

Rena Reiser

In the garbage? Where do unwanted thoughts and feelings go?

Chasi is coming back from another long, difficult day running a daycare program for kids 3-5 years of age. One would think that running a daycare program isn't that big a deal. You love what you do, you're working with sweet little kids, what could be so overwhelming? Step into Morah Chasi's life for just one day. If it were just you and the kids it would all be good, but then every parent has their own idea of how she needs to run the program. Her assistant keeps coming late and on top of that cops an attitude whenever she needs her help. The office next door keeps complaining about the noise levels, the toilet is leaking, and the fluorescent bulb over her workstation wouldn't stop flickering. Basically, when she comes home, she is done.

Meir, the good, thoughtful husband that he is, notices Chasi's state of agitation and wants to allow her the space to talk it out. "So, Chas...how was your day?" Here comes her big chance to let it all out. She thinks, but is that fair? Why does Meir have to deal with all of my kvetching and whining? And aren't I stronger than that? Can't I just be a baalas middos and ignore it? Tomorrow's a new day and I'll be just fine, she says to herself. So she says out loud, "My day was great. How about you, May?"

That scene is one we can all relate to pretty well. We have those back and forths from challenging days and we want to be big girls and just put it behind us. The only thing is that later that night, Morah Chasi took her frustrations out on some cookies and ice cream. That part might look very familiar to you as well.

This raises an important question - where do challenging thoughts and feelings go when we ignore them?

Can we successfully chuck them in the garbage bin? Or store them away neatly in a room with a big "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door? Or are we just piling them up onto the hallway table until they block the mirror and you can no longer see yourself clearly?

A big reason why many of us have fears of getting too involved in inner work is because we are nervous about what it might drag up to the surface. There's probably a really good reason why we do our best to try to bury those difficult thoughts and emotions in the first place, isn't there? Why would we now go schlepping them back into the limelight?

In other words, let's try and understand together - Does bringing awareness to our problems cause them to get worse? What would happen if we just ignore our problems?

The best thing we can do is ask ourselves that question. What has happened when we just ignored our problems? Has it worked? Were we able to move on and have stable and content lives, or has it caused us unrest and resentment, or maladaptive behaviors?

Let's move this hypothetical into a metaphor of two children who are playing rough with one another. The grown up steps in and says, "Children...we don't fight. We're friends. Now if you want to keep playing at recess you need to say I'm sorry and give each other a hug." Just as the adult has hoped for, the two children say I'm sorry, hug and sit down to play again. Problem solved. Anyone walking by will see two perfectly happy children playing in harmony. Until, five minutes later, they start screaming and crying and throwing plastic trucks at each other.

I'm not sure there's any way around it. Our problems don't disappear when we ignore them. They are still exactly where we left them. So why can it sometimes feel that inner work brings things to the surface that we thought were dead and buried or that we didn't even remember at all!

Our minds are very gifted at giving us what we tell them that we need (as opposed to what we might actually need). If you don't want to deal with those thoughts, your mind will help you avoid them. It might encourage you to eat (or shop, or scroll) away your worries. Those challenges weren't vanquished, they were just embellished with whip cream and chocolate syrup. And as a convenient side effect, you now get to focus on the guilt and frustration of letting yourself down once again and breaking all the promises you keep making yourself. That's not fun. But your brain might be using that to protect you from dealing with something that you believe is worse.

So, back to our question, is bringing awareness to our challenges worse for us in the long run, or is it the path to deep healing.

One of my mentors once shared an incredible mashul with me from R' Nachum Ze'ev of Kelm Zt"l (the Alter's son) that I have found very powerful and insightful. You can find it in the Sifsei Chaim, Middos v'Avodas Hashem vol.2, page 37.

R' Nachum Ze'ev imagines our thoughts and emotions swirling about like sediment in a big glass of wine. As long as the cup stays in motion, our wine is filled with impurities. But if we can learn to steady the cup, the sediments will fall to the bottom, and we can enjoy the pure, delicious wine for what it is.

R' Chaim Friedlander adds that the longer we can keep the cup still, the more diluted the sediment becomes.

So how do we use this mashul in our own inner work? (Which is also Avodas Hashem!)

Most of us may be too busy to realize, but our minds are busier than Times Square. We have all sorts of thoughts and desires whizzing about, oftentimes colliding with one another, turning our

brains into a warzone. The reason we end up behaving in ways which don't line up with our values is because we haven't been able to create the environment for the calm introspection we need in order to prioritize our needs.

If we ignore those thoughts, they begin to throw a tantrum. They will fight for your attention. Something deep inside will be yelling for your attention, desperate for you to realize that not everything is okay. Your mind, following its orders will push the thought down or create distractions around it, basically telling it that you can't deal with it right now. Being ignored, it continues to tug on you, scream and cry, and start to throw the houseplants on the floor.

The important lesson here is that by becoming mindful of our thoughts and feelings, we are not looking to control them or to change them or to make them go away. Like a child desperate for attention, we need them to know that we see them and love them and are here for them, and with that, they can feel safe enough to go to the playroom and play.

Yes! You heard right! When I guide my clients on inner work, we usually bump against resentment or discomfort. A difficult thought or emotion comes up. It may bring them to realize that certain things in their lives aren't okay.

The old option would send up a red flag. It would say, don't go that way. We don't want to experience that. Hey! What if we just ignore it and pretend like it isn't even there. Then they'll spiral back into whatever maladaptive behaviors were sabotaging their life all along because ignoring a problem doesn't mean it went away.

The new option is to notice the difficulty that came up. To calmly acknowledge it without judgment. To know that it can be there without having to be a disruption. We see it. We may choose to embrace it, or we may not be ready to engage it. But by bringing our awareness to it, it no longer has to fight for your attention. It can calm down, find a snug corner in your wine glass, and drift off to sleep.

--

If you want more articles like this straight to your inbox, and to download my free "Tune In Journal" and accompanying guided meditation, click [here](#).

For more information about my 1:1 coaching and group programs, check out renareiser.com.