

Zerizut - Zeal

*Always find something to do — for yourself or for a friend,
and don't allow a moment of your life to be wasted.¹*

We have learned in regards to *haritzut* that procrastination affords an opportunity to the *yetzer hara* to enter into the space between deciding and doing an action. In a similar way the *yetzer hara* enters into the space that we allow it when we refrain from acting either for ourselves or others more generally. However, this formulation requires that we investigate in some detail what is meant by the word “waste” in this definition from *Chesbon Ha-Nefesh* as well as the impact of the distinction between doing “for ourselves” and “for others.”

We begin with the distinction between acting for ourselves and acting for others. When we act for ourselves we are, by definition, acting *for* the *yetzer hara*. It is essential to keep in mind that the *middah* of *zerizut* is a *middah* that helps us define the parameters of legitimate action on behalf of the *yetzer hara*. It helps us to keep in mind the necessary balance that ultimately allows us to act for others: that is, that we have appropriately acted on behalf of ourselves. Of course, the crucial term here is *appropriate*. It is precisely the difficulty of determining what is appropriate, or more accurately, the proclivity of the *yetzer hara* to extend itself beyond the bounds of what is appropriate, that requires that this subject be dealt with under the rubric of *zerizut*. The always present weight of our obligation to serve others serves as a temptation to ignore the *yetzer hara* on the one hand and the counter-weight to the *yetzer hara's* strength on the other.

Thus our definition of “wasted” time requires a profound *cheshbon* in which our ability to serve the other helps us define what the legitimate needs of the self are and when those legitimate needs have been exceeded. When we ignore these legitimate needs we discover that we are unable to serve another effectively. When we accede to our needs beyond their legitimacy we also find ourselves unable to serve the needs of another. *Zerizut* asks us to consider the situation that we find ourselves in such a way as to take both of these concerns into consideration.

¹ Rabbi Mendel of Satanov. (1845). *Chesbon ha-Nefesh*. (D. Landesman, trans.) Feldheim Publishers, New York, 1995. Page 173.

Let's consider an example. I have an obligation to serve my closest other, my partner or spouse. I return home tired and drained from a full day of work. My partner or spouse is at least equally tired and drained or more. The laundry needs to be put away. At first thought I might assume that in service to the other dealing with this chore is incumbent upon me, but in the course of doing the chore, because of the depletion of my resources, I become resentful and angry and, in the end, make the life of my partner much more difficult. Would *zerizut* require that we meet the obligation of this chore, or meet the obligation to care for ourselves, our *yetzer hara*? The easy answer is to say that we should meet our own needs first. However, the easy answer is not usually correct. The more appropriate answer might be that we need to meet our own needs while being mindful of our pressing responsibility to meet the needs of another. Part of the *yetzer hara's* strategy is to meet our own need first heedless of the need of the other and therefore in meeting our need we abandon our obligation to meet the need of the other.

To put it another way, the *yetzer hara* presents us with a binary choice between ourselves and another as if that were the only choice available to us. Whereas the *hesbon* around *zerizut* might lead us to consider how we can meet both obligations simultaneously. In this example that might mean acknowledging the need of the other before our own and then arranging to take the burden off that person even if it is not immediately. Of course, that may turn out to be impossible. In our enquiry we might learn more about why the laundry has to be put away at this very moment and that additional reason might indeed take precedence over our needs. The point is simply that by viewing the situation through the lens of the *middah* we have already taken the first step in constraining our *yetzer hara* and therefore providing the space within our consciousness for the other, thus growing our *neshama*.