

The Month of Tevet:

Overcoming Anger and Agitation During the Month of Tevet

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Introduction

The month of Tevet gives us the opportunity to deal with anger and transform its power to combat our *yetzer hara* (evil inclination). According to *Sefer Yetzirah*, the dominant sense of the month of Tevet is agitation, *רוגעז*/*rogez*.¹ This implies that we may encounter challenges specifically with anger during this month. It is a nervous kind of anger as when we have a hard time maintaining the cool of our voice and actions. We may be prone to lose our temper, or we may be provoked specifically during this time. These challenges during the month of Tevet provide the opportunity for working on how to deal with and overcome our tendencies for agitation. At first glance at *Sefer Yetzirah*, Tevet looks like a dark month where anger and agitation rule rampantly. Yet, the letter *א*/*ayin* of Tevet, which means 'eye,' alludes to the change of perspective necessary for learning to view even that which agitates us to the extreme as a most welcome challenge for self-refinement. The tribe of the month, Dan, means judgment. During Tevet we have the opportunity to revert negativity, judgment and idol-worship enacted by this tribe. Anger is compared to idol-worship because it has no place when we truly believe in Hashem. When we trust and accept whatever He sends our way, even the darkest negativity has a purpose to help us grow and improve our character. We can utilize the sparks of agitation which challenge us during Tevet as a springboard to uproot anger, and grow deeper roots of faith and trust in Hashem. Read on to learn about the connection between the liver and anger both in Chinese Medicine and the Talmud, anger and control issues and how to combat the seven-headed snake energy of anger.

Overcome Anger during Tevet and Increase Righteousness in Shevat

The month of Tevet takes its name from "*hatavah*" – self-betterment and preparation for illumination. This process continues during the month of Shevat whose letter *tzadik* symbolizes righteousness. Together, the letters of these two months spell the word *עץ*/*etz* – tree, which we humans are compared to.² The work of these months enables us to become like the fruit-bearing tree described in the first *Tehillim*: "*He shall be like a tree planted by streams of water that brings forth its fruit in its season, and whose leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does he shall succeed.*"³ Thus, overcoming negativity during Tevet is completed by the increase of righteousness during Shevat.

¹ *Sefer Yetzirah* 5:10.

² *Devarim* 20:19.

³ *Tehillim* 1:3.

The Connection between the Liver and Anger

According to the Arizal the months of Tevet and Shevat correspond to the two eyes.⁴ In Traditional Chinese Medicine the eyes and the liver are related. Dry, red eyes and other eye conditions as well as irritability, and inappropriate anger are symptoms of liver imbalance.⁵ Likewise, our sages teach us that: "The liver gets angry; the gall bladder injects in it a drop and calms it down."⁶

The function of the liver is to purify the blood, and provide the body with fresh blood. In Kabbalah, the liver corresponds to the primordial snake. Its rectification is personified by Dan, whose flag had a picture of a snake. Rabbi Ginsburgh teaches that the three "rulers" of body and soul are the brain, the heart, and the liver,⁷ which correspond to Adam, Eve, and the snake, respectively.⁸

Anger – the Snake Energy

When a person gets angry, he is taken over by a negative energy. The essence of anger derives from the primordial snake. The first word the primordial snake said was 'אָף/af.' This word can mean either 'even,' or 'anger.'

וְהַנָּחָשׁ הָיָה עָרוּם מִכָּל חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה ה' אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר אֵל הָאִשָּׁה אַף כִּי אָמַר אֱלֹהִים לֹא תֹאכְלוּ מִכָּל עֵץ הַגָּן: (בראשית ג, א)

"The snake was more cunning than all the animals of the field that Hashem had made, and it said to the woman 'אָף/af – even if G-d said that you cannot eat from the trees of the garden.'"⁹ The Zohar explains, "He said to the woman, אָף/af – even [anger]." The snake began with anger and brought anger into the world."¹⁰ Therefore, any time we get angry, we have lost it, meaning lost control over ourselves and allowed the external energy of the snake to take possession over us. This is one of the reasons why anger is compared to idol-worship, as the person who is angry is now serving his "snake-god" which is coming between him and Hashem.

