Rav Eliyahu Dessler’s Integrative Approach to Creating a Meaningful Life

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and anguish? This cannot be the case either. There must be a way out. There must be some way of repairing this terrible misfortune which has befallen the whole of mankind. We must search for the remedy; we must find the key to happiness. We can be sure that Hashem, the source of all goodness, must have provided the world with a way to happiness; it is only up to us to find it. But before we can find the remedy, we shall have to diagnose the disease. What is this epidemic disease, of world proportions, that robs us of all happiness in life?

Our Sages, the true Sages of the Torah, have already told us the answer. It is stated clearly in the Mishna:2 “Jealousy, lust and status-seeking remove man from the world.” The world, as God made it, is a happy one. It is we who have removed ourselves from the world of happiness to the world of suffering by means of these three evil desires. So we only have to run away from jealousy, lust and prestige—that is, to banish them from our hearts—in order to transform the world into one brimming over with happiness from end to end. Then, we will find that we shall not only have osher with an aleph (happiness), we shall have ‘oshi (riches), too. The sages say:8 “Who is rich? He who rejoices in his portion.” They do not say that he is also rich; they do not say he is very rich; they simply say “He is rich”—period! The fact is that one who is not satisfied with his portion in life—whatever it may be—is not only not happy; he is not rich. In material terms he may have millions in the bank, but he is not rich; he is poor.

What does being poor mean? It means not having what you need. If a person wants and needs something that he does not have, he is poor, however much he may have in the bank. We shall find, in fact, that the so-called “rich” man is much worse off than the “poor” one because his ambitions and needs are so much greater. The poor man’s needs are easily satisfied, but the rich man’s desires and prestige-seeking are never gratified; they can never be gratified, because satisfying one need only leads to the next, ad infinitum. If we look at each of them as he sees himself—not as the poor man views the rich—we shall see that they are both very badly off; they both live miserable and frustrated lives; but, if anything, it is the “rich” man who is worse off than the “poor.” But the one who has conquered his lusts, who makes do with a minimum and is happy with his lot—the one who needs nothing that he does not have—he is the rich man. No one else in the world is rich but he.

■ DIRECTING ONE’S AMBITIONS

Who is this man? Let us take a closer look at him. We said he has banished desires and ambitions from his heart. Does that mean that he is a weak-kneed person, without energy, without “drive”? Is that what we call life? Is he like an old man, with no goals, no desires, with all his vital energy spent? Could this be what we mean by a happy life?

No! Certainly not! Nothing could be further from the truth. What we mean is this:

There is no happiness in the world in material things; there is only happiness in spiritual concerns. The one who enjoys a rich spiritual life is happy. There is no other kind of happiness in existence.

We see this in real b’nei Torah. Those fortunate people who devote their whole mind and desire, enthusiasm and ambition, to the pursuit of Torah and wisdom—they experience what true happiness means in this world. We
these too began fighting one another, biting, clawing and wounding; until one of them was victorious, snatched the carcass in his jaws and ran.

As I reflected on this savage scene, I observed the victor running in the distance, his path over the snow marked by bloodstains from the many wounds he had sustained. I said to myself: "It has cost him blood; but at least he managed to still his hunger. One could apply to him the verse, 'By his life he obtains his bread.'"

Then I took another look at the others. I saw that their wounds were worse than the first one's; they had lost blood; their strength was gone. And what had they gained from all their fighting? The shame of the vanquished. They had been beaten by their fellow, who had eaten and enjoyed, while they had nothing but their hurts; and their hunger, which had led them to fight in the first place, was still as intense as ever.

Now when I reflect on the hunger of the man who craves for material things, this memory from earlier times arises in my mind. It can serve as a parable for the human situation. The victor in the battle of life also comes out of it wounded, ill and exhausted. And what is more, his victory is a hollow one because his hunger is never stillled, but rather redoubled and intensified, as we have seen. And if such is the lot of the victor, what shall we say of the fate of the vanquished? And most people in the world end up as the vanquished in the competitive rat-race.

But I know what you are going to ask me: "What about the one whose ambition is directed to good ends?"

Here we have again arrived at the difference between the giver and the taker: between the ambition to give and the ambition to take. Our discussion of this will be reserved for the next chapter.

**Author's Note**

You may well ask, why does the craver never gain satisfaction, even when he obtains that which he craves? Something profound and remarkable lies hidden here. We can see that "craving" is the urge to draw to oneself that which is now outside one. In this it differs from a physiological urge such as hunger, which is merely the experience of a need to fill one's stomach. This is a clearly defined and limited goal. On the other hand, anyone who is unfortunate enough to fall into the hands of the money drive or other materialist craving is not in need of anything known or defined. He is governed by a novel and artificially-created urge to extend his domain: to obtain that which is outside himself because it is outside himself. He does not crave the object of desire because of any intrinsic value it may possess, but simply because it is perceived as something beyond his reach.

It follows—and this is the best indication of the truth of our analysis—that as soon as he obtains the object of his desire it is no longer of any interest to him. It no longer has the power to quench his desire. But when the person observes that his craving is not satisfied he misinterprets this and imagines he can satisfy his hunger by obtaining other things—things that are still beyond his
Lovingkindness

This “Discourse” is the result of many years’ work and thought. Its nucleus was already extant in the writings Rabbi Dessler brought with him from Kelm, and it underwent many revisions during his early years in England. When reading certain passages it must be borne in mind that much of it was imparted to and written for young people of the 16-18 age-group. However, it contains ideas which were fundamental to Rabbi Dessler’s thought and were indeed seminal to its later development.

