianites, and are returning to Moshe to deliver the spoils of their victory:

במדבר לא:יד

וַיִּקְצֹף מֹשֶׁה עַל פְּקֻדֵי הַחֵיִל שָׂרֵי הָאֲלָפִים וְשָׂרֵי הַמֵּאוֹת הַבָּאִים מִצִּבְאָה הַמִּלְחָמָה.

Numbers 31:14

Moshe became angry (*vayiktzof*) with the commanders of the army, the officers of thousands and the officers of hundreds, who had come back from the military campaign.

And why is he so angry with them? The reason is as disturbing as the rage itself:



במדבר לא:טו-טז

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֵיהֶם מֹשֶׁה הֲחַיִּיתֶם כָּל נִקְבָּה. הֵן הִנֵּה הָיוּ לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּדַבֵּר בִּלְעָם לְמַסָּר מֵעַל בְּה'.¹

Numbers 31:15-16

Moshe said to them, “Why have you spared all the females? For they were the very ones who, at the bidding of Bilaam, caused Israel to rebel against the Eternal!”

Even as the Israelites cut down their enemies by the thousands, it seems they followed some basic military code of mercy: spare the women and children. And that is what sets Moshe on a tirade. “They should have killed the women!” storms Moshe, “Those women were the greatest sinners of them all!”

This unsettling outburst catches Rashi’s attention. It is as if he has been watching Moshe for a while now, noticing a pattern of behavior. But Rashi says nothing just yet. He waits until a few verses later to make his point, when Aharon’s son Elazar begins speaking to the troops:

במדבר לא:כא

וַיֹּאמֶר אֶלְעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן אֶל אַנְשֵׁי הַצָּבָא הַבָּאִים לְמִלְחָמָה זֹאת חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה¹ אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֶת מֹשֶׁה.

Numbers 31:21

Elazar the priest said to the soldiers who had come in from war, “This is the decree of the Torah that the Eternal commanded Moshe.”

Elazar then goes on to explain how to purify foreign metal vessels for general use. Nothing too exciting. But this is odd. Why is **Elazar** the one giving this kind of instruction? Shouldn’t Moshe himself be communicating the law to the people? So Rashi answers:

¹ Interestingly, this is one of only two places in the Torah with the phrase *זאת חקת התורה*. The other, more well-known usage is the beginning of Parashat *Hukkat*, which introduces the laws of the *parah adumah*, the Red Heifer. Both cases deal with purification after contact with the dead.



רש"י במדבר לא:כא

ויאמר אלעזר הכהן וגו' - לפי שבא משה לכלל כעס בא לכלל טעות, שנתעלמו ממנו הלכות גיעולי נכרים.

Rashi to Numbers 31:21

"Eleazar the priest said..."—because Moshe came to a state of anger, he began to make mistakes, and the law of purging foreign vessels eluded him.²

Rashi is blaming Moshe's temper for his inability to remember the laws that God spoke to him. This is a serious charge. For the suggestion is that when Moshe loses control in this way, he gets rattled and unfocused, and he ceases to be able to perform his primary function as a prophet.

And Rashi does not stop at this one accusation. For he has seen this problem before, and with a deft bit of *parshanut*, he links us back to a similar moment, earlier on:

וכן אתה מוצא בשמיני למלואים, שנאמר (ויקרא י', טז) ויקצוף על אלעזר ועל איתמר בא לכלל כעס בא לכלל טעות.

And so you find also during the eighth day of the inauguration of the tabernacle, it says, "[Moshe] became angry at Eleazar and Itamar..." (Leviticus 10:16). He came to a state of anger, so he began to make mistakes.³

² Rashi is quoting from a *midrash* in Sifrei Bemidbar #157, but the general principle of anger causing forgetfulness is derived in the Talmud Pesachim 66b, where Reish Lakish says, "Any person who becomes angry, if he is a Torah scholar, his wisdom departs from him, and if he is a prophet, his prophecy departs from him," and then goes on to cite the verses in our *parashah* as proof.

³ Rashi goes on to cite one other example of Moshe's anger: "So, too, when he said, 'Listen, you rebels'; ... 'and he struck the rock' (Numbers 20:10,11). It was through his anger that he made this mistake." In this case, however, the verb לקצוף is not used.

The one other place where we do see this verb used in reference to Moshe is in Exodus 16:20, when the people save *manna* for the next day after Moshe has told them not to. It rots and becomes infested with maggots and, "ויקצף עלה משה - Moshe became angry." Perhaps that explains why Moshe seems to forget to tell them the other information that God has given him: that they will be given a double portion on the sixth day. It isn't until



Rashi highlights the usage of the same verb for “becoming angry,” *vayiktzof* (ויקצוף), back there in the Book of Leviticus. In the aftermath of Aharon’s oldest sons’ deaths, the priestly family had gathered to eat a meal outside of the sanctuary. Moshe became enraged, for the priests are supposed to eat all the offerings in a designated place.

