

Dessler, Elijah Eliezer

מכתב מאליהו



RABBI ELIYAHU E. DESSLER

strive
for truth!



MICHTAV ME-ELIYAHU

the selected writings of Rabbi E.E. Dessler

rendered into English and annotated by

Aryeh Carmell



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PART ONE

Lovingkindness

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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.

The discourse on lovingkindness

OR *Giving and taking*

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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?"¹

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."²

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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

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, batten 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.

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"⁶ 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 Hānoch, who was the seventh generation after Adam, "And Hānoch walked with God,"⁷ upon which the Rabbis say: "Hānoch was a cobbler, and with every single stitch that he made he achieved mystical unions with his Creator."⁸ 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

to do by others? No, says Rabbi Yisrael; the “mystical unions” which Hanoach achieved were nothing more nor less than the concentration which he lavished on each and every stitch to ensure that it would be good and strong and that the pair of shoes he was making would be a good pair, giving the maximum pleasure and benefit to whoever would wear them. In this way Hanoach achieved union with the attribute of his Creator, who lavishes his goodness and beneficence on others. This was his “mystical union”; he was united and wholehearted in his desire, his single-minded ambition, to attach himself to his Creator’s attributes. Of course, as a natural consequence he was protected from any hint of evil or wrongdoing. There could be no question of his ever deceiving or over-reaching his customers, even unwittingly. His “taking” would never exceed the value of the work he was doing—the measure of his “giving.”

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The second story concerns Rabbi Yisrael Meir Hacoheh of blessed memory, universally known as the *Chafetz 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

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

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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.

parable with the love of a man for his betrothed. There can be no doubt that this is an example of the love produced by the power of giving.

Here is a case which I personally observed. I knew a young married couple whose little son was the delight of their lives. War overtook the town where they lived and they were forced to flee. It so happened that the young mother was away from home on that day; the father fled with his little boy in one direction while the mother was forced to take the opposite route, and so the family was separated by the warring armies. And so they remained, separated in sorrow and yearning, all the years of the war. At last the battlefronts grew quiet, peace returned, and they were re-united—and what a happy family reunion that was!

But a remarkable thing came to light. They could no longer make good that which the years had taken away. The love between the father and his son was deeper and closer than that of the mother for the son. Was it because she had parted from him as a small boy and found him grown up? Was she still yearning for the little son she had left behind? But this is only imagination. The cruel fact was that the potential “giving” of all those years was lost beyond recall. It was the father who had trained and reared the child and had lavished on him the thousand-and-one acts of tender care which normally fall to the lot of the mother. The love which springs from all that giving had passed completely to the father.

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We can find another example of “the love which comes from giving” in the *halacha* dealing with help to a fellow-

Jew in distress. Two cases are discussed in the Gemara.¹³ One is the case of a pack-animal whose load has fallen, and the mitzva is to help the owner re-load it. The other is the case of the overloaded animal, where the mitzva is twofold: to prevent further suffering to the animal, and to help the owner to load it more effectively. If one is confronted by both cases at the same time, the second one takes precedence, since an additional mitzva is involved—helping the animal. If one is confronted by two precisely similar cases, but in the one instance the owner is a friend and in the other the owner is an enemy, helping the enemy takes precedence, since there is a specific mitzva to help one’s enemy,¹⁴ “so as to conquer one’s *yetzer*.”

But what if the choice is between *unloading* the pack-animal of a friend and *re-loading* the pack-animal of an enemy? Here too, says the Gemara, the mitzva of helping the enemy comes first. Even though the mitzva of preventing suffering to an animal is a Torah command, “conquering one’s *yetzer* takes precedence.” There is an additional point here. By resisting one’s inclination and helping one’s enemy one automatically removes some of the hatred from one’s own heart and replaces it by the love which comes from giving. A perceptive person will observe many cases of this sort.

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To sum up: that which a person gives to another is never lost. It is an extension of his own being. He can see a part of himself in the fellow-man to whom he has given. This is the attachment between one man and his fellow to which we give the name “love.”