Rabbi Dessler valued this “Discourse” very highly and took great care with its composition, giving the Hebrew a very individual, quasi-Biblical style (which it has not been possible to reproduce in translation). The Author’s Notes following Chapters Seven and Thirteen date from a later period and the discussion here is at a deeper level. It is recommended that they be omitted at first reading.

he discourse on lovingkindness
OR Giving and taking

The giver and the taker

When the Almighty created human beings He made them capable of both giving and taking. The faculty of giving is a sublime power; it is one of the attributes of the blessed Creator of all things. He is the Giver par excellence; His mercy, His bounty and His goodness extend to all His creatures. His giving is pure giving for He takes nothing in return. He can take nothing for He lacks nothing, as the verse says, “...If you are righteous what do you give to Him?”

Our service to Him is not for His need but for our own, since we need a means of expressing our gratitude to Him.

Man has been granted this sublime power of giving, enabling him too to be merciful, to bestow happiness, to give of himself. “God created man in His own image.”

On the other side stands the faculty of taking, by which a person aspires to draw to himself all that comes within his reach. This is what people call egotism or selfishness. It is
the root of all the evils in the world.

Some people take without giving anything in return. They are robbers if they take by force, or thieves if they take by stealth, or swindlers if they are cunning enough to persuade others to give them their property of their own free will.

There are some who wreak their evil on a world scale—such as warmongers and perpetrators of genocide—while others operate on the individual level. The former have no judges among mankind; only God can give them their just deserts. To deal with the second category men have set up the judicial system in order to protect themselves and also to establish norms of right conduct and to educate public opinion to look upon such behavior as shameful. But the root of the evil—the faculty of taking—remains intact. Consequently, you should place no trust in man or in his civilization. Beneath this mask he continues to swindle, steal, rob and murder. Our Sages have long since laid bare his deceit when they told us: “If it were not for fear of the state, each man would swallow his neighbor alive.”

But there are some who take without doing any wrong to their fellows; they merely like to take without giving anything in return. For example, those who love gifts or inherited wealth or those who like to live at the public expense or those who seek gain or inflated profits. All these must be included among the “takers”; the wisest of men said of them: “He who hates gifts shall live.”

These two powers—giving and taking—form the roots of all character-traits and of all actions. And note: there is no middle way. Every person is devoted, at the deepest level of his personality, to one or the other of the two sides, and in the innermost longing of the heart there are no compromises. It is a basic law that there is no middle path in human interest. In every act, in every word, in every thought—except perhaps those directed towards his innermost self without any connection with anything outside himself—one is always devoted either to lovingkindness and giving or to grasping and taking. We find a similar idea in The Duties of the Heart, where it is stated that in matters of the inner life there are no indifferent actions; there are only obligations or prohibitions.

What has been said so far may help us somewhat towards understanding the verse we quoted above: “He who hates gifts shall live.” But it will receive fuller explanation later on.

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on business dealings

We know what the merchants and businessmen are going to ask. “You say that only giving is good and all taking is bad? You will disrupt the whole order of the world. All creatures are made by God to both give and take; this is how God has arranged His world. Why should man be any different? Why should he not take as well as give?”

But the truth is clear: there are two kinds of taking. There are some who take the maximum and give the minimum. These are the merchants and middlemen who take advantage of every opportunity for profit, without
him to repay by giving happiness to that person by way of thanks and appreciation.

The taker, on the other hand, wants only to draw to himself as much as he can, whether by robbery, deceit, or other ways of "getting something for nothing." In his heart of hearts he believes that everything is his, everything and everyone are there for his sake. When he receives some favor from his friend he consequently does not feel any obligation to repay it. He takes it for granted that people should do things for him. He is thus by nature ungrateful. You may find a "taker" expressing thanks, sometimes even very beautifully. But don't you trust him or his thanks. Gratitude may be on his lips but it is not in his heart. He is quite prepared to cover himself in the cloak of gratitude, knowing that this may assist him to obtain further favors and gifts in the future. It becomes clear therefore that his "gratitude" is also "taking," since this is its object.

To sum up: true gratitude derives from the power of giving, while ingratitude is spawned by the power of taking.

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**the perfected world**

People have asked me: if God did not want man to be a taker, but to be entirely self-sufficient, then why did He create man in a plural environment and make him a social being? Surely it would have been preferable to create each individual in a world of his own, where there would be no possibility of jealousy or competition?

My answer was twofold. First: if man was not a social being he would not be able to choose between taking and giving; taking would simply be precluded by the nature of things. Hashem created man to be a free being who could distinguish between good and evil and choose the good. This is why the two forces were implanted in him and he was given the task of choosing the power of giving and avoiding the faculty of taking, thus ensuring his success both here and for eternity. The Torah makes this quite clear:

> I have put life and death before you...  
> And you shall choose life,  
> So that you may live, you and your children.  

Secondly: if men were not social beings and did not need each other, there would of course be no possibility of giving either. The concept of "giving" would not exist if there were no one to give to.

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One of our group then came back with the following question.

Since it is true that there can be no giving without someone receiving what is given, surely giving itself leads to evil? Surely the giver makes the recipient a taker? It follows too that there can never be a perfected world. If all human beings were to become givers, who would there be to take from them?

