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Pain. Even the kind we choose to experience, we'd do without if we could. Yes, we do feel better after persevering and succeeding despite the pain, but if you ask most people, they'd still prefer the painless route to success.

Let's not forget that our bodies are wired for pain to let us know when something is going wrong. It's our body's way of saying, "Don't do that or you'll really hurt yourself." The idea of, "No pain, no gain" is something we have to live with, but not something we choose to live by. It's just that we human beings also like to gain in life, and that forces us to face the pain.

In fact, we make heroes out of people who do, at least for the "right" reasons. The Torah calls it *mesiras Nefesh*—self-sacrifice, and when done for the right reason and in the right way, it increases a person's reward in the World to Come and gets them positive Divine attention.

It is easy to fear pain, and all of us do, though some more than others. The Torah counts on it when threatening us with curses for disobedience. Let's face it, fear of pain is one of the best motivating factors to overcome our inertia when it comes to fulfilling certain responsibilities. A lot of people get out of bed to make it to *minyan* on time because of what they'll suffer if they don't.

Fear of pain stops being something positive when it becomes a daily nightmare, or debilitating. Life is a process of development that includes taking at least some minor risks from time to time. The average person who has yet to become too obsessive about avoiding pain will take those risks when they can't be avoided, like a critical operation. But they may not take the ones they can choose to avoid even though they represent an important opportunity for personal growth.

President Roosevelt was quoted as saying during the Great Depression, "We have

nothing to fear but fear itself.” It’s a great line, meant to encourage Americans at the time to not let circumstance sap them of all their life force. Despite the dark cloud hovering above and the negative economic forecast, people would only be able to turn things around by creating and using opportunities to make things better. Just as their losses had been real, they had to believe that their gains would be as well if they took the necessary steps to make them so.

Rosh Hashanah is next week, *b”H. Yom HaDin*—Day of Judgment. Who takes this seriously and is not concerned about their outcome? And even though we give the holiday a festive spin, at the end of the day it is a life-and-death decision. Even if we have “escaped” judgment until now, enjoying better results than anticipated, we know there are no guarantees for the upcoming year. People around us are dying. They’re getting sick or suffering major setbacks, and if we’re honest, we know we can’t explain why them and not us.

Then there are the people who are already going through *Gibnom*. They’ve suffered greatly and perhaps still do. Will next year be better, worse, or the same? It’s a terrifying question to think about, especially if you already feel you’re doing everything you can to make God ease up and it still hasn’t helped.

The Torah’s answer at all times, but actually in this week’s *parsha*: “*You shall choose life, so that you and your offspring will live*” (*Devarim* 30:19). Yes, it means do not stray from Torah and live a zombie secular life. But it also means, do not let anything block you from the opportunity to enhance your life. Nothing. Not *ta’avah* (too much desire for material pleasure) from one side and not fear from the other.

In both cases, of *ta’avah* and *pachad* (fear), it is not a question of psychologically beating them back. That rarely works. It is a question of out-prioritizing them. A parent afraid of the water will jump in anyhow to save their child. A lazy person will go out of their way for the woman or man of their dreams. One person may not be able to push down a wall, but many perhaps can.

Focusing on a problem only prolongs it. Focusing on its solution, or even just something more positive solves it, or keeps us going long enough for it to solve itself. Serving God with joy is easy to do when you’re already happy. Serving Him with joy while depressed is not only a great *mitzvah* and *Kiddush Hashem*, but therapy itself.

And you know what? If we keep track of blessings instead of our curses, we find out that they greatly outnumber the bad things in life. Happiness is a state of mind, one that is easily influenced by our perception of reality. I can speak from personal experience that playing “The Happiness Game,” as basic and childish as it seems, has very grown-up results. It is amazing how seeing pages of blessings that we live with every

day, even see when we look in the mirror but don't take note of, can lift a person's spirit just by seeing them listed.

The good news is that you don't have to be happy and successful to be great, or to come out of Rosh Hashanah with a good report card. You just have to make a point of recognizing opportunities for greatness, big and small, and use them. The rest will take care of itself because God will take care of the rest.

Good *Shabbos* and *Shannab Tovah U'mesukah*,

Pinchas Winston

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