

ZERIZUT: ACTING WITH PROMPTNESS

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Every morning, Eli rushes his siblings out of the house so that he can get to school a few minutes early. One morning, halfway to school, his sister realized that she left an important homework assignment at home and asked if they can turn around and pick up the assignment. Without hesitating, Eli said to his mother “Even though getting to school early is very important to me, don’t let that affect your decision.”

Sometimes we procrastinate working on an important task that is not very exciting or is very difficult in favor of other activities. The Talmud, *Pesachim* 4a, relates that someone who embodies *zerizut* (acting with promptness), the opposite of procrastination, always performs mitzvot promptly, without delay (*zerizin makdimin lemitzvot*). While we generally try to complete tasks promptly, we sometimes face certain challenges. Let’s look at the following scenarios:

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| CASE ONE | Shira is spending her summer planning a Shabbaton (Shabbat retreat) for the beginning of the school year. Her family and friends are pushing her to complete the preparations quickly so that she has some relaxation time at the end of the summer and suggest that she set her goals accordingly. She would also like to have some time at the end of the summer but is concerned that if she tries to speed up the preparations, there is a greater likelihood that something will go wrong. What should she do? |
| CASE TWO | Lisa raises money from friends and family to take disabled children on fun trips. This Sunday seems like a good opportunity for a trip but if she waits a few months, she will have enough money to take them on a better trip. What should she do? |
| CASE THREE | Shimon and David volunteered to reorganize the synagogue’s library. The past few Sundays, Shimon asked David to work on the project and each week, David had a different excuse. Shimon tells David that he does not want to procrastinate any longer and if David is not available this week, Shimon is prepared to do it himself. David replies that he has been busy but he really wants the opportunity to help the synagogue. He asks Shimon if they can work on it in a few weeks when he won’t be as busy. What should Shimon do? |

Question for the Table

Why do you think a discussion about *zerizut* is relevant to the month of Elul, Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur?

Examining the sources

R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto dedicates three chapters of his *Mesillat Yesharim* to *zerizut*. He notes that that *zerizut* is relevant at two different stages of a task or project:

There are two components to promptness, one before the action and one during its performance. Before the action one should make sure not to delay performing a mitzvah. Rather, when the time comes, or when the opportunity arises or the thought crosses one's mind, one should quickly act and one should not allow time to pass ... Promptness during performance means that once one has begun performance, one should quickly complete it, not for the purpose of removing the burden but out of fear that one may not complete the task.

Mesillat Yesharim, Chapter 7

חלקי הזריזות שנים, אחד קודם המעשה ואחד אחרי כן. קודם התחלת המעשה הוא שלא יחמיץ האדם את המצוה, אלא בהגיע זמנה או בהזדמנה לפניו או בעלותה במחשבתו, ימהר יחיש מעשהו לאחוז בה ולעשות אותה ולא יניח זמן לזמן שיתרבה בינתיים ... הזריזות אחר התחלת המעשה הוא, שכיון שאחז במצוה, ימהר להשלים אותה ולא להקל מעליו כמי שמתאוה להשליך מעליו משאו, אלא מיראתו פן לא יזכה לגמור אותה.
מסילת ישרים, פרק ז

R. Luzzatto writes that one should complete tasks quickly. However, a comment in *Orchot Tzaddikim*, an anonymously authored work written centuries earlier, teaches us the difference between acting quickly and rushing:

Although promptness is very positive, one should make sure not to rush in one's work too much. One who rides [a horse] too quickly is likely to get hurt and one who runs very quickly will fall. One cannot complete a task properly if it is rushed; doing something properly requires patience. This is why our rabbis stated "be patient in judgment." Promptness is to be awake, alert and ready to act, but never to rush what one is doing. These issues require great wisdom to determine when one should act quickly and when one should act with patience.

Orchot Tzaddikim, Sha'ar HaZerizut

אף-על-פי שהזריזות טובה מאוד, יזהר שלא ימהר בעבודתו יותר מדי כי הרוכב במהירות הוא קרוב מאוד להיכשל. וכן מי שהוא רץ במהירות הוא נופל. ולא יתכן לתקן מעשה מתוקן בבהלה, אבל במתון יתקנו העניינים. וכן אמרו רבותינו: "הוו מתונים בדין" (אבות א, א). והזריזות - שיהא ניעור לבו ויקיץ מחשבותיו ויקלו איבריו למלאכתו, אך לא ימהר בשום עניין. וכל אלו העניינים צריכים חוכמה גדולה, מתי ימהר ומתי יאחר.

אורחות צדיקים שער הזריזות.

These sources highlight two reasons why a project might take longer than expected. First, because the person working on it is trying to ensure that it is completed properly. Second, because the person working on it takes a lot of breaks and is not fully dedicated to the project. *Orchot Tzaddikim* addresses the first type of delay and writes that it is praiseworthy. R. Luzzatto addresses the second type of delay and sees it as a challenge to completing tasks.

Questions for the Table

- Do you think *Orchot Tzaddikim* would accept the argument of someone who says "I work much better when I am up against a deadline"? Do you think R. Luzzatto would accept the argument of someone who says "if I don't take a break every few minutes, I can't get anything done"?
- How would you apply this discussion to case #1? What should Shira evaluate before deciding whether to try to finish her project earlier?

In Case #1, Shira is faced with the decision of whether to speed up her project at the expense of potentially making errors. What if *zerizut* will not negatively impact the result but delaying will produce an even better result?

R. Yisrael Isserlin deals with this issue in discussing the optimal time to recite *Kiddush Levana* (the blessing on seeing the new moon). On the one hand, there is a benefit to recite it on Saturday night when people are dressed in their nice Shabbat clothing. On the other hand, one can only recite the blessing until the middle of the month.

