

The Toxicity of Resentment

By Abraham J. Twerski

"They were drunk, but not with wine; they drifted, but not with ale" (Isaiah 29:9).

This is just one of many places where the prophet, in admonishing the Jewish people for their errant behavior, compares them to people intoxicated with alcohol. It follows then that learning how a person recovers from alcoholism can help us in our own moral development. Indeed, my years of experience with such addicts have taught me that the approach and methods used to help them recover can help anyone improve his life.

I recall one of my patients who was swindled by a group of businessmen whom he had trusted. "I feel bitter resentment towards those crooks," he told me. "I will go to an AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) meeting tonight and try to shed it. You see, if I hang on to resentment, I will drink again."

His words made me think: *This man is aware of the toxicity of resentment. He knows it will lead him back to addictive*

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behavior. What about people who do not see that harboring resentment is really harmful to themselves? They can go on bearing grudges for years.

King Solomon stated, "Anger *lingers* in the bosom of a fool" (Kohelet 7:9). You may not be able to avoid feeling angry when offended, but to allow the anger to remain with you is indeed foolish.

How does a person divest himself of lingering anger? One way is through verbalizing feelings with friends. I learned this when I accompanied the above-mentioned patient to the AA meeting that night. After one recovering alcoholic delivered an emotional

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talk about his recovery experience, participants formed small groups and exchanged ideas and personal stories. In the group I attended, my patient related how he had been deceived by people he had trusted. His anger at them was eating away at him. "I can relate to that," someone said. "I used to be filled with anger too. But I came to realize that hanging on to anger is not affecting the people who hurt me. They don't have headaches, indigestion or insomnia. *I do*. Why should *I* suffer because of their wrong behavior? So I just stopped thinking about them, and eventually my anger evaporated.

He continued, "Hanging on to resentment is akin to allowing people you don't like to live inside your head without paying rent. I'm not the kind of person to let people do that, so I evicted them from my head."

I'm not certain that this completely eliminated my patient's resentment, but it was certainly a good beginning.

There is another way of ridding oneself of resentment. My father used to say about someone who offended him:

"That person does not know how foolish his behavior was. I feel sorry for him for being such a fool. I cannot be angry at someone if I feel sorry for him. The two feelings conflict, so the anger must go."

Sympathy causes one to wish to help a person and alleviate his distress. Anger causes one to want to punish the offender. Just as light and darkness cannot coexist in one room, neither can sympathy and anger toward the same person.

Of course, many of these thoughts are taught in the works of *musar*. Unfortunately, for many of us, reading *musar* is often an intellectual rather than an emotional exercise, and therefore has little impact on our behavior. But studying *musar* intensely, and discussing its principles, preferably in a group, may have a greater effect. The classic letter of Ramban to his son, found in many *siddurim*, is an extremely helpful resource in dealing with these issues.

If we understand that harboring resentment is toxic to ourselves, we will be motivated by self-survival to rid ourselves of it. As an added bonus, we will gain a precious mitzvah: "Do not hate your brother in your heart" (Leviticus 1:17). **JA**