Laziness thrives on rationalization.

By Alan Morinis

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In truth, human beings are just that – humans and not angels. It is therefore impossible for us to have the might of the angels. Nonetheless we should strive to get as close to this level as we possibly can. King David used to praise his own share of this trait by saying (Psalms 119:60), "I hurried – did not delay – to keep Your mitzvot." (Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, Path of the Just, ch. 6)

In this quote, Rabbi Luzzatto calls on us to cultivate the trait of zirizut – which can be translated as zeal, alacrity or enthusiasm. We obviously want and need this if we are going to be energetic in leaping to perform our obligations. This trait motivates us to get up, get going, and do good in any of the variety of ways. Where does the fire come from, the spark that ignites us to be prompt and active, the antidote to laziness?

In the chapter, "An Explanation of the Trait of Enthusiasm," Rabbi Luzzatto spends the bulk of the chapter discussing not the zeal we seek, but its opposite – the laziness with which we are all too familiar. Laziness (atzlut or atzlus in Hebrew) is the obstacle. The picture Rabbi Luzzatto paints is of humans being weighed down, so that it takes effort to lift ourselves up and out of the tendency to sink down and down, to destruction:

The bad that comes from laziness does not come about in one fell swoop, but slowly and without notice. It comes in a sequence of one leisurely bad deed after another, until you find yourself sunk in evil.

Elsewhere he says clearly: "The lazy man, though not actively evil, produces evil through his very inactivity." This the same notion as expressed by the English philosopher Edmund Burke in his oft-quoted line: "The only thing necessary for the triumph [of evil] is for good men to do nothing."
Heavy Spirit

I am sure we'd all like to avoid that fate – neither to sink into laziness nor to do evil. To accomplish that, however, we need to be informed about atzlut – laziness – itself. So Rabbi Luzzatto tells us that laziness is characterized by heaviness:

*And see that the nature of a human being is very heavy.*

Rabbi Luzatto, like many Mussar teachers, associates laziness with our physicality. If we were pure spirit, we'd be light and active. But because we live in bodies, we are tied to the physical world and, controlled by the force of gravity, we are pulled down. These are facts of nature that Rabbi Luzzatto does not deny, but he cautions, "If you abandon yourself to this 'heaviness,' you will not succeed in your quest."

The Hebrew word for "heavy" is ka'ved. This word also shows up prominently in the story of Moses's attempts to get Pharaoh to release the Jews from Egypt. In Exodus 7:14 we read that Pharaoh refused to pay attention to Moses's entreaties because his heart was ka'ved, usually translated as "obstinate" or "stubborn." Here, too, we get an image that helps us understand what it is to be "heavy" – it means to run counter to the way of spirit.

It is ironic that Pharaoh accuses the Jews of being lazy (Exodus 5:8). And here we uncover a feature of laziness that most of us will recognize too readily: Laziness thrives on rationalization.

The Alter of Novardok has a poignant section in his book, *Madregas ha'Adam*. He runs through a list of ambitions a person might set for himself, and responds to each one with the word "lu" – Hebrew for "if only."

*I'd give so much to charity, if only I were wealthy.*
*I'd commit myself to studying, if only my Hebrew were better.*
I’d learn so much, if only I were smarter.
I’d be so helpful to my friends, if only I were stronger.

All of it is rationalization, of course, and nowhere do we find rationalization more perfected than in the case of the lazybones. A lazy person shines with brilliance in creating excuses for why he or she just cannot accomplish some task.

Lazy Rationalizations

Though Orchot Tzaddikim was written in the 16th century, the script of the rationalizing lazy one resonates among us, too, almost 500 years later. In "The Gate of Laziness" we read the following, based on sayings in the Book of Proverbs:

If one says to him: "Your teacher is in the city – go and learn Torah from him," he answers: "I am afraid of the lion on the road," as it is written (Proverbs 26:13): "The lazy man says: "There is a lion in the way."