It seems that there is a distinction. If the upcoming Saturday night is early in the month, such as the seventh or eight of the month, so that even if it is cloudy on Saturday night and on the next few nights, there is still an opportunity to recite the blessing by the end of the fifteenth (the final time to recite the blessing), then it is proper to wait. This is because it states in the Or Zarua (a work on Jewish law) that one should only recite the blessing on the moon on Saturday night when everyone is adorned in nice clothing. However, if the upcoming Saturday night is later in the month such that if it is cloudy on Saturday night and the next few nights, there will be no opportunity to recite the blessing, one should not wait because whenever there is a chance to lose an opportunity to perform a mitzvah altogether, we don't delay performing it, even if the delay is to perform the mitzvah in better way.

Terumat HaDeshen no. 35

יראה דיש לחלק בדבר, היכא דליל מוצאי שבת הבא בקרוב, אינו לילות הרבה בחודש, כגון ז' או ח' בחדש, שאפילו אם יהא מעונן במוצ"ש, וב' וג' או ד' לילות אחריו, עדיין יש זמן לברך, עד סוף ליל ט"ו, כה"ג יפה להמתין עד מו"ש. דכתב א"ו: דאין מברכין על הירח אלא במו"ש, כשהן מבושמיין ובכלים נאים; אבל אם ליל מוצ"ש הבא, יהא לילות הרבה בחודש, שאם יהיה מעונן בו, וב' וג' או ד' לילות אחריו, יעבור זמן הברכה, כה"ג אין להמתין עד מו"ש, דכל היכא דראוי הוא להסתפק, שתעבור המצוה, אין משהין אותה, אפילו כדי לעשותה יותר מן המובהר.
תרומת הדשן ס' לה

Questions for the Table

- In every project we engage in, there is always a possibility that delaying will lead to a lost opportunity. How does R. Isserlin deal with this? How can we apply his criteria to other situations?
- How is case #2 similar to the case discussed by R. Isserlin? How is it different?

Case #3 builds on the discussion of case #2. If Shimon is concerned that delaying the project may cause them to lose the opportunity altogether (for example, Shimon is leaving to Israel or college for the year), then perhaps he should start the project without David, even if he won't accomplish as much. However, if Shimon is driven by simple *zerizut*, he must consider whether *zerizut* should be employed when it comes at someone else's expense. If we consider *zerizut*, in this case, to be an enhanced way of performing the mitzvah, we find a similar discussion regarding Chanukah lights. While we are accustomed to each person lighting their own Chanukah lights corresponding to the day of Chanukah, that is really considered an enhancement (*mehadrin min hamehadrin*). The basic mitzvah is one candle per night for the entire household. R. Avraham Gombiner discusses a situation where one has to choose between one's own enhanced form of the mitzvah or the basic fulfillment of someone else:

If one has minimal oil and one's friend has none, it is better to light one light each night and give to one's friend because the law requires only one light.

Magen Avraham 671:1

אם יש לו שמן בצמצום ולחבירו אין לו כלל מוטב שידליק בכל לילה א' ויתן גם לחבירו דהא מדינא א"צ אלא א'.
מגן אברהם תרעא:א

Questions for the Table

- How might one use R. Gombiner's idea to argue that Shimon should allow David the opportunity to help? Is R. Gombiner's case different?
- What other options should Shimon explore?

Dr. Timothy Pychyl, an expert in the study of procrastination, notes that "Procrastination is not a delay based on priorities. Procrastination is delaying an important task in favor of some alternative task that we really know is not as important, needn't be done right now, but seems more attractive, more rewarding."¹ Whenever someone is faced with a dilemma as to whether to do something now or later, the most important question to ask is whether the issue is delay based on priority or procrastination. If Shira from case #1 is or David from case #3 are procrastinating, then they need to motivate themselves to work efficiently and avoid making excuses for doing something that they know is important. However, if they are delaying based on other priorities, then they need to weigh the merits of delaying and the merits of acting with *zerizut*.

From the beginning of Elul until Yom Kippur, there is a specific focus on repentance and self-improvement. R. Luzzatto's *Mesillat Yesharim* outlines a series of steps one can take towards self-improvement and *zerizut* is the second step (following *zehirut*, watchfulness). When we set a goal to improve ourselves, it is important to start working on that goal promptly rather than procrastinate. We can counteract any tendency we have to procrastinate by trying to incorporate *zerizut* into all aspects of our lives.

Compiled by Rabbi Josh Flug, Director of Torah Research, Yeshiva University's Center for the Jewish Future

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF AUTHORS CITED

R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (also known as Ramchal, 1707-1746) was an Italian scholar who wrote numerous works on Jewish thought and mysticism. His *Mesillat Yesharim* is considered one of the most important Jewish works on ethics. He settled in the Land of Israel in 1743.

Orchot Tzaddikim was written in the 14th or 15th century. The author is unknown. The book discusses many different character traits and is often quoted in discussions on ethics and values.

R. Yisrael Isserlin (c. 1390-1460), an Austrian rabbi, was one of the most influential rabbis of Europe in the early fifteenth century. His *Terumat HaDeshen* serves as the basis for numerous Ashkenazi practices.

R. Avraham Gombiner (c.1633-1683) was a Polish rabbi most well-known for his *Magen Avraham*, a commentary on *Shulchan Aruch*. He also wrote a commentary on Midrash and the Tosefta.

Dr. Timothy Pychyl is a faculty member in the Department of Psychology at Carleton University. He authored three books on procrastination and writes a column on procrastination for *Psychology Today* available at: <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/dont-delay>.

¹ Timothy Pychyl, "No Time to Delay," *Psychology Today* (March 2008) available at: <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/dont-delay/200803/no-time-delay>.