In this case, a furious obsession with ritual precision blinds Moshe to the human tragedy standing before him. Does he not have gentler words for a family that has just suffered such a tremendous loss? Again, Moshe’s anger is mixed up with a lack of sensitivity to the content and context of his message. And again, Rashi points out, this anger causes Moshe to forget the law.

Aharon calmly replies that one cannot eat in the sanctuary on a day of mourning:

ויקרא י"ט

וַתִּקְרָאנָה אֶתִּי כְּאֵלָה וְאָכַלְתִּי חֹטְאֹת הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה יִיטֵב בְּעֵינַי ה'.

Leviticus 10:19

After such things have befallen me, had I eaten a sin offering today, would the Eternal have approved?

Moshe immediately recognizes that Aharon is correct. Of course—Aharon is grieving the loss of his children! How could he have been expected to perform his ritual duties on the very day that his sons had died? But Moshe wasn’t thinking clearly. His mind was too clouded with rage.<hr />

they come and tell him that they have received this double portion that he explains: “This is what the Eternal said: tomorrow is a day of rest, a holy Shabbat for the Eternal” (16:23).



Rashi's suggestion that anger can lead to error is not too surprising. He is following a well-established rabbinic critique of anger, most famously formulated in the Talmud by R. Yohanan ben Nuri, as follows:

תלמוד בבלי שבת קה:

המקרה בגדיו בחמתו והמשבר כליו בחמתו והמפזר מעותיו בחמתו יהא בעיניך כעובד עבודה זרה, שכך אומנתו של יצר הרע: היום אומר לו עשה כך ולמחר אומר לו עשה כך עד שאומר לו עבוד עבודה זרה והולך ועובד.

Talmud Bavli Shabbat 105b

Anyone who rips his clothes in anger, or breaks vessels in anger, or throws his money into the air in anger—you should regard them as if they had committed idolatry. For this is the practice of the Evil Inclination. Today it tells someone to go and do this, and tomorrow it says to go and do that. Until one day, it says, “Go worship idols!” And that person goes and worships.⁴

The language of the condemnation here is very sharp: indulging in anger is like committing idolatry! But the logic is the same as Rashi's above: anger takes a hold of one's consciousness so fully that one forgets even the most basic of God's laws. Anger is like a drug that fogs the mind and causes one to make terrible mistakes.

What is interesting, however, is the emphasis Rashi gives to the repetition of the particular verb, *liktzof* (לקצוף), in these two examples of Moshe's anger and subsequent forgetfulness. For there are many other verbs for becoming angry in the Torah (להתרגז, לזעום, לכעוס, לחרות,

⁴ This *sugya* is explored in depth in a class by my colleague R. Micha'el Rosenberg, entitled “Righteous Anger, Useful Anger,” available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/righteous-anger-useful-anger>.



each of which indicates a different version of the feeling. By calling out this particular expression of anger, Rashi means to specifically critique a certain type of anger: impulsive, unreasoned rage that bursts forth in an instant and leaves no room for compassion or consideration.

Not all anger is bad, perhaps; a case can be made for justifiable anger or moral outrage. Moshe himself displays this kind of righteous anger when he sees the people dancing wildly around the Golden Calf, and again after he hears Datan and Aviram refer to Egypt as the real “land of milk and honey”; in both of those cases his anger is described with the language of *vayihar* (ויחר) (Exodus 32:19; Numbers 16:15).

But *ketzef* (קצף), that blinding fury that occludes clear thinking and seeks destruction—that is a dangerous and problematic emotion. In modern Hebrew, *ketzef* means “foam” or “froth,” which gives us some sense of the kind of insane rage that would have someone “frothing at the mouth.” It is this kind of anger that leaves Moshe incapacitated, forgetting everything he knows and attacking the undeserving.

Having thus established a Rabbinic critique of “*ketzef*,” we might ask if anyone else engages in this particularly dangerous form of anger. A concordance-scan of the Torah reveals that there are only two other characters who indulge in such unbridled wrath.

The first is the Pharaoh of Egypt:

בראשית מ:ב-ג

וַיִּקְצֹף פַּרְעֹה עַל שְׂגֵי סְרִיסָיו עַל שֶׁר הַמְּשָׁקִים וְעַל שֶׁר הָאוֹפִים. וַיִּתֵּן אֹתָם בְּמִשְׁמַר בֵּית שֶׁר הַטְּבָחִים אֶל בֵּית הַסֵּהר מִקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יוֹסֵף אָסוּר שָׁם.



Genesis 40:2-3

Pharaoh became angry (*vayiktzof*) with his two eunuchs, the chief cupbearer and the chief baker, and he put them in custody in the house of the chief steward, in the same prison house where Yosef was confined.

Pharaoh loses his temper, for reasons unclear, and immediately throws two men into jail. Their fates seem arbitrarily determined: one is soon released, while the other one is hanged. The only law that seems to be operative here is the impulsive will of the monarch. The only clear lesson is that one would do well to steer clear of his foul moods.