If they say to him: "Your teacher is already in the province – get up and go to him," he answers: "I am afraid that a lion might be in the streets," as it is written (ibid. 26:14): "A lion is in the streets..."

If they say to him: "He is in the building," he answers: "And if I go and find the door locked, I will have to return." They say to him: "It is open." But he still will not get up, as it is written (ibid. 26:14): "The door is swinging on its hinges – and the lazy man is on his bed."

In the end, not knowing what to answer, he says to them: "Whether the door is open or locked, I want to sleep a little more," as it is written (ibid. 6:9): "How long will you sleep, you lazy man? When will you rise from your sleep?"
Here is rationalization exemplified, though we are entitled to question why the person is called lazy. If there really is a lion in the road (distant) or street (nearby), then the person can't be blamed for exercising caution. But if there is no lion, then why is he called "a lazy man"? Shouldn't he be called a liar?

Yes, he is engaged in untruth, but he is totally unaware of that behavior. That's the way rationalization works. It masks the truth so that the one who utters the false words doesn't even see that they are false. Laziness leads to rationalization, and rationalization leads us away from truth.

**Why Bother?**

The negative impact of rationalization is that it holds us back from lifting ourselves out of the heavy inertia that Rabbi Luzzatto has highlighted. That's why rationalization is called an *eitzat ha'yetzer* – advice of the evil inclination – and is ultimately not only misleading, but destructive.

You need to become more aware of the little voice that keeps you from being active and energetic and lifting yourself up. That voice is none other than the whispering of the yetzer hara, offering up rationalizations that you then repeat to yourself as if they were valid reasons to stay stuck on the couch, not learning, not practicing, not exercising, not visiting the sick, not doing the myriad things that you would certainly rank as worthwhile activities – if you would only do them.

The yetzer hara counsels "why bother?", "you're so tired," "there will be lots of others to do it," "this isn't the last chance." This is the way in which that inner voice keeps you from doing that which is positive in your life.
And the same source leads us to do the negative. The Talmud (Shabbat 105b) is well aware of how the yetzer hara operates in this way:

"Today he [the yetzer hara] says, 'Do this [sin],’ and the next day he says, 'Do this [somewhat more serious sin],’ until he says, 'Serve idolatry' and the person goes and does it!"

A person should therefore always view even small transgressions as if they were as serious as idol worship, because the yetzer hara uses the tactic of incrementally increasing rationalizations to cause a person to fall deeper and deeper into wrong action – without seeing the course he or she is following.

**Ordinary Evil**

The word "evil" has been coming up in this discussion, and since our subject is something no more heinous than laziness, it is worthwhile deepening our understanding by turning for a moment to face this word "evil." directly.

We tend to think of "evil" only in its most terrible incarnations, when referring to truly unspeakable deeds. No doubt that evil is easiest to see and name when it is unmistakable, like when dozens of schoolchildren are caught up in a terrorist’s political ploy, or when the innocent are made to suffer for the glorification of a distended ego or a sick mind. But to associate evil only with such headline crimes is to give evil a bad name. The evil that shows up on the nightly news in such heavy doses is really the very same quality that appears in much more dilute form in our own lives, in the guise of impatience, deceit, jealousy, judgmentalism, anger, etc.

Because evil is to be found in wrong actions of every scope and scale, the horrific deeds that seem to fall off the end of the chart actually don’t. They remain connected to ordinary people and ordinary lives by
this progression of negative steps, a downward spiral, that so often begins not with a wrong step but – shockingly – no step at all. Terrible evil can begin when we have the opportunity to do something and even the will to make it happen, and then we fall prey to that little voice that counsels us to relax, take it easy, don't bother. Laziness is often the first step on the path to destruction. Think of it as Mussar’s slippery slope.

