

“And you shall guard the matzos, for on this very day I brought your legions out of the land of Egypt.” (12:17)

Rashi cites the well-known *Midrash* which tells us not to read the word as *matzos*, but as *mitzvos* (which are spelled the same). We derive from here that “just as one should not allow *matzoh* to become leavened, so too, should one not cause leavening with regard to any *mitzvah*. Rather, if a *mitzvah* comes to your hand (an opportunity arises), perform it immediately.” Do not postpone performing a *mitzvah*. Every *mitzvah* is precious, and every moment is valuable, so do not squander such a golden opportunity.

The need to incorporate *zerizus*, alacrity, joyful willingness and excitement, into our *mitzvah* performance is underscored by the fact that the Torah restricts *chametz*, leavening, from being brought on the Altar as part of various meal-offerings. The *Sefer HaChinuch* explains that this prohibition helps to imprint on our psyche the need to acquire the attribute of *zerizus* in our service of Hashem. Leavening is the natural result of delay in the dough-making process. The Altar is the site chosen by Hashem as the symbolic place from where *korbanos*, sacrifices – which represent our personal attitude and willingness to offer ourselves up to Hashem – are burnt. This fire serves as our proxy, our medium of service, and, thus, demonstrates our joyful readiness to serve Him.

Zerizus is the *middah*, character trait, which helps us fulfill our dreams. It transitions us from wishful thinking to taking action. It is the *middah* that defines everything we do. If our attitude concerning *mitzvah* observance is sluggish, it indicates that we are far from eager or excited about serving Hashem. As *zerizus* becomes a part of our lives, we discover our practical accomplishments, which will ultimately lead us to happier, more meaningful lives. It is all about doing, achieving, while thinking about acting gets us nowhere.

Horav Chaim Friedlander, zl, explains that when the *pasuk* exhorts us to prevent *Pesach matzos* from becoming *chametz*, *Chazal* derive a lesson concerning the underlying essence of the *mitzvah* of *Matzah*. Our Sages reveal that the secret of the *mitzvah* of *Matzah* is concealed within the lesson we must derive from the Jewish People’s haste in leaving Egypt. It teaches us the overriding significance of the *middah* of *zerizus*. Just as *Klal Yisrael* were unable to achieve freedom without the medium of *zerizus*, so too, is it impossible to fulfill the Torah and execute its *mitzvos* properly without the power of *zerizus*. The *zerizus* factor determines whether it is truly a *mitzvah*.

The crucial lesson derived from here is that one must be a *zariz*, enthusiastically diligent, and alacritous in his service of Hashem. *Chametz* occurs when one does nothing, and allows nature to take its course. As human beings, we are naturally lazy. To be a *zariz* is to go against nature. *Matzah*, like *zerizus*, is the product of working against the forces of nature.

At the end of his treatise on *zerizus*, the *Mesillas Yescharim*, writes: “The Scriptures describe the Heavenly angels as having *zerizus* to carry out the Divine bidding...” The *pasuk* in *Yechezkel* 1:14 describes them as acting swiftly as streaks of lightning. While a human being is not an angel... his aspiration should be to emulate their *zerizus*, as David *Ha'melech* says in *Sefer Tehillim* 119:60, “I hastened and I did not delay to observe Your *mitzvos*.”

What is the *Ramchal* teaching us? After his thesis on *zerizus*, he notes that the angels have been lauded for their exemplary alacrity in serving Hashem. We should aspire to be like them. The question is simple: What relationship do we simple humans have with angels? How can we strive to be like them? How can their attribute of *zerizus* be expected of us? We are not angels.

Horav Shimshon Pincus, zl, explains that the Heavenly angels are our example, our standard for defining *avodas Hashem*, service to the Almighty. Hashem wants us to be as “angel-like” as we can be, to emulate the Heavenly angels – not human beings!! This is a powerful statement and an awesome mission. No one has ever said that to be an observant Jew is a walk in the park. It is an awesome responsibility, but after one has mastered it, it becomes his greatest source of joy.

In “*Lights Along the Way*,” Rabbi A. Twerski explains this concept from a practical perspective. The human being is a composite of a physical body – much like that of any brute beast, subject to physical strivings and desires. He also has a *neshamah*, a spiritual soul, a Divine spirit – akin to that of an angel.

