

## Simchas Torah & Alacrity – Avi Friedwald

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Since the period of the Geonim (c. 589 CE), Shemini Atzeres/Simchas Torah has had a dual focus: (1) Celebrating the fact that G-d wants His people to remain close to Him for one extra day, and have a "small (intimate) seuda" after spending seven days atoning for the seventy nations of the world though offering seventy פריים (Gem. Succah 55b). (2) Celebrating the completion of the yearly cycle of reading the Torah via dancing and a seudas mitzvah (Orach Chaim 669).

Rav Nebenzahl SHLIT"A (one of the Rabbonim of the Old City) explains that it is most appropriate that we have merged the "small seuda" of Shemini Atzeres with the Siyum for completing the Torah, as this seuda was requested by G-d specifically for the Jewish People – and we are celebrating this seuda with the completion of the key item that makes us different from other nations – namely the Torah.

The first seven days of Succos celebrate a combination of physical (harvest) and spiritual (atonement achieved during the Yomim Noraim) achievements. Shemini Atzeres/Simchas Torah solely celebrate a spiritual achievement. However, there very much is a physical component too – namely the dancing and singing we do in Shul in honour of the Torah, which creates excitement and helps us connect more easily to the spiritual. Rav Nebenzahl refers to this physical component as "זריזות התנועה" – which can be translated as "alacrity of movement".

He explains that alacrity (or *zerizus*) is a central element in Judaism. Rav Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (in Mesilas Yeshorim Chap 6) explains that *zehirus* (lit. caution) is required to prevent us from transgressing negative commandments – whereas alacrity is required to ensure we do positive mitzvos. If we don't jump in to it – we may end up not doing it.

This applies both in resolve to do the mitzvo, as well as in the physical preparations. We can see alacrity working in reverse in the Ramban's famous letter to his son advising him – "תתרגל תמיד לדבר כל דברך" – "בנחת...ובזה תנצל מן הכעס" – "always speak softly/slowly ... this will help prevent you from getting angry."

Rav Nebenzahl brings down a fascinating story from Rav Chaim Shmulevitz ZT"L, which occurred in the Yeshiva in Volozohn. There was a bochur who was known as the most knowledgeable in the Yeshiva. One time during lunch, he was asked a question in the Gemora they were learning, which he didn't know the answer to. One of the other bochurim responded – "but it's an explicit Tosfos..." The star bochur who was asked the question was so upset that he didn't know the Tosfos that he got up immediately without bentching – packed his bags and went to a remote location where he secluded himself for a number of years and devoted himself to learning. He eventually became one of the great Gedolim of yesteryear. When Rav Chaim of Volozohn ZT"L (the Rosh Yeshiva) was asked if the bochur did the right thing – he responded – from a *halochic* perspective he definitely didn't, as he should have bentched first. However, had he delayed a few minutes, in order to bentch – he may have lost his impetus to go somewhere secluded and learn with great Hasmoda – and would not have achieved what he did.

The Ramchal explains that alacrity is also required to ensure we complete a mitzvo that we have already started – as otherwise the Yetzer Hora may prevent us from completing it. He proves this from Avrohom, who when serving his guests/angels shortly after his bris hurried to his wife, asked her to quickly prepare the food – and hurried himself to his flock to get an animal to slaughter (Ber. 18:6-7). Similarly when the Torah describes how Rivka gave Eliezer and his flock water – it also mentions the expression of hurrying three times (Ber. 24:18-20).

The Mechilta (Shemos 12:17) expounds the posuk ושמרתם את המצות (Shemos 12:17 – "guard the *Matzos*") as ושמרתם את המצוות – and explains that just as we can't allow Matzos to become Chometz by allowing them to rise for too long, so we also shouldn't allow mitzvos to become Chometz by delaying in its start and completion.

Rav Nebenzahl gives a modern day example, to illustrate the importance of alacrity. When depositing money in a Bank – the quicker you deposit it, the longer it has to accrue interest. Delays in depositing will result in a reduction in the return received. Similarly, when you borrow money from the bank, any delays in paying back the loan are likely to result in a call from the bank manager – and a larger interest penalty. An excuse that "I have now paid it back" is unlikely to result in a reduction in the penalty. In order to ensure that our heavenly Bank Manager gives us the best return on our spiritual investments, we need to ensure we deposit in good time.

Let us use our alacrity on Simchas Torah to bring us closer to Hashem and His Torah, and also to take the enthusiasm with us throughout the year – when performing the day to day mitzvos.