Now these are interesting questions, but if we devote a little more thought to the subject we shall see that the matter is really self-explanatory. There is a great difference between a "recipient" and a "taker," and similarly between a "giver" and "one from whom things
are taken.” We would do well not to confuse these concepts.

There is a type of person who takes and lets people take from him. This is the one possessed by the power of taking. His taking arises from self-love; he wants only to take and would much prefer not to give at all. If anything is taken from him this is only because he is unable to prevent it.

There is another person: one who gives and receives. He is the giver, whose giving flows from the source of pure goodness in his heart, and whose receiving immediately fills his heart with gratitude—in payment for whatever he receives.

The explanation is this. Both types—the giver and the taker—in fact pay for what they get in the majority of cases. The difference is that the giver does not want to take anything without payment, and at the very least he pays by sincere thanks and appreciation. On the other hand, the taker does not want to pay anything; he pays only because he has to, realizing that without payment he is not likely to get what he wants. It follows that the person in whom the power of giving is operative, and who never receives any favor without payment by way of grateful appreciation, will never fall prey to the power of taking, however much he may receive from others.

The corrupted world is a world of takers whose aim is to use, despoil and exploit each other as much as they can. This is the social system in which jealousy, greed and competitiveness reign and which inevitably leads to war, murder, robbery and misery, as mentioned in Chapter One.

But the perfected world is one where every person without exception gives to and benefits others, and whose heart overflows with gratitude for what he receives from others. A human society such as this is the perfect and happy society, overflowing with peace and love—the society in which Hashem delights.

We can perhaps see a hint of these ideas in a story told in the Midrash Rabbah.99

We are told there that Alexander of Macedonia, the world-conqueror, on his travels beyond the Mountains of Darkness, once came across the kingdom of "Cassia." He became friendly with the king, who offered to show him their system of justice. Two men came before the court. The plaintiff had bought a piece of wasteland from his neighbor and had found a treasure buried in it. He claimed that he had intended to buy land only and not treasure, and insisted that the treasure belonged to the vendor. The vendor on the other hand argued that he had sold the land and all that it contained, and the treasure must go to the purchaser.

The king of Cassia addressed each in turn, and asked them whether they had sons or daughters. It emerged that one had a son and one a daughter, each of marriageable age. The king’s decision was that the children should marry and the treasure would "stay in the family."

When he saw Alexander’s astonishment at this case and its outcome, the king said to him: "Why, have I not
ever considering whether the effort and work they have invested really bear any relationship to the profits gained. When they bend their efforts to benefit from their neighbor’s failures or take advantage of his ignorance, can this really be distinguished from plain, unvarnished deception? Not to speak of those who amass their fortune by usury, battening on other people’s hard-won earnings, or who exploit their workers, paying them a pittance for hard and exacting toil, or who oppress whole nations, ruling them with a tyrant’s hand (even though some incidental benefit may accrue to their people)—all these and their like are examples of “much taking and little giving.”

And furthermore:

Even the little that they do give is not true giving. It has its roots not in good—the faculty of giving—but in evil—the faculty of taking. All their desires and thoughts are immersed in taking. If they give, it is only with the object of taking sevenfold in return. The storekeeper, for example, gives his goods in order to make a profit. If he gives the customer best quality goods, his purpose is merely to double his profits.

And a still greater evil emerges:

Since everyone’s drive is towards taking, the inevitable result is intensive competition, with each person trying to get as much as he can for himself out of every situation. True, there is nothing wrong in this from the point of view of human judgment. But does not competition lead to much needless pain and suffering, and sometimes even to severe illness and premature death?

Such are the results of one type of “giving and taking.” The other kind will be discussed in the next chapter.

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business at its best

The ways of the tsaddikim among human beings are very different. Their giving is maximal and their taking minimal. And even the little that they do take is essential for them, since it enables them to maintain the giving and beneficence to which they are devoted. It follows that their taking, too, derives from a holy source—from the desire to give. They have no contact whatsoever with the evil force of taking. They are “the holy ones on this earth” who identify themselves with the attributes of their Creator in all their actions.

How are we to conceive of “both giving and taking” at its best? Let us examine the actions of two of the greatest human beings who have ever lived, one of them belonging to the very earliest times and the other to the very latest. We shall then discover the right way, for if we follow in their paths we shall never fail.

The Torah writes of Ḥanoch, who was the seventh generation after Adam, “And Ḥanoch walked with God,” upon which the Rabbis say: “Ḥanoch was a cobbler, and with every single stitch that he made he achieved mystical unions with his Creator.” I have heard a beautiful explanation of this in the name of Rabbi Yisrael Salanter of blessed memory—an interpretation which is indeed typical of his whole approach. He said that this midrash cannot possibly mean that while he was sitting and stitching shoes for his customers his mind was engaged on mystical pursuits. This would be forbidden by the din. How could he divert his attention to other matters while engaged on work which he had been hired
family for that day, and then to close, to enable the other shopkeepers to make a living too. But then he noticed that his plan was not succeeding; most of the customers managed to get to his store during the brief time it was open. So in the end he decided to close his store altogether. He would not be a grocer if this meant causing injury to others.⁹

Our Rabbis have said, "Greater is he who benefits from the labor of his own hands than he who fears God."¹⁰ What is the great virtue of the one who benefits from the work of his own hands?

