

Shabbat Shalom Fax

Parshat Bo

Tel: 815-301-1928

Fax: 815-301-1928

Email: shabbatshalomfax@gmail.com

ShabbatShalom.org

Insights into life, personal growth & Torah

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The Fax of Life

ד"ס

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GOOD MORNING! Growing up, my father would impress upon my siblings and me the importance of always having a question to think about. He'd often say, "A person's mind should never be empty, you should always have a problem to solve or preoccupy your mind with an intelligent question." He would also hold us accountable by often asking us to share with him something that we had been thinking about.

My father, of course, didn't mean questions like, "Why is the sky blue?" or "Why don't ships sink in the water?" He wanted us to have a Torah or Jewish philosophy related question or problem to contemplate. Still, this process naturally led us to seek a deeper understanding of just about everything. Interestingly enough, my father may have stumbled onto a psychological phenomenon known as the Zeigarnik Effect.

Bluma Zeigarnik, a Jewish Russian psychologist, studied at the University of Berlin under famed behavioral psychologist Kurt Lewin. Lewin had a habit of meeting with his students in the café across the street from the school. One day they noticed a fascinating peculiarity of human nature; waiters could remember complicated orders only as long as the orders were in the process of being served. Once the order was served and paid for the waiters remembered very little of it.

Zeigarnik hypothesized that it is far easier for people to remember incomplete tasks than those that are already completed. She confirmed these findings through a series of experiments. In one of her experiments, Zeigarnik asked a group of 138 children to complete a series of simple tasks, such as puzzles and arithmetic problems. She allowed the children to complete half of the tasks and interrupted them during the remaining tasks. Zeigarnik investigated their recall after an hour's delay and discovered 110 of the 138 children had better recall for the interrupted tasks than the completed tasks. In a related experiment involving adults, the participants were able to recall unfinished tasks 90% better than completed tasks.

The mind, it seems, engages in some sort of cognitive tension that arises from having an unfinished task, therefore it needs to keep the task in mind in order to eventually complete it and release this internal tension. This concept of having the mind, and even the subconscious, preoccupied with a problem, is what my father was referring to when he said that a person's mind should never be empty.

The Zeigarnik Effect is also the bane of those who are habitual procrastinators – the ones who put the word "pro" into procrastinate. People who habitually avoid doing something either because it is uncomfortable or out of plain old laziness, are really just continually clouding their mind with unfinished tasks. After a while it begins to severely hamper their ability to properly focus and complete other tasks. Soon they are psychologically overwhelmed and get "stuck."

Over the years I have heard many people say, "I work really well under pressure." More often than not, they are actually revealing a very important element of their personality; that they tend to put off important tasks and they only complete them in a deadline induced frenzy. It reminds me of what Bill Watterson (creator of the comic strip Calvin and Hobbes) once said: "You can't just turn on creativity like a faucet. You have to be in the right mood. What mood is that? Last-minute panic!"

Of course, this week's Torah portion has a relevant message on this topic.

"And you shall guard the matzot [...]" (Exodus 12:17).

Before leaving Egypt, the Almighty instructs Moses to inform the Jewish people of the preparations that they need to make for that night. This included items like preparing the Paschal lamb and eating it with bitter herbs and unleavened bread – aka *matzot* (plural of *matzah*).

The great Biblical commentator Rashi explains (ad loc) that "guarding the *matzot*" means being very meticulous in their preparation in order to prevent them from becoming *chametz* (leavened). The process of leavening is that of the dough "souring" – in Hebrew the word for sour is *chamutz* and sour wine – i.e. vinegar – is called "*chometz*" (the "o" is pronounced like the "o" in the word dough).

Rashi goes on to quote the *midrash (Mechilta Bo, parsha 9)*, "Rabbi Yoshia says – Do not read the word '*matzot*' rather read it '*mitzvot*' (although vowelized differently, the word *matzot* is spelled exactly the same as *mitzvot*). Thus, the verse in the Torah takes on an added meaning; just as the Jewish people are commanded to not allow the *matzot* to become *chametz* (by delaying the process to completion), so too they shouldn't allow *mitzvot* to become 'leavened.' Rather, if an opportunity to do a *mitzvah* presents itself, do it immediately."

In other words, just as we have to be meticulous in our process of preparing dough to become *matzot* (by eliminating all unnecessary delay), so too must we have the same attitude of immediacy toward fulfilling *mitzvot*.

