

Chapter 31

THE SECRET TO HAPPINESS

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Said the student to his rebbe: “I want happiness.”
Replied the rebbe: “First remove the ‘I,’ which is haughtiness. Then remove the ‘want,’ which is desire. After that, all that will be left is ‘happiness.’ ”

THE HIDDEN LIGHT OF CREATION

The *passuk* in the beginning of *Bereishis* says, “And G-d saw that the light was good.” Our Sages say that G-d didn’t want the light to fall into the hands of those unworthy and so He hid it for the World to Come (therefore it is called the “*Ohr HaGanuz*”—the Hidden Light). Where did He hide it? He hid it in the Torah.

We can probably assume that this great light, which is the purpose of Creation, contains the ultimate happiness that we can ever hope to have. But what does it mean that the light is hidden in the Torah?

To try and answer this question, let us take a deeper look at the story of *Kabbalas HaTorah*, the giving of the Torah. The *Zohar*

in *Parashas Balak* quotes the story of how G-d approached each nation and asked them if they wanted the Torah or not. They replied by asking what it says there, and G-d showed each nation (or its ministering angel) the one thing that was hardest for it to give up. To Eisav He showed the *passuk*, “Thou shall not murder,” since the strength of Eisav is achieved by the sword, as it says, “By your sword you shall live” (*Bereishis* 27:40). Giving up murder would mean giving up the very essence of his strength and existence, which Eisav wasn’t willing to do.

To Yishmael G-d showed the *passuk*, “Thou shall not commit adultery.” The strength of Yishmael is through numbers, as it says, “Behold I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation” (*Bereishis* 14:20). If promiscuity were forbidden, Yishmael’s ministering angel feared that it would not be able to maintain the strength of Yishmael’s very essence, and so he too refused.

And so it went for all the nations. G-d showed them all the thing that would be most difficult for them to give up, and they all ended up refusing the Torah. Not only did they refuse it, but they also encouraged G-d to give the Torah to the Jewish people, hoping that if the Jews would have all these restrictions they would never be able to prosper and would fade away.

Indeed, the *Zohar* says, the nation’s ministering angels even offered to give gifts from their own power, so that the Jews would agree to accept the Torah. Eisav gave some of his strength of the sword to the Jewish people, and that is why the Jews have been able to win wars (for example, during the reign of the Jewish kings and today in Israel as well). Yishmael gave some of its strength of numbers to the Jews, and that is why the Jewish people have been able to remain a nation against all odds.

This, says the *Zohar*, is the meaning of the *passuk*, “*Hashem miSinai ba v’zarach miSe’ir lamo, hofi’a meiHar Paran*—G-d came from Sinai and shone from Se’ir [i.e., He shone from the strength

of Eisav, who is called Se'ir, onto the Jewish people], and He bestowed from Mount Paran [Yishmael]..." (*Devarim* 33:2).

The *Zohar* provides a parable. A wealthy and wise doctor discovered the elixir of life and wanted to give it to his only son. But he was afraid that his many servants would be jealous and try to steal it. What did he do? He placed the precious potion inside a vial, and on the tip of the vial he placed a small amount of substance that had the smell of death.

When he announced to his servants that he had discovered the elixir of life, they all wanted to partake of the incredible potion. But when they brought it close to their faces and got a whiff of the smell of death, they returned it to their master, saying, "Master, this precious elixir of life is worthy only for your son!"

Deep down they secretly hoped that the son would take the potion and die, and they would be the ones to inherit their master's wealth. They even offered their master to give his son gifts from their hard-earned money so that he would be convinced to accept it.

This is a fascinating *Zohar*, but why is it that G-d asked of His creations to give up their most precious asset, their very essence, as a prerequisite to receiving the Torah? And what does the parable mean to tell us regarding the "smell of death" on the tip of the vial?