He who is concerned to benefit only from his own labor is that great human being who desires above all that his "giving" should exceed his "taking." This person, fearing that he might not succeed in this aim, refuses to earn his living solely by the use of his intellect or talents, in the sciences or professions, because in these there is a greater risk that he might receive more than he gives by way of services rendered. He therefore prefers to work with his hands and by the sweat of his brow—the simplest kind of work which is paid on the lowest scale—because the value of his effort will certainly be greater than the payment he will receive.

But why is he greater than one who fears God? This we hope to explain later on.

The second story concerns Rabbi Yisrael Meir Hacohen of blessed memory, universally known as the Chaifetz Chayim—the holy tsaddik whom we had the merit still to see in our own generation. He did not want to make a living from his Torah-learning, so he decided to open a grocery-store. It goes without saying that his goods were of the best quality, his measures were always heaped up and his scales always tipped in favor of the customer. Naturally people crowded into his store. Then Rabbi Yisrael Meir said to himself, "Then how will the other grocery-stores make a living?" So he decided to open his store only one or two hours a day, just sufficient for him to earn the few pennies he needed to keep himself and his
on the roots of love

There is nobody in the whole world who does not possess at least a spark of the faculty of giving. This may be seen for instance at times of family rejoicing, when people of the most grasping natures still feel the urge to involve their friends in their celebration. No one’s joy is complete unless he can share it with others. Similarly, everyone has a deep-seated need for social life of some sort. (This is why solitary confinement—separation from the company of one’s fellow-men—is considered such a severe punishment.) What is the nature of these yearnings?—sparks of the faculty of giving.

We all want to have children. Two motives may be distinguished here. We want children to give us a sense of continuity; we feel that death is not quite so final if we have left children behind us. But perhaps an even stronger motive is the need to have someone on whom to lavish our love and affection. This is why childless couples will often adopt orphan children and bring them up as their own. Some will even lavish their affection on a dog or other pet animal, and treat it almost like a child. This too is an indication of the hidden depths of the power of giving in the human soul.

Here we come to an interesting question. We see that love and giving always come together. Is the giving a consequence of the love, or is perhaps the reverse true: is the love a result of the giving?

We usually think it is love which causes giving because we observe that a person showers gifts and favors on the one he loves. But there is another side to the argument. Giving may bring about love for the same reason that a person loves what he himself has created or nurtured: he recognizes in it part of himself. Whether it is a child he has brought into the world, an animal he has reared, a plant he has tended, or even a thing he has made or a house he has built—a person is bound in love to the work of his hands, for in it he finds himself. I have been shown a source in the sayings of our Rabbis which may indicate that they held the opinion we have just put forward: that love flows in the direction of giving. They say in the tractate Derech Eretz Zuta:11 “If you want to keep close to the love of your friend make it your concern to seek his welfare.”

Love of this kind can go very deep indeed. Let us observe what is written in God’s Torah. (This is the only source from which we can learn the true depths of the human heart, for only the Creator knows the secrets of the human soul that He has created.) We find there that among the categories of men permitted to return home before a battle are the following:

Whoever has built a new house and not consecrated it…and whoever has planted a vineyard and not redeemed it…and whoever has wedded a woman and not taken her to his home…12

All are treated in exactly the same way: the builder of the house and the planter of the vineyard equally with the new husband who is involved in the most intimate of human relationships. The Torah thus reveals to us that the love we bear to the fruit of our labors is directly com-
the clearest possible manner that he really is to you “as yourself.”

on love between the sexes

The love and affection which often prevail between man and wife are something remarkable in human psychology. At first glance we might think that this love has no true personal content. Perhaps it is merely something implanted in us by the Creator as part of His deep-laid plan for the maintenance of the world, just as hunger is given to us to ensure the preservation of the body. But this seems most unlikely. To achieve this end the biological urges of physical desire and yearning for children would suffice. What is the point of this additional emotional attachment?

I have heard it said that this love arises from gratitude. Two people are grateful to each other because they help each other to fulfill their natural instincts. But this idea is mistaken. There are plenty of ungrateful people in the world, but we do not find that husband-wife affection is necessarily lacking in their case.

We must rather say that this love arises between husband and wife because they complement each other. This fact flows from the nature with which the Almighty has endowed them. Alone, every person is defective and unable to carry out his proper function; as our Rabbis say, “He who has no wife…is not a complete human being.” Together, they complement each other, and by giving each other this completion they come to love each other, on the principle we have already established: the one who gives, loves.
good use even of “hunger-based” urges, whose aim is the satisfaction of personal, selfish desire.

For example, in his service of God he will act sheloh lishmah, that is to say, out of concern for himself (and from sheloh lishmah he will endeavor to reach lishmah); he will do things out of fear, that is, he will be afraid of punishment for himself; and he will perform mitzvot with the idea of receiving “the portion allotted by the master to his servants,” that is, he will look out for reward for himself. In mitzvot between man and man, in addition to these motivations he will act out of compassion and sympathy, which are not motives of pure, unselfish love, since basically they are self-centered, their aim being to avoid the pain caused by seeing the other person’s distress.

All these motivations are based on taking, since in the final test one is acting for one’s own benefit. But it is highly advisable to make use of all motivations of this kind for spiritual purposes. This is the meaning of that difficult saying of the Rabbis: “You shall love Hashem your God with all your heart: with both your inclinations, both the good and the bad.” The person on the way up must make use of his bad qualities themselves—that is, his selfish urges—for the sake of his spiritual progress.

