

We have a kindness problem in our country. People are angry, especially made worse by the pandemic and its limitations, but this is not something totally new. From recent Gallup polls, we know these numbers have been on the rise for years. Theories abound as to what exactly causes all of this. The growth of social media and its amplification of pieces meant to whip people into a frenzy. The increase in people buying into conspiracy theories, that gives people the whiff of some potential revelatory truth bomb out there. Or, potentially maybe things have actually gotten worse for folks over the years. Wage stagnation, cost of living increases, mistrust of government are all potential measurables that have caused folks to lash out.

But it's not so much the big things that manifest from rage that I want to focus on but the smaller things. Those events taking place on airplanes, on the road, and in restaurants and other business establishments. Between January and mid-June, the FAA received approximately 3,100 reports of unruly behaviour, of which 487 have been investigated. That compares to a yearly average of 142 investigations over the last decade.

Data from the Missouri Statewide Traffic Accident Record System, (S.T.A.R.S.), my home state, was sorted through. The search was narrowed for fatal crashes involving "aggressive" or "hazardous driving." A 37% increase in St. Louis County from 2019 to 2020 was found – and that's with fewer cars on the road during the first part of the pandemic.

In 2020, retail workers were called "heroes" and "essential" as they worked to supply meals or groceries amid a harrowing pandemic. At the same time, they were tasked with carrying out one of the most complex social aspects of the pandemic: enforcing mask mandates. A survey of 4,187 McDonald's workers from last summer conducted by the Service Employees International Union found that 44% of respondents had been physically or verbally assaulted over mask mandates.

All of those numbers were shocking to read. Where did our kindness go and why have people allowed their anger to run rampant? Dr. Luana Marques, an associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School has been studying this rise and has a theory.

The pandemic has understandably caused fear and anxiety in a lot of people, which leads to the activation of the amygdala, the fight-or-flight part of our brains. "Patience is the ability to restrain your emotions a little bit, right? And you need your thinking brain there."

Marques explained that even though life is gradually opening back up and the most frightening days of the pandemic are hopefully behind us, people are still "riding really high cortisol," which means they're more on edge and quicker to reach what she called a "boiling point."

The psychological reasoning is sound and helps to understand where it is coming from. I've definitely felt my temperature rise more rapidly in public facing situations than at other times in life. And even more transparently, as a Rabbi who puts content out there pretty regularly on the internet, I have been called ignorant, idiotic, had my Rabbi title mocked, along with other things that are best left unsaid in a holy space such as this. I have received e-mails that make me never want to open my e-mail again.

That danger in that rage is what it produces and teaches others, especially our youngest folks. And, what does it turn into? While I am taking a bit of license here, if anger is a force and we know energy isn't created or destroyed, but rather converted into something else, how might we harness that?

Rage and anger are ever present emotions in our Parshah this week. Even more specifically, desperation animates every character in the parsha this week. When we're desperate we don't always act as our best selves. In utero, Yaakov and Esav seem to be at one another's throats. Their parents, Rebecca and Isaac seem to be partial to either child respectively. Especially with Rebecca, we can see her anger manifest in her treatment of Esav. Isaac's shepherds quarrel with the shepherds of Gerar. He asks why they later come to him *Ki Snaytem Oti*, for you hated me. More hatred.

The most painful moment in the parshah though, and perhaps all of Torah, comes in the aftermath of Jacob receiving the blessing that Isaac thought he was delivering to Esav. When the realization hits them both, here is what the text says,

“Isaac was seized with very violent trembling. “Who was it then,” he demanded, “that hunted game and brought it to me? Moreover, I ate of it before you came, and I blessed him; now he must remain blessed!”

When Esau heard his father’s words, he burst into wild and bitter sobbing, and said to his father, “Bless me too, Father!”

But he answered, “Your brother came with guile and took away your blessing.”

[Esau] said, “Was he, then, named Jacob that he might supplant me these two times? First he took away my birthright and now he has taken away my blessing!” And he added, “Have you not reserved a blessing for me?”

Isaac answered, saying to Esau, “But I have made him master over you: I have given him all his brothers for servants, and sustained him with grain and wine. What, then, can I still do for you, my son?”

