

Understanding The System Of Suffering

based on the weekly Shmuess given by HaRav Shaya Cohen, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshiva Zichron Aryeh

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In this week's Parsha, the Torah details the suffering that the woman who is found to be a Sotah endures. We may have different reactions to this suffering, we may even say she got what she deserved. Our reactions to suffering generally shape our opinions of how we view Hashem and the extent of His kindness. It therefore behooves us to research and make sure that we have the proper perspective.

The Sefer Hachinuch in discussing the Mitzvah of Metzora (171), gives insight into suffering and how Hashem set up and runs the world. He explains, "That which our Sages say, the way a person acts is the way he is treated (Sotah 8b), the intention is, that based on a person's actions he is able to receive a reward. It will always be that wherever a person places all his thoughts and actions, it will either draw blessing or the opposite. As the Pasuk says (Eichah 3:33), 'For He does not willfully bring grief or affliction to man.' It also writes (Tehillim 5:5), 'He is not a G-d who wants evil.' This means to say that Hashem does not hold anyone accountable because He wants to punish them. On the contrary, Hashem always wants good. However, a person causes himself to be punished when he strays from the straight path and removes from himself the ability to receive the good. This can be compared to someone walking on a straight path that is totally clear from any stones or obstacles. On both sides there is a fence of thorns. If he veers off the path and scratches himself on the thorns, he cannot say that Hashem wanted him to get scratched. Rather, he caused it to happen to himself as he was not careful to walk on the straight path. In summary, any bad that occurs is a result of Hashem removing His protection due to the person's sin until he receives the appropriate punishment. Then He commands His angels to once again protect him."

Upon initial analysis the Sefer Hachinuch is bewildering. We know that the entire purpose of suffering is to benefit us. Suffering causes a person to do Teshuva, and the suffering itself cleanses a person of his sin. In addition, the entire system of reward and punishment was set up so that we could earn the good to avoid the embarrassment of partaking in the poor man's bread, **והמא**

אכסופא. Based on this, the Sefer Hachinuch is difficult to understand. Why does he say that it can't be that Hashem is directly causing the suffering to a person, as that would be a deficiency in Hashem's goodness? This is perplexing, as the suffering is also good! So why can't it be that Hashem is causing the suffering?

A powerful insight into the extent of Hashem's kindness can be extrapolated from here that can reshape our worldview on suffering. Although suffering may be for our best, and a necessity to earn the ultimate good, due to Hashem's constant good that never changes, He himself will not mete out the punishment. This idea can be illustrated by a Rashi in Parshas Behaaloscha, (12:10). The Pasuk says that Hashem removed His cloud from the tent, and only then was Miriam punished with Tzaros. Rashi says as follows, "This can be compared to a king who said to a teacher, "Punish my son harshly, but do not punish him harshly until I leave you, for I have pity on him."

Another insight into the system of suffering can be derived from the Masha that the Sefer Hachinuch brings to illustrate his point. He compares suffering to a person who veers off the straight clear path, and scratches himself on the thorns. He then emphasizes that he caused this to himself. In other words, the viewpoint is that he himself chose suffering. In this Masha lies a reframing of how we look at the world and suffering. It is not the case that when we sin we are punished with an external consequence that was newly designed at that moment, meted out by Hashem. Rather, Hashem created a system in which we live in a world with pre-existing harmful elements. When we sin, we are so to speak walking into the thorn bush. It is a natural consequence of our actions.

This paradigm of suffering is extremely empowering. Through seeing the consequence as a direct result of our choices, it can help prevent us from sinning. In addition, this perspective can allow us to maintain a positive relationship with Hashem, even through suffering, as we will not view Hashem as the direct source of the suffering.



Shir HaShirim Insights

In loving memory of Mr. Marvin Halpern

Last week we discussed the nature of a person to build a barrier around his heart from rationally responding to Hashem's punishments by doing Teshuva, and the resulting need to teach our children the beauty of Torah and having a relationship with Hashem. This is not only in the context of trying to convince them to make the proper spiritual decisions, but as basic staples of their education in order to enable them to come to the proper conclusions themselves.

This nature of a person to build a barrier from rationally responding to Hashem's punishments is brought out clearly from the words of the Navi (Yeshaya 6:10): *The peoples mind is becoming fat, their ears stopped, and their eyes sealed – lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and they will grasp with their heart, and repent and save themselves.*"

Rashi explains: *Lest they see with their eyes - They intended not to listen to the words of the prophets, for they feared lest His words please them, and they will understand with their heart, and return to Me, and this will be their cure.*

We see from here that a person will build a barrier to protect himself from rationally responding to events that would lead him to do Teshuva even when he knows that the conclusion will please him in the long run. The only remedy for this is to give him the tools to come to Teshuva on his own before he needs to use them. There is no greater way to accomplish this than by teaching Shir HaShirim as a staple of our youths' education before they need to use it as the greatest tool against their Yetzer Hara.



ELIEZER INSTITUTE Emunah Highlights

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How can I remain focused that everything is decided in Heaven while throughout the day I am constantly performing Hishtadlus, which are actions that seem to contradict this tenet of faith?

The Ramchal (*Derech Hashem part 4, Tefillah*) explains that this, in fact, is one of the main purposes of Tefillah:

"But see that the Creator, may He be blessed, prepared a rectification for this. And that is that a man first come close, stand in front of Him, may He be blessed, request all his needs and 'cast his burden upon Him.' And this is a central and essential beginning for all of his efforts, such that when he is later pulled into the other ways of effort - which are the ways of human effort - it will not happen that he will get embroiled and stuck in physicality and materialism. For he will already have begun with, and made everything dependent upon, Him, may He be blessed."

By prefacing our acts of hishtadlus with heartfelt prayer to the true Decider of everything, one can remain focused on the truth of the matter despite the seemingly contradictory actions he must perform in fulfillment of his obligation of Hishtadlus.