A wonderful idea suggests itself here for helping oneself to acquire the quality of giving. The artistic talent is a divine gift to man. It enables him to use his refined imagination to sense the most subtle nuances of human character, imperceptible to others, and to express them in the spoken or written word, in sculpture or in painting. One would have to be a very great artist to give full expression, for instance, to a mother’s concern for her children, the wonderful intimacy and profundity of her feelings. She herself needs no art; she acts and feels according to her nature. But when artistic expression is given to these emotions they must make a profound impression on everyone.

Hashem has implanted a spark of the artist in each one of us—each according to his ability. Whenever we use our imagination to picture something to ourselves this arouses our emotions and makes its impression on us. This is something of the greatest value to anyone who is training himself to develop his emotions in the directions required by the Torah. And similarly with the quality of giving. Before we arrive at the ultimate goal of joy and ecstatic attachment to God in love (which form the basis of true giving, as we have seen), we can at least try to picture to ourselves our neighbor’s worry and distress in all their details and nuances. The sympathy and compassion thus engendered may move us to actions of lovingkindness. Similarly, we can picture his relief and happiness at obtaining what he so sorely needs. The knowledge that it is in our power to cause our friend all this happiness must surely make giving easier for us.

But for the picture to work we must already have a measure of love for our neighbor. If this is insufficient, we can make use of “service from fear.” We can feel it to be our duty to be a giver, and our imagination can tell us how a giver ought to feel. Also we must try to do as many acts of lovingkindness as possible, and trust that the repeated actions will influence the quality of giving deep within our hearts.
"you shall love your neighbor as yourself"

It was explained in the previous chapter that every human being possesses some spark of the faculty of giving. In other words, the faculty of taking has not been given the power to extinguish this last spark. It is essential that this should be so, for the world depends on it for its very existence; without that vestigial spark of giving, no one would marry or have children.

But since most people's power of giving remains at this vestigial level, they tend to restrict their giving and their love to a narrow circle of relatives and friends. They look on everyone else as strangers and deal with them in ways dominated by the power of taking; envy, exploitation, grasping and greed rule the day.

If one were only to reflect that *a person comes to love the one to whom he gives*, he would realize that the only reason the other person seems a stranger to him is because he has not yet *given* to him; he has not taken the trouble to show him friendly concern. If I give to someone, I feel close to him; I have a share in his being. It follows that if I were to start bestowing good upon *everyone* I come into contact with, I would soon feel that they are *all* my relatives, *all* my loved ones. I now have a share in them all; my being has extended into all of them.

Someone who has been granted the merit to reach this sublime level can understand the command, "*You shall love your neighbor as yourself*"\(^{16}\) in its literal sense: "As yourself: without distinction; as yourself: in actual fact."\(^{16}\) By giving to him of yourself you will find in your soul that you and he are indeed one; you will feel in the clearest possible manner that he really is to you *"as yourself."*

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on love between the sexes

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Of course, their love, in its turn, will make them want to go on giving, and the pleasure and happiness which each bestows on the other will maintain and intensify their love.

On this basis we can understand yet another remarkable fact. Why do we find so often that this husband-wife affection does not seem to last? The answer is simple. People are generally “takers,” not “givers.” When their biological instincts gain the upper hand they become “givers” and “lovers.” But before very long nature relaxes its grip and they relapse into a state of “taking” as before. This change takes place imperceptibly. Previously they were joined together in an atmosphere of love and mutual giving. From now on they are “takers” once again and each begins to demand from the other the fulfillment of his or her obligations. When demands begin, love departs.

This is why I always say to a couple in the joyousness of their wedding day: “Filling your hearts at this moment is a wondrous desire to give pleasure and happiness to each other. Take care, my dear ones, that you strive to keep this desire always as fresh and strong as it is at the present time. You should know that the moment you find yourselves beginning, instead, to make demands upon each other, your happiness is at an end.”

There are some people who do not want to enter into marriage. This is because they are unable to shake themselves free of the power of taking, and even their natural instincts cannot turn them into “givers,” even temporarily. Similarly, there are couples who want as few children as possible—a very prevalent phenomenon in our time. Such people are outstanding specimens of “takers”; they do not want to “give” even to their own children.

To sum up: the best relationship between husband and wife will obtain when both achieve and practice the virtue of giving. Then their love will never cease and their lives will be filled with happiness and contentment for as long as they live on this earth.

on ambition

Everyone admires the ambitious person. People do their best to educate their children to be full of ambition and “drive.” It has even been said that ambition is life itself. But is this correct?

Ambition is hunger. A hungry person craves food and an ambitious person craves the objects of his ambition. It is therefore a great mistake to think that ambition is life. Hunger is not life. It is merely the stimulus which the Almighty has implanted in his creatures in order to remind them to do the things necessary to keep themselves alive. Similarly all ambitions are kinds of hunger. They are the emissaries of our heart’s inclinations, for good or for evil.
But when we have achieved the quality of giving itself, we shall no longer need "works of art"; our new nature will take charge. Our giving will be pure, flowing from the goodness of our generous heart, and no longer bear any relation to self-need or self-concern.

\[ \text{10} \]

the cure for wrong ambition

How can one avoid being caught in the net of wrong ambition?