An animal cannot be condemned for acting upon its cravings and physical temptations. After all, it is only an animal. An angel which is comprised of pure spirit really cannot be lauded for executing Hashem’s Will, because he is pure spirit not just “something spiritual.” The human being consists of both of these qualities: part animal, part angel. A man is considered spiritual when his spiritual magnitude overwhelms and transcends his physical dimension. When man allows the angelic quality of his being to control his physical component, thereby deterring his behavior, he has achieved a significant step towards spirituality.

There is no dearth of stories concerning the *middah* of *zerizus*. The following story, however, incorporates the lesson of *zerizus* into the *mitzvah* of *Matzoh* and, as *Chazal* infer, to all *mitzvos*: In his *Sefer Nitzotzos*, *Horav Yitzchak Hershkowitz, Shlita*, relates the story of a pious Jew, whom we will call Shaul, who grew up in Russia during the beginning of the Communist revolution. Life was difficult for the Jews under the Russian Czars. Indeed, there was hope that with the advent of the new movement called Communism, their lot would improve. How wrong they were.

From the outset, Communism was the movement that would help the workers. Capitalism was an anathema. All monies would be divided equally. Division of classes among the people would be eliminated. Everyone would prosper. However, the people soon realized that the movement would enslave them like none other. Everyone began to suffer, but none had it worse than the Jews. After all, Communism was an agnostic ideology. There was no place for G-d in their society. While most

religions deferred to the Communists' pressure, small pockets of Jews remained steadfast and resolute, refusing to renege on their beliefs

Shaul was one of these pious individuals. A *Stoliner chasid*, he sought out the *Rebbe*, *Horav Yisrael, zl*, for guidance and inspiration. In 1922, when the *Rebbe* died, his son, *Horav Yochanan*, became *Rebbe*. At the time, Shaul lived in Kiev and not only did he personally observe *mitzvos* but he found ways to organize campaigns for *Tefillin*, *Shabbos* and *Bris Milah*. Constantly risking his life, he felt it a privilege to serve the Almighty in this manner.

Unfortunately, Shaul was caught and sentenced to Siberia as a dissident. His sectarian actions in rallying other Jews were considered criminal, and he was fortunate not to be executed for his subversion against the ruling government. This punishment did not alter Shaul's *avodas Hashem*, service to the Almighty. He assembled as many Jews as were willing to acknowledge their heritage, to make a makeshift clandestine *shul*. He smuggled in a few pairs of *Tefillin*, some *Siddurim*, and *Chumashim*. They even had a *bais ha'medrash*, of sorts. Shaul feared no one – other than Hashem. This is how he lived. Obviously, the Communist government discovered his insurrection and quickly put an end to his religious services.

Shaul was a problem for the Communists that would not go away. Wherever he went, he attracted other Jews who, albeit alienated, seemed to follow him. The judges decided that the only way to put an end to Shaul's influence was to incarcerate him in a place removed from society, and especially Jews. Shaul was sent up north, very close to Vladivostok, an area that had no Jews and practically no people. To the judges it was the end of the earth. Moreover, the climate was far from hospitable, and likewise those who were imprisoned there with him.

Shaul found himself one Jew among one hundred base farmers, whose entire day revolved around the two meals they were served daily. Shaul's goal was to maintain his Jewishness, both in appearance and action, even in this miserable place. The Communists had taken his *Tefillin* and whatever few *sefarim* he had. They could not, however, take Hashem away from him.

It was an unusually cold winter, even for Siberia, but Shaul was preoccupied with keeping track of the days, so that he could determine the *Yomim Tovim*, Festivals. His primary focus was on how to obtain six *Matzos* for the *Pesach Sedarim*. One would think that this should be furthest from his mind, but Shaul was an unusual person. Torah was his *raison d'être*. *Mitzvos* coursed through his veins.

According to his calculations, he had reached the fifteenth of *Adar*, and *Pesach* would occur in another month. How was he to fulfill his dream of eating *Matzah* on *Pesach*? The Russians had taken his body, enslaved and broken it, but they could not penetrate his noble *neshamah*, soul. His mind was free to soar in the heavens.

