

TOOL #19

In his eleventh principle of Jewish belief, Maimonides teaches us that Hashem rewards those who obey the commandments of the Torah, and disciplines those who violate them.

Quite often, that discipline manifests itself in the form of human suffering. The suffering can be a tool for the person to wake up and do teshuvah, or it can be a cleansing process itself.

The mystics explain this concept as a "natural consequence" of the negative things a person does. An analogy might be helpful: Let us say that a doctor tells you that it is not healthy to eat 10 chocolate bars in the middle of the night. One fine evening, you binge away on 10 chocolate bars. An hour later, you are nauseous. Frantically, you call the doctor and tell him, "I am sorry I ate the chocolate bars. Please forgive me. I will never do it again. Just take the pain away from me!" The doctor responds, "My forgiveness is not the issue. You were not hurting me when you ate the chocolate bars; you were hurting yourself. Now you will suffer the consequences of eating 10 chocolate bars. Your system is rejecting them and will clean itself out by vomiting. It will be painful, but after you vomit, the system will be cleansed."

Similarly, the Almighty give us guidance to avoid doing the things that will hurt our spiritual system. If we do not follow His advice, which is specified in the Torah, the natural consequences of wreaking havoc on a spiritual system will manifest themselves in physical suffering. Our physical well-being rests on a balanced, healthy spiritual system. When it is disturbed, a reaction can be felt in the physical realm. That is where the suffering comes from. People bring it on themselves. There is a strong connection between the physical and spiritual realms, and one affects the other. This is an equation in life. No one can escape its realities. (This equation also works in a positive way: Living a good life is a natural consequence of following the guidance the Almighty gives you.)

Today's tool encourages us to realize the following: Think of all the sins you have done in your life. According to the equation of reward and discipline, how much suffering should you have received in your life? How much discipline do you need? Think about the fact that Hashem has sheltered you from so many misfortunes and afflictions, despite the fact that you are deserving of them as a result of:

1. All the sins you have committed.
2. Your defiance of Hashem.
3. Your contempt for His words.
4. Your ingratitude.
5. Your lack of praise.
6. Your aversion to His service.
7. Your failure to do teshuvah and confess before Hashem.

8. Your defiance of Him in the face of His consistent goodness and dependable kindness.

Do you realize what is happening here? You have been sinning in a way that is comparable to eating thousands and thousands of chocolate bars in the middle of the night, and yet you did not get a stomachache! What should your reaction be?

You should be thanking and praising Hashem for His goodness in sparing you from "stomachaches." Obviously, Hashem has injected another factor into the equation the fact that he is "slow to anger." This attribute has built a "time delay" into the system. You did not get away with anything. Hashem has merely slowed down the natural consequence. Does this help you? Of course. Now you know that you have time to do teshuvah and avoid the suffering you are destined to receive.

Let us carry our analogy one step farther: After you have eaten the one thousand chocolate bars, your doctor offers to give you an antidote that will reach your stomach moments before the acid builds up to make you suffer. He offers you the injection. Do you take it or not? How foolish would you be to reject it! How sensible you would be to take it!

Despite the logical choice, people are not in a rush to do teshuvah because they have not yet experienced the pain. There was once a doctor who told me that he wished he had a medication that could imitate the pain that comes with heart disease (without the disease itself). He could inject that into people who, although they were prime candidates to suffer from heart disease, were not taking care of themselves. He felt that if they could feel the pain before they actually got heart disease, they would be motivated to change their lifestyle before it was too late.

Until that new drug is invented, we should learn from other people's pain. We should be sensitive to those pains, and learn by this vicarious experience how to avoid it ourselves.

Today's exercise:

1. List three of the sins in your life - bad traits, etc. - that you have not corrected.
2. Reflect on the fact that you have not yet received Divine discipline for your sins.
3. Notice how others do suffer greatly in life. It can be really painful! (This does not suggest that everyone who suffers is a sinner, but it is one of the equations in how the Almighty runs this world.)
4. Thank Hashem for delaying the natural consequences of your sinning.
5. Inject yourself with a strong booster shot of teshuvah.