

Temple Israel
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“Controlling Emotions”

Since the arrest of Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Junior by Sergeant James Crowley two weeks ago, there have been various voices that have commented on this distressing event. Media and political pundits, as well as many in this country rushed to make judgments including President Obama.

Some arguing the arrest was unjustified and this is a case of racial profiling by Sergeant Crowley. Others claiming Professor Gates warranted the arrest due to his aggressive tones. Yet, no matter what you believe, both sides were at fault. Both individuals stopped listening to the other and both let their anger overtake them.

Anger is a natural and inevitable emotion, which in our society can either be displayed or concealed. Yet, no matter our tendencies, many, including Professor Gates and Sergeant Crowley, do not manage their anger appropriately. Think about a heated dispute with a partner, a friend, or family member. As the intensity of the conversation increases, we might yell, say things we do not mean, or tune out what the other person says. However, while anger might be a natural emotion, we cannot use this as an excuse for uncontrolled fury.

In our Torah this week, we continue with Moses' speeches to the Israelites in which he speaks of the rewards for obeying God's commandments and the hardships faced in the wilderness. Yet, throughout these speeches, Moses knows the dangers of unrestrained anger. Back in Numbers, dejected by not having water, the Israelites become irritated with Moses and Aaron. In response to the Israelites complaints, Moses yells: "Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock!"

Moses is unable to control his rage then defies God's command by striking the rock twice instead of once. By not keeping his anger in check, God ultimately denies Moses from the Promised Land – his greatest hope and dream. Similarly, when we allow anger to control us rather than us control anger, we might squander our greatest desires.

There is an old married couple adage "do not go to bed angry;" however, as couples can attest, when we are upset by a situation or at the other person, this is much harder to bring to fruition. In an argument, many of us might try to immediately confront the situation, which often ends with continued agitation and arguing.

This leads to hurt feelings, grudges being held, and at its worst, the loss of an amazing relationship.

Instead, when facing a heated situation with our loved ones, we should step away from the situation. It allows an opportunity to calm down, and also gives us time to put our self in the other's metaphorical shoes. When we take time to grasp the other person's point of contention, we can better understand each other's feelings thus making it easier to overcome our issues.

For example, if Sergeant Crowley was able to step away from the intense situation, maybe he could have realized the feelings of inferiority Professor Gates was experiencing in his own house.

At the same time, if Professor Gates took a moment to retreat from the heated conversation, Gates might have seen an officer who was trying to protect him, his house and his neighborhood. Yet, this did not occur, and in the media, we witnessed the hazards of unmanageable anger.

We know that anger happens. It is a natural and acceptable emotion. However, letting our emotions overwhelm us and control the decisions we make is disgraceful.

As we enjoy Shabbat this evening, may we not go to bed angry tonight or nights following! Instead, let us find new ways to harness our anger. So, unlike Moses, we realize the dangers of our rage and overcome our fury.