

Passover and the middah of Zerizut/Enthusiasm

We know a lot about our upcoming holiday of Passover, so let's go straight to the middah, or 'holy quality' we are embracing in this month's practice of Mussar. Zerizut means 'enthusiasm', and comes from the Hebrew root zayin-resh-zayin (ז.ר.ז) which translates variously as: 'to speed up', 'accelerate', 'expedite', 'hasten' 'stimulate', 'encourage' and (in chemistry) 'to catalyze'.

We can easily relate this middah with Passover, as the holiday seems to be speeding toward us, and we still haven't bought our matzah! The holiday is also a powerful catalyst for spring cleaning. There is much to rush around and do right now. Also, Passover being such a wonderful holiday, it is easy to feel enthused in the process - there is much to anticipate: the beauty of our familiar traditions, time spent with friends, beloveds, community (and let's not forget the food!).

Surprisingly, our English word, enthusiasm, has an even more interesting root for our purposes: coming from the Greek, it literally means to be inspired, and to be possessed by a god! From Webster's:

1. Originally, supernatural inspiration or possession; inspired prophetic or poetic ecstasy.
2. Intense or eager interest; zeal; fervor.
3. Something arousing such interest or zeal.
4. Religious frenzy (Archaic).

Wow, who knew? This is why I love looking things up in the dictionary, whether Hebrew or English - beyond the commonly accepted meanings, there are so many other surprises. And, the concept of religious frenzy definitely applies to atmosphere in my kitchen in the days leading up to Passover, what with the vacuum cleaner and the dishwasher humming away, the pots of boiling water, the long lists hanging from the refrigerator door, the chopping, stirring, the mounds of damp, used-up dishtowels, and hence also the laundry . . . it's a crazy, wonderful time, one I look forward to every year with excitement. As to 'inspired poetic ecstasy' - maybe the is where the four cups of wine come in?

But, let's go a little deeper.

In our study session last Shabbat (thank you Tony and Joan!), we began our study of Zerizut by learning that implementing enthusiasm well includes the concept of 'awakening' and of taking a deep look at our motivations. We can mistake frantic rushing, or what our author Alan Morinis calls "headless enthusiasm", for the genuine practice of enthusiasm as a spiritual quality. As he points out, "There are ways to be very energetic that can still run you off the rails. A good head of steam, for example, is also potent for driving in the direction of evil. [So] while we see the importance of being energetic and enthusiastic, even to the point of zealotry, this is no counsel to be rash and foolish." As it is written in the book of Proverbs (21:5) ". . . those who are hasty reap only loss." This mindset can be as much an impediment to enthusiasm, he points out, as sloth and laziness.

The lesson here is that enthusiasm is a raw energy which needs to be thoughtfully harnessed

in service of a good purpose. Mornis therefore states from the outset that ". . . we're taking it as a given that there is a good moral compass in hand and that effective deliberation has taken place. Proper, balanced enthusiasm is action done with a full throttle, once review, consideration, and decision have set you on the right course." Where does our moral compass come from? As you shall see, it is an integral part of the Passover story, but one that is often forgotten: the idea that we were freed *for a purpose*.

Reading Morinis' words led to a lengthy discussion of intention, or *kavanaa*, as it is known in Hebrew, a term I'm sure you have heard and perhaps even worked with in services, whether or not you were aware of it. The verb *L'kaveyn* literally translates as 'to take careful aim'. Thus, each time we say a *bracha* (blessing) before a ritual, such as lighting the Shabbat candles, or putting on our tallit, the moment is actually meant to be one of meditation, in which we center ourselves and think about what we are doing and why. These *kavaanot* are designed to bring focus and depth to our spiritual practice. The concept has a wide application in daily life as well, encouraging us to be mindful, in all that we do, of our deeper spiritual aims and purpose.

All of this relates perfectly to the Passover story itself. While the Children of Israel must have been wildly joyous to leave Egypt after long centuries of suffering, it is important to remember that HaShem didn't bring us out only because we were suffering. G-d brought us out for an even more important reason, and that was *to be of service to G-d's world*: "You will bring them and implant them on the mount of Your heritage, the foundation of Your dwelling-place; HaShem will reign forever!" (Exodus 15:17,18). In other words, G-d brought us out of the 'narrow, stuck places' (this is a literal translation of the Biblical word for Egypt) to the wider, awakened view afforded by the theophany (read: 'G-d understanding') of Sinai, and there gave us an unailing code for how to live from the best possible intentions: through the gift of the mitzvot, the Divine can be made palpable in all that we do. And, whenever we are unsure of our direction, the Torah is the ultimate guidebook to refining our intentions.

So while we are all rushing around getting ready for the holiday, which is a wonderful expression of zeal, in itself, let us remember the even deeper reasons for why we are doing this. Let's create some space at the heart of these busy days to feel inspired by G-d, and to be in touch with an increased sense of deep meaning and purpose, even gratitude and awe. Let's allow Pesach (literally, 'to skip over') to remind us to make an end-run around distractions, and go for what is most important: the realization that we are, each of us, free for this one good purpose: to radiate Love, Justice and Compassion, which is the truth of G-d, enthusiastically to those around us, and in every place we find ourselves.

This is perhaps the true meaning of that troublesome and misunderstood term, the 'Chosen People'. This term is not meant to imply that we are special - but rather, I believe, to remind us to be aware of our freedom, and our responsibility, to *choose* every day, how best to direct our energies. Maybe the 'Choosing People' is a more accurate way to understand the charge we have been given.

The Passover story reminds us that it is an intrinsic part of our life-purpose to choose, rightly and well, using the Gift of Torah as our good moral compass. We have been redeemed from suffering in order to relieve it. So amidst all our preparations, know that a calm center can be found in which we can consider anew how best to use our energies, how best to serve, and how to set our intention to do so in a state of joy and inspiration. This understanding of **Zerizut**, so harmonious with the beautiful new energy of springtime, is one of the deeper gifts of this season. **Chag Sameach!**