Yet the analogy seems flawed; if one delays doing a *mitzvah*, he can do it a little later or, at the very worst, he

lost an opportunity. But if one fails to prepare the dough for *matzot* properly, he has created a far worse situation: he now has *chametz* on his hands, which on Passover is a serious transgression. How are these two ideas analogous?

Generally, people delay or push off doing things they wish to avoid doing. Procrastination is usually not a problem of time management or of planning. People simply delay doing things they don't want to do. Even when they get around to finally doing the task they often do it halfheartedly.

For example, if we ask our children to clean up their room, even if they finally acquiesce, getting them to actually do it is often a battle. Imagine if after finally getting them to pick up their room we then ask them to set the table, and finally clear and wash the dishes. Pretty soon they will resent doing the things we ask them to do and begin to object.

More often than not this is because the children perceive their parents' attitude toward them as some variation of indentured servitude. However, if the parents take the time to properly explain why they need them to do the task at hand and the children feel that they are being dealt with as a junior partner, then they begin to see the value in certain chores and can even begin to accept responsibility for the greater whole.

Unfortunately, even as adults we can fall into the same rut when it comes to doing *mitzvot*. If one perceives *mitzvot* to be onerous obligations instead of what they truly are – amazing opportunities for personal growth – then he will soon begin to resent doing them. This will lead to procrastination as one will begin to push off fulfilling them.

Because the easiest way to free our minds from the Zeigarnik Effect is to remove any responsibility of actually completing the task, eventually those delays will become noncompliance, which leads to non-observance. The most common way to relieve oneself of that "guilt" is by beginning to believe that there is no responsibility to fulfill certain *mitzvot*. Thus, by delaying the *mitzvot* we are actually revealing our attitude toward them.

Similar to the household chores, when we obligate our children to pray, say blessings, observe the Shabbat, and do other *mitzvot* without properly educating them as to why they are doing these actions, we are actually well on our way to having them resent doing *mitzvot*. In other words, we are on the *derech* to getting them "off the *derech*" – we are on the "path" to getting them "off the proper path."

As we've discussed, God doesn't **need** our prayers or for us to follow His precepts. They are given to us for **our** sake – so that we may grow and experience the most meaningful and fulfilling lives.

But in order to achieve this we must first understand what the *mitzvot* are all about and find meaning in them. Once we understand them ourselves then we can begin to slowly educate and show our children that *mitzvot* are really opportunities. Our sages even give us a process for this – we are instructed to incentivize them every step of the way. Soon they will see for themselves that studying Torah and doing *mitzvot* are rewarding. The Talmud (*Pesachim* 50b) teaches us, "*Metoch shelo lishma ba lishma* – if one begins by doing things for a selfish reason he will eventually come to do it for the proper reason."

Taking some time to contemplate prayers and their meaning, a person soon realizes how meaningful it is to begin the day with a conversation with Almighty. There are very few *mitzvot* that aren't accessible to the emotions or intellect. This is what our sages mean when they tell us that we should not delay fulfilling *mitzvot*. We should perceive every *mitzvah* as an opportunity for ourselves; not merely as something we have to do.

TORAH PORTION: Bo, Exodus 10:1 - 13:16

This week we conclude the ten plagues with the plagues of locusts, darkness, and the death of the first-born. The laws of Passover are presented, followed by the commandment to wear *tefillin*, consecrate the first-born animal, and redeem one's first born son. The Torah tells us that, at some time in the future, your son will ask you about these commandments and you will answer: "With a show of power, God brought us out of Egypt, the place of slavery. When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us leave, God killed all the first-born in Egypt, man and beast alike. I, therefore, offer to God all male first-born (animals) and redeem all the first-born of sons. And it shall be a sign upon your arm, and an ornament between your eyes (*tefillin*), for with a strong hand the Almighty removed us from Egypt" (*Exodus* 13:15).

SHABBAT LIGHTING: *Jerusalem* 4:33 Miami 5:42 Cape Town 7:37 Guatemala 5:40 Hong Kong 5:51 Honolulu 6:00
Jo'Burg 6:44 LA 5:00 London 4:25 Melbourne 8:19 Mexico 6:08 Moscow 4:34 New York 4:49 Singapore 7:01 Toronto 5:03

"QUOTE OF THE WEEK": Someday is not a day of the week. — Janet Daily

Dedicated in the Merit of a *Refuah Shelema* for
Baruch Yered ben Brainah Sarah
by Jared Bienenfeld



Shabbat Shalom,

Yitzchak Zweig

Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

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