If we look at the animal kingdom we shall see that hungry animals eat until they are satisfied and do not eat again until they are hungry once more. The swine is perhaps an exception, for it eats all the time and is seemingly never satisfied. The human being suffers from a similar disease. "He who loves money will never have sufficient money."¹⁸ He is eternally hungry. And it is not only the hunger for more money that dominates him continuously. It is the same with all physical desires and ambitions: the more one attempts to satisfy them, the more intense the hunger becomes. "If one satisfies it, it is hungry," as the Rabbis said of one form of physical desire.¹⁹

If we reflect further we may note how Hashem had mercy on the pig and increased its food supply in proportion to its appetite; its food is available everywhere since it eats other creatures' refuse. (And if you wish you may see in this an example of the wonders of God's creation: the constant hunger of the pig is a means of cleansing the world of unwanted refuse.) In fact the pig suffers no pain from its hunger; on the contrary, since it is always able to appease it, its life is one of continuous pleasure.

But this is not the case with the man who hungers for that which his *yetzer* craves. What he yearns for is far beyond his reach. He must fight a heavy battle and expend great effort to attain even a small part of what he craves. And even if he lives many years he will never achieve even half of it, as our Rabbis say, "No man leaves this world with half his desires fulfilled."²⁰

But the situation is far worse than that. A person is not only hungry for what he actually needs at any given time. He hungers also for what he thinks he might need in the future, and his hunger is intensified by his concern

for what may happen many years in the future—so far ahead that if the truth be told it is very unlikely he will still be in this world. His hunger extends also to the real or imagined needs of his children and grandchildren. All these accumulated hungers compel him to devote years of back-breaking toil to provide for all these eventualities, not forgetting the worries which beset him regarding the possibilities of theft, failure and loss of all that he has. Of course, the more wealth he amasses and the more he tries to provide against the future, the more his worries increase²¹ and the more his hunger grows until it becomes intolerable.

These cravings to provide for the future stand in his way and prevent his making use of what he has for the needs of the moment. So even if it were possible for him to still his immediate needs at least in part, these other urges deny him this satisfaction. His life is nothing but one terrible hunger from all sides, until he dies, worn out and still hungry.

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Many years ago, when I was wandering in the lands of the North, I observed a pack of ravenous wolves running in search of food. All of a sudden they found the carcass of a small animal lying in their path, and they all pounced on it in ferocious intensity. But they were unable to devour the prey because each one attacked his neighbor, jostling him out of the way. They bit and fought one another until all were wounded and bled profusely. And so they fought until all lay exhausted on the snow, and only a few of them, the strongest, at last got their teeth into the carcass. A moment passed, and

reach. He therefore transfers his craving to them. (It is well known that "rich" people usually desire money, and are willing to sacrifice themselves for money, more than most poor people; as our Rabbis say, "He who has one hundred wants two hundred; he who has two hundred wants four hundred."²⁰) Needless to say, he is disappointed once again.

This does not hold only in the case of money-lust. It applies with equal force to other material desires. There is a case in the Gemara²¹ about a man suspected of adultery who was hiding in the husband's house. The husband entered and was about to eat some food which had been accidentally poisoned by a snake's venom, when the man called out from his hiding-place, "Don't eat that!" and thereby saved the husband's life. Rava concluded from this that he was certainly not guilty of adultery with the wife, for in that case he would have allowed the husband to die. The Gemara asks, "Is this not obvious?" and it replies that we might have thought that the adulterer would prefer the husband to live so that he (the adulterer) could savor the taste of "forbidden fruit": "stolen waters taste sweet."²² This is why Rava has to tell us his *din*; namely, that we ignore this suggested interpretation and insist that we have been given clear proof that the man was not an adulterer. But one might still ask: how is Rava so sure about this? Perhaps the suggested motive is the true one? This question is raised by Tosefot²³ and the reply is given that an adulterer would not know that "stolen waters taste sweet"; an answer which itself needs elucidation.

The explanation is as discussed above. The person in the grip of desire does not know that the impetus of his desire comes merely from the temporary unattainability

of the yearned-for object, and that if only he were able to attain it without too much difficulty it would lose all its attraction. He is convinced that his happiness depends on his attaining this particular object and that if he would only achieve this goal he would be happy ever after. If he only realized how deluded he was about this he would soon cease his pursuit.