Now, it may come as no surprise that a Pharaoh would be prone to such outbursts. This is, after all, the great villain of the Torah, who will put an entire people into slavery at the first sign of threat to his power. When that does not work, he will move quickly to infanticide. He will stubbornly resist all pleas for mercy, even when his own family is in danger. This is a man driven by anger, and who cannot think strategically—let alone contemplate mercy—when his temper has a hold of him. From such a man, we might expect the frothing rage of *ketzef*.

The other figure in the Torah, however, from whose *ketzef* we must be wary, is no man at all. For the third and final angry character linked by this verb is none other than God. Indeed, this verb, *liktzof*, is used in reference to God more than to anyone else in the Torah.

So when Korah leads a mutiny against Moshe and Aharon, and God threatens to annihilate the whole people of Israel, Moshe and Aharon themselves protest:

במדבר טז:כב

וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל פְּנֵיהֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵל, אֱלֹהֵי הָרִוּחוֹת לְכָל בָּשָׂר הָאִישׁ אֶחָד יִחָטֵא וְעַל כָּל הָעֵדָה תִּקְצָף.



Numbers 16:22

They fell on their faces and said, “Oh God, God of the spirits of all flesh, will you become angry (*tikzof*) with the whole community when one person sins?!”

And when Moshe recounts the story of the spies who brought back bad reports from the land of Canaan, he says:

דברים א:לד

וַיִּשְׁמַע ה' אֶת קוֹל דְּבָרֵיכֶם וַיִּקְצָף.

Deuteronomy 1:34

The Eternal heard the voice of your complaint, and was angry (*vayiktzof*).

And when Moshe narrates the episode of the worship of the Golden Calf, he says:

דברים ט:יט

כִּי יִגְרַתִּי מִפְּנֵי הָאֵף וְהַחֲמָה אֲשֶׁר קִצַּף ה' עֲלֵיכֶם לְהַשְׁמִיד אֶתְכֶם.

Deuteronomy 9:19

I was in dread of the Eternal's anger and fury, when God was angry (*katzaf*) with you and sought to wipe you out.

And when Moshe remembers the people's constant complaining—wishing they could go back to Egypt, longing for the fine food they had back there—he says:

דברים ט:כב

וּבְתַבְעֶרָה וּבְמִסָּה וּבְקִבְרֵת הַתְּאֻוָּה מִקְצָפִים הָיִיתִם אֶת ה'.



Deuteronomy 9:22

At Taveirah, and at Masah, and at Kivrot HaTa'avah, you made the Eternal angry
(*maktzifim*).

Again, and again, and again, Moshe repeats some version this message to the people:

דברים ט:טז

זָכֹר אֶל תְּשׁוּכַח אֶת אֲשֶׁר הִקְצַפְתָּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בַּמִּדְבָּר, לְמַן הַיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר יֵצְאתָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם עַד בְּאֵכֶם עַד
הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה מִמֵּרִים הָיִיתֶם עִם ה'.

Deuteronomy 9:7

Remember and do not forget how you made the Eternal your God angry (*hikzafu*) in the wilderness, from the day you went out from the Land of Egypt until you came to this place, you have been rebels against the Eternal.

In fact, when one stands back and surveys all the instances in which God is described as flying into this kind of rage, it suddenly becomes clear that they are all found in descriptions given by Moshe himself. Never does the Torah simply narrate that God became angry using this verb, as it did with Moshe and Pharaoh. That is not to say God is never angry; of course God does get angry in the Torah many times. But different words are used, suggesting different kinds of anger. If God ever succumbed to *ketzef*—that hot-headed, irrational, vindictive rage—it is only from Moshe that we know of it.

What does this mean? It is possible that Moshe is, in fact, accurately reporting the moods of the Eternal. Perhaps Moshe can identify them so well precisely because he experiences these feelings himself. One even wonders, timidly, if he may be offering the same subtle critique of God that Rashi gave of Moshe: *You are too hot-tempered! Too easily provoked! Your anger*



blinds You, and You lose all sense of justice and mercy! You are out of control, and You are forgetting Yourself...

A more likely read, however, is that Moshe is seeing in God the anger he feels in himself. Moshe knows what it is to feel so consumed with rage that he cannot see straight. He knows how infuriating these petulant, rebellious people can be. It makes him so angry sometimes, he can hardly stand it. Sometimes, if he is honest, he wishes they were dead.

Then he sees God punish them, and he assumes that God must feel the same way. God understands what it is to be in the grip of this uncontrollable fury, and to simply unleash it, with no thought of the consequences. This terrible anger that Moshe sometimes feels—this boiling, violent, maniacal rage—is so powerful, Moshe presumes, that not even God can control it. And if that were so, then surely Moshe could not be blamed for his own anger.

So slowly, unconsciously, Moshe begins to speak of God in a language that is actually a projection of his own inner experience of himself. This God feels all the frustration and rage that Moshe feels. This God wants not justice, but vengeance. This is a God who wants nothing more than to destroy these pathetic, whining rebels who dare to defy him. This is a god Moshe has constructed in his own image.

Idolatry indeed.