Out of Control

When a person gets angry it creates a black cloud of soot, which can become stuck on top of the head, and completely block Hashem's light. This is why sometimes anger causes headaches. When Hashem's light is blocked negative forces can enter. When we get angry we therefore allow the negativity of hell to take control over us. We may lose control, scream, and say things we didn't mean to say. It is no longer our own voice that speaks but the negative forces that took control over us. This is what it means that whoever gets angry is as if he worships idols, because he is becoming like a slave to the negative forces which are like idols.

Rabbi Shemuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yonatan: He who gets angry all kinds of torments of *gehenna* (hell) controls him, for it is written, "Therefore remove anger from your heart, thus you will put away evil from your flesh."¹¹ Now 'evil' can only mean *gehenna*, as it is

⁴ Arizal, *Sha'ar HaKavanot, Drushei Rosh Hashana, Drush 1.*

⁵ <<http://altmedicine.about.com/cs/anxietydepression/a/EmotionsTCM.htm>>.

⁶ *Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 61b.*

⁷ In Hebrew brain is מוח/*moach*, heart is לב/*lev* and liver is כבד/*kaved*, the acronym of which spells out the word מלך/*melech* which means king.

⁸ <<http://www.inner.org/times/tevet/tevet.htm>>.

⁹ *Bereishit 3:1.*

¹⁰ *Zohar, Part 1, Page 35b.*

¹¹ *Kohelet 9:10.*

written, “Hashem has made all things for himself, even the wicked for the day of evil.”¹² [This is understood to mean *gehenna*.] Moreover, he is made to suffer from hemorrhoids, as it is written, “But Hashem shall give you there a trembling heart, and failing of eyes, and sorrow of mind.”¹³ Now what causes failing eyes and a sorrowful mind? Hemorrhoids.¹⁴

I’m not sure how to explain the connection between hemorrhoids and anger. Possibly when a person is agitated the food he eats is not digested well, and therefore it may impair elimination, which could lead to hemorrhoids. On a spiritual level, perhaps we can say that there is a connection between the upper and lower opening of the body. When a person gets angry his mouth is out of control. Perhaps as a measure for measure his lower opening too becomes out of control and causes him to develop hemorrhoids.

Anger – the Control Issue

People may get angry when they feel that they are losing control. For example, the bus doesn’t stop for you. You have waited more than 20 minutes, and you are going to be really late to spend time with your children before their bed time etc. Finally the bus comes but it doesn’t stop at your bus stop, it drives right by you, ignoring your flapping hand trying to flag it down. What do you do? You are totally at loss, you have no control. Everything is from Hashem. We need to realize in those difficult moments that everything is from Hashem nothing is in my control; it is all in Hashem’s hands. It is appropriate to ask, “What *midah* (character trait) can I work on now? Which mitzvah can I fulfill? How does Hashem want me to move forward through this test?” Perhaps Hashem wants me to remain 20 minutes in this place, even if I don’t know why, this is Hashem’s will. It becomes so much easier to deal with anger when we understand that control is not in our hands, therefore we have nothing to be angry about. Specifically at this time during Tevet, we have the opportunity to work on the most refined points of removing anger totally. Whenever we get angry at someone, remember it is not that person who is doing whatever he is doing, its Hashem acting through that person, and ultimately its for our good, even if we don’t understand this yet.

Neutralizing Anger through Trans-rational Dedication (*Bitul*)¹⁵

Ya’acov’s struggle with Esav gives us a model for how to overcome the snake energy of anger embodied by Esav. After Ya’acov defeated the angel of Esav, he bowed down seven times to Esav. Why did Ya’acov bow down seven times to Esav? The seven powers of impurity which the primordial snake brought into the world were all gathered in Esav.¹⁶ The name of Ya’acov’s father, ‘Yitzchak,’ has the numerical value of 208, which equals (8 x 26 *yud-kay-vav-kay* – the name of Hashem. Ya’acov’s name equals 182 or (7 x 26). When Yitzchak gave his blessings to Ya’acov, he bequeathed Ya’acov with seven of his *yud-kay-vav-kays* – seven forces of holiness. The last

¹² *Mishlei* 16:4.

