

Rav Eliyahu Dessler, Mikhtav Me-Eliyahu (“Strive for Truth”), trans. Aryeh Carmell  
“Kuntres HaHesed”

1. 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?”<sup>1</sup>

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.”<sup>2</sup>

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...

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... one is always devoted either to lovingkindness and giving or to grasping and taking.

2. The Torah writes of Hanoach, who was the seventh generation after Adam, “And Hanoach walked with God,”<sup>3</sup> upon which the Rabbis say: “Hanoach was a cobbler, and with every single stitch that he made he achieved mystical unions with his Creator.”<sup>4</sup> 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*

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<sup>1</sup> Job 35:7.

<sup>2</sup> Bereshit 1:26.

<sup>3</sup> Bereshit 5:22.

<sup>4</sup> Midrash Talpiot, s.v. Hanoach.

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.”

3. 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*:<sup>5</sup> “If you want to keep close to the love of your friend make it your concern to seek his welfare.”

4. 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

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<sup>5</sup> Chapter 2.

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"<sup>6</sup> in its literal sense: "As yourself: without distinction; as yourself: in actual fact."<sup>7</sup> 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*."

5. 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

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<sup>6</sup> Vayikra 19:18.

<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Moshe Hayim Luzzatto, *Mesillat Yesharim*, ch. 11.

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.<sup>8</sup>

6. 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.

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<sup>8</sup> See Avot 3:15 and Rambam's commentary thereon.

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.

7. 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.

8. 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.”<sup>9</sup> It is clear that mention of the release from Egypt, reinforced by the reference to “the house of slavery,” is intended to arouse in use 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...”<sup>10</sup>

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

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<sup>9</sup> Shemot 20:2.

<sup>10</sup> Midrash Hagadol, Shemot 1:8.

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 mitzvah 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*.

8. We explained in the first part of this Discourse<sup>11</sup> that gratitude is a product of the power of giving. We also wrote<sup>12</sup> 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."

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<sup>11</sup> Chapter 11.

<sup>12</sup> Chapter 4.