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We have thus discovered the reason why the craver can never obtain satisfaction. It is because he is pursuing an illusory goal, and can therefore never attain any real results.

This phenomenon is indeed strange enough to puzzle the wisest. Why does a person not learn from experience? He is always pursuing material ends and being disappointed when he finds they give him no pleasure when achieved. Why does he not eventually learn to cease his fruitless search? If he has already experienced the vanity of his first attempts, why doesn't he realize that his new efforts will meet with no more success? Where is the vaunted intellect on which the human race so prides itself?

The wisest of all men referred to this remarkable fact in the famous words:

Vanity of vanities, said Kohelet:

Vanity of vanities—all is vanity.²⁴

"Vanity" is the desire for the glories of this world; what is outside a person can have no real value for him. "Vanities" are all those occasions when he thinks he has obtained his heart's desire only to find that he is not real-

ly satisfied. That this process is repeated over and over again is the clearest indication that “all”—everything that he may desire in the future—“is” also “vanity.”

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Another thing we must realize is that the concept of “possessing” or “owning” property can often be very misleading. [My property is not “my own” in the same sense as my arms and legs or my thoughts are my own.] No one can ever “own” an outside object so that it becomes united with him and part of him, like his body, let alone his soul.

The concept of ownership must be defined operationally: it means simply that certain objects are to be used by person X and are not to be taken by someone else without his permission.²⁶ It goes ill with the person who yearns to attach himself to that to which it is not possible to attach oneself. His desire can never be gratified and he will be left with nothing but pain. Happy is the person whose desire is to increase the acquisitions of his true self—his soul. Nothing can prevent him from fulfilling his desire and there is no force in the world that can ever deprive him of such acquisitions. He is happy and secure in this world and in the next. □

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on good ambitions

We shall have to reflect a little more deeply this time. Hunger indicates a deficiency. It is the lack of the food that the body requires that causes physiological hunger;

and so it is with other desires. To desire means to feel the lack of that which is desired.

Thus ambition and desire are forces by which a person draws to himself those things which he believes will make good the deficiency which he experiences.

Satisfaction comes when the need is fulfilled. But, as we have seen, desires which originate in the faculty of taking are never satisfied, because the deficiency to which they refer is not capable of fulfillment.

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What of the faculty of giving? It is not a force which draws things to us from outside ourselves. It arises from fulfillment and not from deficiency. Let us consider this carefully.

There is a kind of person for whom material things hold no attraction. He is just not interested in them; he does not consider them important enough. He is happy with what he has and satisfied with whatever he gets. This ability is a blessing from Hashem; as it says, “And you will eat and be satisfied.”²⁶ It is a truly great gift from Hashem (blessed be He) to man—a gift which enables him to be complete rather than deficient. And this is the purpose for which he was created.

Our Rabbis said, “Who is the rich man? One who is happy with his portion.”²⁷ In their majestic wisdom our Rabbis scrutinized the human situation and saw that the one who is satisfied and never hungry can only be he who is working to perfect himself spiritually. He is the only one who is happy with his material portion in life and has no ambition to add to it. He is the rich one. The others, the great majority of mankind, both the “haves”

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 *shelo lishmah*, that is to say, out of concern for himself (and from *shelo 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,”³¹ 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.”³² 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.

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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.³³

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

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.

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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.

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We can perhaps see a hint of these ideas in a story told in the *Midrash Rabbah*.³⁹

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

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

all the mistakes he made, and the gravity of all the sins he committed in this life will become clear to him. It must be so. There is no *yetzer ha-ra'* in the world of truth, so why should there be any errors? Nevertheless we find an extraordinary saying of our Sages which seems to contradict this: "The wicked do not repent even at the entrance to Hell."⁴³ How can this be? Do they not realize the evil of their ways even in *that* world?

The explanation is this. *Knowing* something and *wanting* something are two very different things. How often do we see someone wanting and craving things which he knows very well are bad for his health. Knowledge is no protection against craving.

Repentance only occurs when a person *abandons* his sins and evil deeds. Abandonment does not depend on knowledge alone but on will. Repentance is complete only when one changes the internal balance of his desires. He no longer sins because he has succeeded in making his desire to return stronger than the desire to sin.