This is a difficult question. Our ambitions and cravings for "taking" are products of the yetzer ha-ra. Even if we were to succeed in controlling them in practice—a difficult enough undertaking in itself—surely this would still leave the root of the evil untouched? Who can control the desires of his heart?

Our sainted Rabbis have shown us the way. They said, "He who satisfies it is hungry; he who starves it is satisfied." This means that the one tried and tested therapy for the disease of wrong ambition—the lust for taking—is to heal the hunger with the hunger itself.

The rule is: Let your yetzer hunger, and it will leave you alone.

This "hunger-prescription" becomes easier to follow for the tsaddik who remembers that "giving" and "taking" can never co-exist in the human heart; that until he frees himself completely from the influence of "taking" he will never be a "giver" and so never identify with this attribute of his Creator.

And even the non-tsaddik may well ponder the thought that so long as he suffers from the disease called "taking" his life is not worth living, and that it is surely better to undergo a little hunger than to ruin one's life completely. This may help him towards a cure.

\[ \text{36} \]

Now we can understand why the tsaddikim were so very careful to avoid any contact whatsoever with "taking." They preferred not to get involved with this dangerous force at all. They fully understood the significance of the verse "...and he who hates gifts shall live," which is so puzzling to some. Why "hate"? And how does this ensure life? We referred to this verse at the end of Chapter One, and we promised then that we would try to throw some light on its meaning. I think that after all that we have learned up to this point it hardly needs any further explanation.

\[ \text{11} \]

grateful

What is the nature of gratitude and thanksgiving? What is their origin in the human psyche? And whence comes that ingratitude which is the affliction of so many of the human race?

Here too you may recognize the giver and the taker.

The giver feels profoundly that he must reject "free gifts." The desire of his being is to give, not to draw to himself things that are outside him. Consequently when he does receive anything from anyone else he is immediately prompted to give something equivalent in return. If he is unable to do this in kind, his heart urges
him to repay by giving happiness to that person by way of thanks and appreciation.

The taker, on the other hand, wants only to draw to himself as much as he can, whether by robbery, deceit, or other ways of "getting something for nothing." In his heart of hearts he believes that everything is his, everything and everyone are there for his sake. When he receives some favor from his friend he consequently does not feel any obligation to repay it. He takes it for granted that people should do things for him. He is thus by nature ungrateful. You may find a "taker" expressing thanks, sometimes even very beautifully. But don't you trust him or his thanks. Gratitude may be on his lips but it is not in his heart. He is quite prepared to cover himself in the cloak of gratitude, knowing that this may assist him to obtain further favors and gifts in the future. It becomes clear therefore that his "gratitude" is also "taking," since this is its object.

To sum up: true gratitude derives from the power of giving, while ingratitude is spawned by the power of taking.

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the perfected world

People have asked me: if God did not want man to be a taker, but to be entirely self-sufficient, then why did He create man in a plural environment and make him a social being? Surely it would have been preferable to create each individual in a world of his own, where there would be no possibility of jealousy or competition?

My answer was twofold. First: if man was not a social being he would not be able to choose between taking and giving; taking would simply be precluded by the nature of things. Hashem created man to be a free being who could distinguish between good and evil and choose the good. This is why the two forces were implanted in him and he was given the task of choosing the power of giving and avoiding the faculty of taking, thus ensuring his success both here and for eternity. The Torah makes this quite clear:

I have put life and death before you...
And you shall choose life,
So that you may live, you and your children.38

Secondly: if men were not social beings and did not need each other, there would of course be no possibility of giving either. The concept of "giving" would not exist if there were no one to give to.

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One of our group then came back with the following question.

Since it is true that there can be no giving without someone receiving what is given, surely giving itself leads to evil? Surely the giver makes the recipient a taker? It follows too that there can never be a perfected world. If all human beings were to become givers, who would there be to take from them?

Now these are interesting questions, but if we devote a little more thought to the subject we shall see that the matter is really self-explanatory. There is a great difference between a "recipient" and a "taker," and similarly between a "giver" and "one from whom things
judged well? How would you have decided such a case in your country?"

Alexander replied: "We would have put both parties to death and the royal treasury would have confiscated the property."

The king of Cassia asked: "Does the sun shine in your country?"

"Yes," answered Alexander.
"Do you have animals?" enquired the king.
"Yes," replied Alexander.
"Now I understand," said the king of Cassia. "If you have rain and sunshine it is not in your merit; it is in the merit of the animals; as it says, 'Save, O God, man and beast'; man in the merit of beast."

This wonderful Midrash shows us in the clearest terms the vast difference between the "givers" and the "takers."

When the two "givers" brought their case before the King of the Givers, neither wanting to take from his neighbor more than he had given, the decision was: "Unite." This is characteristic of "givers." They unite in giving as well as in receiving and so create a world of perfection.

The King of the Takers held very different views. He would have condemned to death the virtuous givers as destroyers of the established order of society. Even their property would not go to their children; it would be confiscated by the government.

But the King of the Givers showed his contempt of this attitude by saying: "The beasts are better than you.

If you are allowed to live in this world it can only be in the merit of the animals. If they do no good, at least they do not inflict the harm which you do."