And Esau said to his father, “Have you but one blessing, Father? Bless me too, Father!” And Esau wept aloud.



Every year this exchange strikes me painfully. All I can hear is the almost childlike pleading of Esav...please, just one blessing. His tears wracking his body as he beseeches his father. For all that the Rabbis later retroject onto Esav perhaps unfairly and even with all that we know about Esav from the Torah, how can we not be stirred at this moment and feel some empathy for him?

The sages also see this cry as an instructive moment in how rage and pain can reverberate far beyond the initial moment. For they say, the same loud and bitter cry of Esav is exactly like another loud and bitter cry in Tanach. In Bereishit Rabbah 67, where they make this connection, they say the following “Whoever maintains that the Holy One is a forgoer of just claims, may that person forgo their life. God is long suffering but ultimately collects what is owed. Jacob made Esav break out into a cry but once and when was he punished

for it? In Shushan the capital, as it says “and he cried a bitter and loud cry.”

The redactors of this Midrash see Jacob’s actions here as requiring a punishment. Jacob, the great father of the tribes is taken to task for his actions in this parshah and the pain they caused his brother. Not punished in the moment but meted out at a later date with potentially much more severity, as the edict to destroy the Jewish people is made in the story of Esther.

Thankfully, that crisis is averted but it’s noteworthy that the Rabbis see Jacob’s action here toward his brother as so problematic that the punishment coming from God almost wipes out the Jewish people. In Psalms 80:6, we are told that God has made us drink *D’maot Shalish*, tripart tears for our actions.

The Midrash there on Psalms links that punishment directly to how Esav was treated here. What does it mean for these teachings to imply that the hate we put out in our interactions with people can not only cause them pain but also cause God pain?

I don't ascribe to the theological understanding that God metes out punishment for each individual action that we undertake in our time on this Earth but I do think this framework can be helpful to think about this lack of kindness that we are seeing in our society today.

For when these actions come home to roost, in the lessons that they are teaching those young folks watching all of us, what are we imparting to them? That when you face a moment of frustration, you should take it out on the service worker? That when you read something someone writes that you disagree with, you should unload your vitriol upon them? That when your food order is wrong or a worker kindly asks you to put on a mask on, you should meet this request with force?

This rage is poisonous and it's contagious. We have to start learning how to control it. Marques, the aforementioned Psychologist argues that one way to help people recalibrate their emotions and stop resorting to aggression is to shift their perspective.

"When we're anxious, our lenses are distorted. We tend to magnify or 'catastrophize,'" she said. "Widen your lenses and try to collect more data — that tends to also cool off the brain a little bit." So we should try to breathe and practice patience. Get curious about your emotional responses. See if you can sense them in the moment and remember that the person in front of you is just as much created in God's image as you are. We also need to call out this behavior when we see it, telling people it's wrong to act that way and reminding the next generation that a culture of rage is not one that they want to inherit. If you see something, say something is not just about suspicious packages or people but can also be applied to behavior that's problematic.

All of this is a practice about which we need to stay diligent.

When Isaac and Esav are having their moment here, Isaac says to Esav, Jacob took your blessing, *Vayikah Birkhatekha*. That word, “your blessing-*birkhatekha*, according to the commentator the Baal Ha’turim appears only one other time in Tanach, in Psalms 3,

לְיִהוָּנָה הַיְשׁוּעָה עַל־עַמֶּךָ בְּרִכְתֶּךָ סְלָה:

Deliverance is the LORD’s; Your blessing be upon Your people!  
*Selah.*

It is noteworthy that this line appears in Havdalah. In a ritual ceremony where we mark the distinction between the holy and the profane, what a powerful reminder for us to think about as we start our weeks.

What might it look like if every time we said that word in Havdalah, *Birkhatekha*, we remembered this moment of pain and desperation? How might we act differently? How might it make us pause and rethink something that we did? How might you communicate differently? If you heard Esav's sobs at the start of each week, wouldn't you try to change your ways? For if deliverance truly comes at the hand of God as the Psalmist says, then God must be waiting for us to act in the way that merits that redemption, one that probably involves more love and kindness, and less anger and rage.

Rabbi Adir Yolcut