The Rabbis have revealed to us a most amazing idea. When a person dies and his soul returns to the world of truth, he now understands things as they really are; all his errors are clearly laid out before him. But the evil desires which he acquired in his lifetime in this world do not depart. Even when their evil consequences are clear, these desires have become so ingrained in his soul that they remain intact. "Even at the entrance to hell," when the disaster of sin is absolutely clear, "they do not repent." They *cannot* repent; the desire for evil is already an inalienable part of themselves.

So it is with ingratitude. One whose yearnings were for material things, one who belonged to the "takers" of this world and who consequently was unable to feel true

gratitude (as explained in the previous chapter), will "eventually"—even when he eventually reaches the world of truth—be unable to feel gratitude for the bounties of Hashem. He will realize and understand the *need* for gratitude and the terrible burden of his ingratitude, but he will not be able to *feel* grateful. He has used his time in this world to develop the quality of "taking," and it is with this that he comes to his everlasting home.

Thanksgiving and gratitude are the bases of ecstatic devotion to Hashem and this is what is meant by the "song" of the angels and the righteous. How can one merit the world to come if that ecstatic devotion is lacking?

This is the bitter lesson given by our Rabbis to the ungrateful one: he may (God forbid) lose his portion in the world to come. □

notes

- 1 Job 35:7.
- 2 Bereshit 1:26.
- 3 Avot 3:2.
- 4 Mishle 15:27.
- 5 Rabbi Bahya ibn Pakuda: *Hovot Ha-Levavot* (a classical *mussar* source written in the 10th century); section on "The Service of God", chapter 4.
- 6 Psalms 16:3.
- 7 Bereshit 5:22.
- 8 *Midrash Talpiot*, s.v. Hanoah.
- 9 The Chafetz Chayim eventually earned his living by selling his books. For a long period he traveled the length and breadth of the pale of Jewish settlement in Russia, Poland and Lithuania in the guise of a peddler, selling his books in synagogues and study-houses. Mostly he went unrecognized, but sometimes the local rabbi was perceptive enough to realize that the "peddler" was none other than the great author himself.

- 10 *Berachot* 8a.
 11 Chapter 2.
 12 *Devarim* 20:5-7.
 13 *Bava Metzia* 32b.
 14 *Shemot* 23:5.
 15 *Vayikra* 19:18.
 16 Rabbi Mosheh Hayim Luzzatto, *Mesillat Yesharim*, ch. 11.
 17 *Bereshit Rabba*, ch. 17.
 18 *Kohelet* 5:9.
 19 *Sanhedrin* 107a.
 20 *Kohelet Rabba* 1:34.
 21 *Nedarim*, end.
 22 *Mishle* 9:17.
 23 Ad loc.
 24 *Kohelet* 1:2.
 25 It has been suggested that this accounts for the surprising fact that there is no Hebrew root corresponding to the verb "to have." The concept of "having" or "owning" is expressed in Hebrew by the verb "to be" plus the dative preposition *le-*; the sense being, as discussed here, that ownership merely means that the object is there "for" that person. If this is so, Hebrew is well called the holy language, since it teaches us true concepts by its very structure.
 26 *Devarim* 11:15; and see above, p. 37-38.
 27 *Avot* 4:1; and see above, p. 28.
 28 *Eycha* 3:22.
 29 *Shabbat* 88b.
 30 *Yoma* 86a. Compare also the explanation given by Maharal of Prague, *Netivot 'Olam, Netiv Ha-Osher*, ch. 1.
 31 *Avot* 1:3.
 32 Rashi on *Devarim* 6:5, from *Berachot* 54a. See also above, p. 95ff.
 33 See *Avot* 3:15 and Rambam's commentary thereon.
 34 See above, ch. 7, and note 19.
 35 See above, ch. 2.
 36 See above, ch. 1.
 37 See above, ch. 6.
 38 *Devarim* 30:19.
 39 *Parashat Noah* 33:1.
 40 *Psalms* 36:7.
 41 *Shemot* 20:2.
 42 *Midrash Hagadol, Shemot* 1:8.
 43 *Eruvin* 19a.