We can now derive a general law: Takers harm each other, for the taker makes the person from whom he takes a taker in his turn; his aim now is to try his best to get back what was taken from him. But givers complete each other. The giver arouses a spirit of giving in the recipient, whose aim is now to give back in gratitude that which he has received.

on the love of God

The true service of God is built on a foundation of gratitude. It is stated with the utmost clarity in all the books of the Tenach that it is our duty to be thankful to Hashem for all the good He bestows on us, and that this is to be the motivation of our observance of all the mitzvot and statutes of the Torah. This basic principle is hinted at in the first of the Ten Commandments revealed by God in that blinding revelation to all our people at Mount Sinai: "I am Hashem your God, Who took you out of the land of Egypt, the house of slavery."41 It is clear that mention of the release from Egypt, reinforced by the reference to "the house of slavery," is intended to arouse in us feelings of gratitude as a prelude to our acceptance of God's Torah.

Certainly it is possible to serve God from fear. One
may refrain from wrongdoing because one is afraid of eventual retribution, and this can also be a motive for fulfilling the commands of the Torah. But this is the lowest rung in the ladder of God's service. Service which partakes of wholeness and perfection can only be that which comes from unselfish feelings of gratitude.

Our Rabbis said: "Whoever is ungrateful for good done to him by his friend will eventually prove ungrateful for the good done to him by the Holy One, blessed be He."⁴² Rabbi Nachum Velvel Sieff of Kelm, one of the great Mussar teachers, explained this saying in a remarkable way.

Every human being (he said) is swayed in all his actions by his characteristic qualities. If he is irritable he will become angry in every situation which contains a stimulus to anger. If he is arrogant, he will act arrogantly in every appropriate situation. Similarly, if he is good-hearted he will be good to everybody; if selfish, this will emerge in all his dealings. No one can ever beg or borrow from his neighbor a character-trait that he happens to need at a particular moment. So an ungrateful person [so long as his fault remains uncorrected] will be ungrateful not only in his dealings with his fellow human beings but also in his relationship with the Divine Source of all being. Once this trait is ingrained in his character it will take charge of all his behavior and permeate all his attitudes, even when he is standing before Hashem.

On the other hand, one who acquires and fosters the precious quality of gratitude to others will not only give thanks to God but will feel with all his heart and soul how much he owes Him for all the manifold bounties he has received and continues to receive every day of his life. Such a person will naturally express his gratitude by sacrifice or prayer offered in sincerity before the Almighty [and by trying with all his might to carry out God's commands to the best of his ability]. By doing this the human being becomes in a certain sense a "giver" to Hashem (if such a thing were possible), and Hashem becomes (as it were) a "receiver." This is just the relationship which, as we saw earlier, fosters feelings of love from the giver to the receiver. In this way the person can become attached to Hashem in love—the highest achievement of the human soul.

Love of God is so great because it is so difficult of attainment. There are few indeed who ever perform the first mitzva of keriat shema": "And you shall love Hashem your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might." The truth is that this love is attainable only by those who have achieved the quality of "giving" and the gratitude which flows therefrom.

It should now be clear. The basis of the love of God is nothing but the quality of giving.

AUTHOR'S NOTE  

We quoted above the saying of our Rabbis: "Whoever is ungrateful for the good done to him by his neighbor will eventually be ungrateful for the good done to him by Hashem." What is meant by the word "eventually"? There is a profound thought hidden here. We will expound it briefly and leave it for the reader's later reflection.

When a person leaves this world for his eternal home and comes to "the world of truth," everything will be revealed to him as it really is. He will become aware of
keep the way of Hashem..." This is "the Torah of the Fathers." But even if we have failed to live up to "the Torah of the Fathers" in all respects, we should at least try and hold firm to the character of the Fathers, which the Jewish people possess by heredity. (See the discussion of "spiritual inheritance" in the essay "The Attribute of Mercy" in Volume I of Strive for Truth.)

This inborn tendency to lovingkindness is the "inner spiritual point" which never departs from the Jewish soul. This is the spiritual aspect of that famous promise by which God assures us that even in the depths of exile and degradation

I have not rejected them
nor cast them out
for I, Hashem, am their God.

This is why our Rabbis, in the passage quoted above, cite the text "My lovingkindness shall never leave you." By human kindness we acquire God's kindness, measure for measure. The profound insight here is that God's greatest kindness is the gift to Israel of the "inner point" of spirituality, which is given even to the unworthy. This is a bestowal of undeserved besed without parallel.

Unfortunately our generation has moved far from the Torah of the Fathers. Let us take firm hold of deeds of kindness. Let us learn the Torah of lovingkindness.

Many of the principles of besed have been discussed in the first part of this Discourse. The Almighty God has given us the merit to add to these in this second part.

"giving" leads to faith

We have explained in "The Roots of Mussar" that all thought comes from interest. What a person does not want to think about never enters his mind. It follows that all thought is to some extent tainted by self-interest, and "bribery blinds the eyes of the wise." I have only to accept a gift from someone and I can no longer see the truth about him. Certainly not if my own personal interests are involved. We concluded that our only hope of getting to the truth in matters which the yetzer ba-ra' opposes is to remove all bias from our heart, and to make a supreme effort to seek the truth and only the truth.

Now it should be clear that bias and self-interest have their roots in the power of "taking," which is the source of all our desires. And since it is bias and self-interest which cloud our recognition of Hashem and our faith in Him, the only way to come to recognize the truth about Hashem is to remove "taking" from our heart and instead to reinforce the power of "giving." This is our only chance to awaken within ourselves the interest for truth, which as we know is the prime condition for the recognition of truth.