This is indeed the lesson from the Book of Proverbs (6:6-11) that cautions us to see the connection between those few extra minutes spent cozy in bed, and our ultimate descent into suffering:

_Lazybones, go to the ant. Study its ways and learn. Without leaders, officers or rulers, it lays up its stores during the summer, [and] gathers in its food at the harvest. How long will you lie there, lazybones? When will you wake from your sleep? A bit more sleep, a bit more slumber, a bit more hugging yourself in bed, and poverty will come calling upon you..._

Laziness is likened to sleep, and the call is to ‘Wake Up!’ Waking up is essential to the development of alacrity or zeal (zerizut) that is our real focus here. It is also central to the whole enterprise of learning Mussar.

The heart wants to be inspired, and the first step to becoming inspired is to become aware of the pitfalls we are likely to meet on that way. That will help us to avoid them. Laziness is the obstacle that Rabbi Luzzatto points out to us, and his guidance coincides with experience and common sense. Nothing could be further from inspiration than laziness. Sort out what is true and what is false in your aspirations. Be alert to catch the voice of rationalization when it pipes up. This is how you plow away laziness and clear the road to zerizut.
To overcome laziness, you need action. Changing your thoughts will not be sufficient. Thinking about laziness can also be a product of laziness: you can come up with a rationalization to continue resting and not accomplishing anything, arguing to yourself, "Resting will make me stronger and then I'll really be able to take on the major task. So for now, I'll just sleep a little more."

Self-help manuals provide lots of hints and programs to overcome laziness. Mostly, they seem to involve lists, commitments and planning. A Mussar approach is different. Here is a tool that will help you recalibrate the soul-trait of atzlut (laziness) as a step toward cultivating zerizut (enthusiasm).

The Mussar masters recognize that our inner traits are interconnected, and that strengthening one trait can diminish another. With that principle in sight, they sometimes devised exercises that did not directly confront a middah but rather sought to influence it from the side, so to speak. Applied to our discussion, enthusiasm can arise when laziness is reduced, and an effective way to counteract laziness is to cultivate gratitude.

The only person who could possibly be lazy is one has not fully (or at all!) internalized the notion that life contains many gifts, and receiving life's gifts creates personal indebtedness. Too many of us fail to recognize the innumerable good that we have received in life. We tend to be too focused on what is not quite right, and as a result, we feel deprived and needy. If you would really recognize how much good is bestowed on you every day, then that recognition would make you feel obligated to do something with those gifts, and to reciprocate by giving of yourself. Laziness will begin to lose its appeal and will seem instead to be an abomination.

To summarize, recognizing the good in your life can dissolve the inner conditions that give rise to laziness. And when laziness falls away, the natural inclination of the heart to be active and energetic can flow unimpeded.
To begin your homework for this week, right now, take five minutes to make a list of some of the gifts you have received in your life very recently. There isn't a life that isn't missing some things, of course, and sometimes very important things are lacking. But Jewish tradition encourages us to recognize and cultivate our gratitude. What do you have to be thankful for? Can you breathe good air? Is there clean water available? Do you have a roof over your head? Are there people who love you and whom you love? Do you belong somewhere? Has your life been influenced positively by someone who did you good?

Even if some things are missing or deficient, make a short list of what is good in your life.

Equipped with your list, every day during this period, set aside a few moments to review the items you have written down. Remind yourself daily about what you have received. We can grow numb and oblivious to our gifts – and one direct result can be laziness. When you make effort to recognize what you have received, your heart will fill with gratitude and the basis for laziness will be supplanted.

You will get the maximum benefit from this practice by writing down any insights in your Accounting of the Soul Diary. Did you remember to review your list? Did you find gratitude arising in your heart? Use your diary to express that gratitude. As you awaken more gratitude within, you might notice the effects noted here – less laziness, more enthusiasm. Take a look and see what happens for you.

When you reflect on this assignment, does it seem to be too much trouble to do? Now we can learn something valuable by wondering, whose voice is that?

Here are some suggested key-phrases for you to use in your Accounting of the Soul practice:

"Don’t delay."

"With zeal for good."