Among the hundred or so inmates incarcerated in this jail was a teenage boy whose name was

Vladimir. He kept to himself and did not speak. Indeed, while the other inmates were regaling each other with stories of their previous life, Vladimir said nothing. Thus, he became an outcast – among outcasts. Since Shaul was the only one who never questioned the reason for Vladimir's incarceration, the boy warmed up to him. He related the story of his life to Shaul, and, after a while, he opened up completely to him. Shaul felt that this relationship was a G-d-send, since Vladimir was one of the few prisoners who worked from early morning until late at night in the wheat fields a few miles from their prison. Shaul presented Vladimir with a proposition: If he would bring him a few kernels of wheat daily, Shaul would give him his breakfast. This was an incredible offer, since the little food that the inmates received was certainly insufficient in providing energy for an entire day's toil. An extra portion would certainly go a long way. On the other hand, Shaul was prepared to starve for weeks as long as he would be able to obtain wheat for his precious *Matzah*.

Vladimir did not understand the purpose of the few kernels of wheat, but he definitely could use another breakfast. Slowly, Shaul became weakened by his daily fast. Nevertheless, he gathered the kernels, ground them into flour and found a way to bake his *Matzos*. *Pesach* night, he sat back and made a *Seder*. It was not much. He had his *Matzos*; *Marror*, bitterness, was certainly abundant. Alas, he had no wine. He would subsist on his *Matzos*. With courage borne of faith and trust in the Almighty, Shaul remained strong until the summer, when the Russians finally allowed him to leave.

Shaul entered his hometown of Kiev on what was, according to his calculations, *Erev Rosh Chodesh Elul*. We can imagine his shock and disbelief when he was told that it was only *Tammuz* 29. He was off by a month. He practically fainted on the spot. It had just hit him – he had conducted the *Pesach Seder* when the rest of the Jewish world was celebrating *Purim*! Not only had he not celebrated *Pesach* properly, he had, in fact, eaten *chametz* on *Pesach*! Shaul was a broken person. Siberia did not break him, but the thought of eating *chametz* on *Pesach* was too much to for him to bear.

Shaul eventually emigrated to the United States. He heard that the *Stoliner Rebbe* had been spared from the Nazi terror. The *Rebbe* had been living in *Eretz Yisrael*, but was coming to America to give comfort and solace to his many *chassidim* who had survived as embers from the flames of the European inferno. Shaul decided that he would join the throngs of people waiting to meet with the *Rebbe*.

He waited hours until, finally, it was his turn to meet the *Rebbe*. Shaul entered the room, shook the *Rebbe's* hand and broke into uncontrollable weeping. After explaining the reason for his excessive emotion, the *Rebbe* sat back and also wept. "*Mi k'Amcha Yisrael!* – 'Who is like Your nation, *Yisrael!*' A man goes through years of suffering at the hands of ruthless creatures; yet, his only complaint was that he had erred and eaten *chametz* on *Pesach*!"

The *Rebbe* looked at Shaul and said, "True, you did not fulfill the part of the *pasuk* that exhorts us to guard the *Matzos* from becoming *chametz*, but, you certainly fulfilled the interpretation of

U'shemartem es ha'mitzvos!" Hashem does not look at the conclusion. He cares about one's attitude, his fervor and toil, his sacrifice and devotion. Hashem looks at the heart one puts into *mitzvah* performance. You gave up your daily bread, so that you could partake of *Matzah* on *Pesach*. Do you think for one moment that this is not precious in Heaven? You have provided Hashem with a treasure. Do not fret, Shaul. Hashem accepted your *Matzah* as the most worthy *korban*, offering!"

Shaul was obviously shaken by these words. He gathered his courage and asked the *Rebbe*, "Would the *Rebbe* please write this, so that I can keep it with me?" Paper was brought, and the *Rebbe* wrote and affixed his signature to the "note." Shaul left a new person.

A number of years passed, and Shaul lay on his deathbed, surrounded by his family. He had lived a difficult life, but Hashem had blessed him with a beautiful family from whom he had derived much satisfaction. Now, it was time to say "good-bye". Shaul turned to his oldest son and asked him to bring him a sealed envelope that lay in his desk drawer. After his son had brought it, Shaul removed the note that was inside and said to his son, "Please be sure that this note is placed beneath my head in the grave. It is my passport to *Gan Eden*."