



Mindfulness and Mussar Podcast transcript

The alacrity of Abraham: An interview with Rabbi Alexandria Shuval-Weiner of Temple Beth Tikvah in Roswell, Georgia – Episode #2

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Andrew Feldman: Welcome to the Mindfulness and Musar podcast, I'm Andy Feldman. We're continuing our focus on interviews with chapter authors from the book, the *Mussar Torah Commentary*. The chapter we'll focus on today is called "Z'rizut - Alacrity, the Alacrity of Abraham." I'm very glad to have the author with us, Rabbi Alexandria Shuval-Weiner, the senior Rabbi of Temple Beth Teva in Roswell, Georgia, near Atlanta. I'll link her full bio to the podcast website, but I'll note from her bio that she and her husband have five children all successfully launched – so mazel tov – and a four-legged furry child still living at home. Rabbi Shuval-Weiner, welcome and thanks for being with us.

Rabbi Shuval-Weiner: Thank you so much for having.

Andrew Feldman: Give us an overview, if you would, about the middah of *z'rizut*. In other words, what are some perspectives from Judaism, from its various sources, about the value and the importance of enthusiasm and alacrity?

Rabbi Shuval-Weiner: So, it is a big word with all sorts of different definitions that align with it. Obviously, alacrity is one of them. It also has a definition of zeal, of perseverance, of promptness, readiness, cheerfulness – sort of all-encompassing definition of *z'rizut*.

Andrew Feldman: That's helpful. Am I right that one aspect of it is also finishing the task. In other words, we can be very enthusiastic about starting a project, but do we have the *z'rizut* to stick with it to the finish line.

Rabbi Shuval-Weiner: Yeah, that's huge. Years ago I studied a little bit about educating gifted and talented children, and there is a university professor, Joseph Renzulli. Dr. Renzulli talks about this idea of task commitment — that you can be very talented, you can be very gifted in something, you can be very knowledgeable, but unless it is connected to this idea of completing the task – and in a timely manner – you sort of lose points in that world of giftedness and talented. So that was a really big thing, this idea of *z'rizut* in this educational model of understanding. So that task commitment is huge.

Andrew Feldman: I want to ask you next about the Torah portion you focus on, which is *Vayeira* in Genesis, and you write in your chapter, "*Z'rizut* constitutes the core of Abraham's spiritual DNA. As with many of the middot, we see Abraham act with *z'rizut* in both laudable and deplorable ways." So we've got some positive and negative examples in this parshah, if you can give us an overview.

Rabbi Shuval-Weiner: Absolutely. So we see Abraham, who is full of enthusiasm. He rushes to greet the strangers. He prepares meals for them, he sits with them. Everything is very enthusiastic in his engagement with him. Then we see this play out later when he receives a message that Sodom and Gamora are going to be destroyed, and he immediately becomes the voice of justice and righteousness, arguing with God. And that the holy hutzpah where he just steps into that—and that it’s incredible. We get so much of our justice system from being reminded: we must be the voice for the voiceless.

Later, we see moments where things start to shift a little bit. We see God commanding Abraham to listen to Sarah to allow him to send his firstborn son Ishmael out into the wilderness, and he doesn’t question—he immediately does this.

When God tells Abraham to take Isaac up unto the mountain to sacrifice him, the same man who immediately argued about the strangers in Sodom, what does he do? He doesn’t say a word, but we see this language from the text [reads the Hebrew], “He rose with passion in the morning and he headed out first thing, break of dawn to take him up to that mountaintop,” to supposedly sacrifice him. And one starts to question: What is up with his thinking process? You know, just as we saw him at the very beginning, when we see him, where he doesn’t think twice about heading out to the territories. This is the same Abraham where he doesn’t think twice about sending his progeny out potentially to die.

And so in this sense of both this great enthusiasm and zeal for fulfilling the call by God, we also wonder: Did he put his brain on the back burner, if you will, in order to fulfill this call, to fulfill this mitzvah without thinking?

And that’s where I believe we become challenged by this particular middah. How often do we jump into a project, but are we really bringing our full sense of thinking, of compassion, of consequence, to the table. And sometimes we need to take a moment to step back and process before we make those decisions.

Andrew Feldman: For sure. I’m going to ask Rabbi Shuval-Weiner one more question about a personal story related to this middah, but before I do that, let’s take a short break for reflection.

[Music]

Andrew Feldman: At the end of your chapter, you have some useful questions to ask ourselves. Two of those are: When might you need to step back and focus on self, family or other important relationships? And the other is: Are you bringing the same level of *z’rizut* to those relationships as you are to your external work? And I know in speaking with you, you have a personal story that relates to those questions if you’d be willing to share it.

Rabbi Shuval-Weiner: Absolutely. As a rabbi, I am so humbled to be able to do the work that I do and to engage with people each and every day at every moment of important milestones in people's lives. And I have attempted to, to bring this sense of passion to my work as we all attempt to do with our chosen paths in life.

I recall one day my youngest child was about 15 and she popped by my office. She said, "Hey, mom, let's go out and, you know, grab a cup of coffee, maybe even get our nails done." And I remember responding to her saying, "Oh, sweetheart, that sounds wonderful, but I really can't leave the office right now." And she turned around with a big smile on her face. She goes, "Mom, I totally get it, you know, we'll try this another time." And she walked out and then she turned around and she said, "You know, mom, if a congregant had called you, you would have dropped everything."

And with that, it really made me stop and think. And I believe we all have those moments where, for whatever reason, we throw ourselves into our work, whether it's for some high value, or our own egos, or for whatever that is—we too often feel like our worth comes from what we do. And it feels safe to sometimes put the people that are closest to us on the back burner, that they'll always understand.

And I think in that moment, the realization that said: I need to step back and reevaluate and recommit myself as equally as passionately to my own family that I would do for my community. That is the struggle that we all have in trying to find that balance between work and life, the multiple things that we feel passionate about.

Andrew Feldman: I know our listeners will very much appreciate you sharing that story and a very enthusiastic thank you for being on the podcast. Rabbi Alexandria Shuval-Weiner from Temple Beth Teva in Roswell, Georgia. Rabbi Alex, thank you very much for being with.

Rabbi Shuval-Weiner: Oh, well, thank you. I really am honored and humbled to have been asked for our listeners.

Andrew Feldman: The book on which our interviews are based is the *Musar Torah Commentary, A Spiritual Path to Living, a Meaningful and Ethical Life*. It's edited by Rabbi Barry Block and published by the Central Conference of American Rabbis. To learn more about the book or to order it, head to Mussar.ccarpress.org.

The music on our podcast is by David Shevin and Warren Bird from their album, *Let Us Break Bread Together*. And finally, if you want to keep up to date with the podcast, please see the podcast website middot.org. And if you're listening on a podcast player like Apple Podcasts, please consider adding a rating and a review since that helps others learn about the podcast.