¹³ *Devarim* 28:65.

¹⁴ *Babylonian Talmud, Nedarim* 22a.

¹⁵ This section is adapted from Dr. Yisrael Susskind, *Vayishlach: How to transform anger* *Rockland Jewish Reporter*, November, 2007, vol.17 (2), p. 2.

¹⁶ *Shem m’Shemuel, Parashat Vayislach*.

remaining 26 was given to Esav, whose name equals 376, which is 26 + 350. 350 equals seven x 50, the numerical value of the Hebrew word for טמא/*tamé* – impure. Each time Ya’acov bowed, he bestowed Esav with one of his forces of holiness, each of which neutralized one of his impure forces. After seven bows, all the impurity in Esav had been neutralized, and all that was left in Esav was one holy, Divine 26. Ya’acov thus succeeded not only in overpowering his brother, but in returning him to ‘goodness.’ In such a state, we feel love.

But how does bowing neutralize impurity? How does it cut off the seven heads of the snake? If we are confronted by an agitated person who has brought a spirit of impurity into his thoughts and speech, we need to help the person draw on his own internal holy sparks. We need to see the 26 inside of that person even as it is surrounded by the heads of the snake. Most important we must not allow his snake to elicit our snake. We can neutralize the negative by repeatedly use our loving 26s to serve the person. In this case putting up with the outrageous behavior and showing support is an expression of true love that helps beat the angry person’s seven headed snake and in this way nullify his anger.

The numerical value of the liver – כַּבֵּד/*kaved* – the seat of anger is also 26. When a person gets agitated it arouses and activates the liver. However, the agitation itself includes its rectification. The spiritual energy of the liver is actually no other than *yud-kay-vav-kay*= Hashem. Even within the greatest impurity of anger is concealed the oneness of Hashem. When we respond with love while dealing with an angry person, we can neutralize his anger and activate his concealed *yud-key-vav-key*. Likewise when we give the benefit of the doubt and focus on Hashem while being provoked to anger, we have the greatest ability to overcome our ego and strengthen our connection with Hashem. In this way the fire of anger can be used to better the relationship. The tool for doing so is *bitul*, shrinking our ego for the moment and nurturing our fellow. That is the primary lesson from this story of Ya’acov’s bowing. There is no satisfying English equivalent of *bitul*. The closest is “gratuitous passionate trans-rational dedication.”¹⁷

Transforming Anger

The snake, in Kabbalah, represents the initial state of immaturity of the soul, as characterized by the un-rectified attribute of anger. The venom of the snake is hot like the fire of anger. When converted to good, the fire (and blood of the liver) serves to warm the cold month of *Tevet*. The sense of holy anger is the ability of the soul to arouse our good inclination to become angry at our evil inclination. This, our sages teach in their commentary on the verse: “*Be angry and don’t sin. Commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still.*”¹⁸ How can we use and channel our anger in a positive way? In *Chassidut* we are taught that one must direct his left (“evil”) eye towards himself (with the holy anger of his innate good against his innate evil), to lower and subdue his ego, while simultaneously directing his right (“good”) eye towards outer reality (by which power he helps reality perfect itself). The character trait of anger is one of the worst

¹⁷ I love Dr. Susskind’s definition of the Hebrew expression *bitul* used often in Chassidism.

¹⁸ *Tehillim* 4:5.

emotions possible. Yet, when its energy is channeled towards becoming angry only at evil, it can turn us towards all the good as the name Tevet indicates. Anger, like any of G-d's creations, can serve a good purpose. When a person is angry at us, we are tempted to respond with our dark side; however, we have a positive alternative. By freeing ourselves from negativity, by finding the strength to do what G-d wants us to do; we use the fire of the conflict to refine both our character and our relationships.