HONESTY AND TRUTH

What is faith? Is it part of human psychology to "have faith," to "believe"? If it was, it would apply to everything that we hear. Only a simpleton "believes everything." It is also not right to dignify with the name of "faith" the intellectual adherence to propositions which we are not prepared to live by. A man can be said to have faith only in
those matters which in the depths of his heart he recognizes as true and decisive for him. It follows that the degree of a person's faith depends on his purity of heart. Only one who is basically honest and true to himself (in Hebrew: ne’eman) can be a man of faith (in Hebrew: ma’amin).

Reinforcement of the power of “giving” removes our inner bias. It follows that the more a person busies himself with helping other people, the stronger and deeper will be his recognition of his Creator.

**AVRAHAM’S HOSPITALITY**

Our Rabbis have said\(^{10}\) that hospitality to strangers is greater than receiving the presence of the Shechina. We learn this from the fact that Avraham Avinu begged God to postpone His revelation until he had finished attending to the strangers who had just appeared near his tent.\(^{11}\)

But we must ask, Why was it right for Avraham to “keep God waiting,” so to speak, while he attended to the needs of (so far as he knew) the lowliest of idolatrous Arabs?\(^{12}\)

**GREATER THAN PROPHECY**

The answer is that hospitality, even to the lowest of the low, is receiving the presence of the Shechina; and at a greater and deeper level even than prophecy itself, which is the foremost among all the heavenly gifts. The reason is first that prophecy is a gift, and not something that one creates oneself and so makes part of one’s own personality; on the other hand an act of lovingkindness deeply and permanently affects the person’s whole personality. As we have seen, an act of this sort removes one’s inner bias and enables one to see the truth clearly. Faith is thereby acquired in a deep and permanent way. Accordingly the person achieves a constant and stable “vision of the Divine Presence,” deeply engrained in his heart and being. This is now something he has acquired and made his own, and not, like prophecy, a gift from outside himself.

**PROPHECY—AND MURDER**

Prophecy can be something external to the personality, not affecting one’s actions. We can see this from the case of Cain, who was a prophet to whom God Himself spoke words of encouragement\(^{13}\) “Why are you hurt, and why has your face fallen? If you improve, you will be raised up, etc.” Nevertheless he found it possible to kill his brother.

**KINDNESS TO THE LOWLY**

Why did the angels appear to Avraham like the lowliest of human beings? Because the lowlier the recipient the higher the act of besed.

(Elsewhere\(^{14}\) we find that there is nothing worse than to find that one’s charity has been given to unworthy recipients. The contradiction is only apparent however. In that case the Gemara is speaking of the wicked persecutors of Yirmiyahu, who were certainly dangerous people, “takers” par excellence. Their charity did not proceed from a pure desire for besed, but from the opposite. The charity of a “taker” is itself “taking.”\(^{15}\) The only chance of their gaining merit from their charity would be if it happened to come into the hands of a deserving person. Then their merit would be that they had functioned as “instruments” for someone else’s benefit.\(^{16}\) If it were ensured that their charity came into the hands only of unworthy people it


would bring them no merit at all, and this they richly deserved.)

ONE'S NEIGHBOR A KING

We are told that on the day of judgment we will be asked “Did you make your Creator king over you every morning and evening, and did you make your neighbor king over you with mildness of spirit?” What is the connection between these two questions? “Making one's neighbor king over one” means putting oneself at one's neighbor's service. This is “giving” par excellence. As we have seen, it is only the “giver” who is capable of truly recognizing his Creator and accepting Him as king.

FAITH AND GRATITUDE

We explained in the first part of this Discourse that gratitude is a product of the power of giving. We also wrote that love springs from acts of giving and not vice versa.

The relationship between faith in God and gratitude to God follows the same pattern. Gratitude and “giving” lead to faith, rather than faith being the cause of gratitude. Logically the latter proposition should be true. When one recognizes the greatness of God one should be grateful for all his bounties. But in practice it does not work that way. A person does not recognize God in his heart in gratitude unless he has first purified his heart from the disease of selfish bias—the product of egoism and “taking.”

Even if a person is shown open miracles, it is not the miracles which bring a person to faith in God but the gratitude which the miracles produce. Mosheh Rabbenu described all the miracles which God had done for the Jewish people, ending with the words, “...and with all this you still have no faith in Hashem your God.” This shows that without gratitude no miracles can bring one to faith.

only “giving” leads to true service of Hashem

All the deeds and thoughts of the person who lives by the power of “taking” is ruled by the principle of self-interest. If he does something for someone else he will have calculated in advance that it is “worth his while.” The mitzvot which he does and the Torah that he learns are all subject to the same principle: what does he get out of them? The answer may be honor, prestige and the like. Or it may be worse: he may want to use his knowledge and position to injure and oppress others. The principle is: one whose interest is himself serves no one but himself.

The idea of putting himself unreservedly at God’s disposal, the concept of loving God with all his heart and soul, are completely alien to him. He may not admit this to others, or even to himself, but in his heart of hearts he does not really believe in God at all, as we have explained. What connection can he possibly have with the service of Hashem?

COMMENDARY WITHOUT THE BOOK

This is the meaning of Hillel’s response to the would-be proselyte: “What you don’t like don’t do to your neighbor: this is the whole Torah—all of it. The rest is