Perhaps the answer to these questions will also explain what our Sages meant by G-d hiding the great light of Creation inside the Torah. It seems that the "smell of death" on the tip of the vial may very well be the method that G-d uses to hide this light. Furthermore, the answer to these questions may reveal the path to this great light that G-d has in store for the *tzaddikim*, and which He has hidden in the Torah.

THE PURPOSE OF CREATION

To answer the questions of the previous section, an introduction to the purpose of Creation is necessary.

The Ramchal and many other *tzaddikim* explain that G-d created the world for one purpose only, to bestow His good upon us. Rav Yehuda Leib HaLevi Ashlag (1884–1954), a great Kabbalist known as the “Baal HaSulam” for his commentary on the *Zohar*, explains that the evil inclination is nothing more than “the desire to receive for the self.” This desire was implanted in us by G-d in order that He be able to bestow His good upon us. G-d wouldn’t be able to bestow His good on an entity that was really just part of Him. After all, in essence, everything in the universe is G-d! Our bodies, our minds, and our hearts are really G-d. Even our souls are just a *cheilek Aloka miMaal*, a part of G-d on High. So how could G-d give us anything, if this is essentially giving to Himself?

To solve this, G-d created us with a *ratzon lekabel*, a desire to receive, so that we perceive ourselves as separate from G-d. Since G-d does not have a desire to receive anything (from whom would He receive? He lacks nothing and there is no one else!), through this desire-to-receive we became separate and different from Him. (In truth, there is nothing but G-d—*ein od milvado*. But we *perceive* ourselves as separate. This is one of the great paradoxes that man can never fully comprehend, and it requires faith. It is similar to our inability to grasp how on the one hand we have free will, but on the other hand we say that everything that occurs is really G-d’s will.)

While this “desire to receive” is necessary for our existence (otherwise we would just be part of G-d and not separate), it is the “opposite” of G-d—because He has no desire to receive anything. G-d has *only* a desire to give, yet we exist *only* by virtue of our desire to receive. Being opposite of G-d does not allow us to become truly close to Him, because in spiritual terms, the more similar you are to something, the closer you are to it, and the more different two things are, the farther apart they are. There is no distance in Heaven, only difference. And this difference in our nature causes us to feel shame in receiving G-d’s good

for our own sake (as the Ramchal calls it, *nahama d'chisufa*, the bread of shame). As part of G-d, our souls yearn to be similar to Him, like a branch wants to be similar to its root. Receiving causes us to feel the difference between G-d, the Giver, and us, the takers, which causes us shame.

So what is the solution to this dilemma? How can we receive the good of G-d without shame? We can't just negate the "desire to receive," or we would cease to exist as separate from G-d. Not only that, but if we destroyed our desire to receive, G-d would no longer be able to bestow His good upon us, which was the whole purpose of Creation! So according to the Baal HaSulam, our job is not to destroy the desire to receive, but rather to elevate it to the point where we desire to receive only for G-d's sake and not for our own sake (this is the meaning of the concept of *lishmah*, doing something solely for G-d's sake).

Ultimately, we will all come to this level in the future and learn how to receive only to "give" pleasure to the Creator. In this manner of receiving, the best of both worlds is achieved. Not only can G-d bestow His good on us, but we don't feel the shame of being different and separate from the Creator through the act of receiving, since we are receiving only for *His* sake. This allows G-d to bestow His good on us, because the pleasure we receive is still enjoyed by His creations, but the enjoyment is for the sake of the great King and not for the sake of the "self." We are receiving because that is the will of G-d and because it gives Him pleasure, and not because we want to enjoy it ourselves.

This also allows for the enjoyment that G-d wants to give us to become infinite in nature. For if the enjoyment was only for the self, it would be limited to the capacity for enjoyment that we were created with. For example, if one creates a cup that can hold a liter, once a cup is full, it can't receive anymore. So if the taking would be only for ourselves, then once we got all we wanted, it would be over. However, if our enjoyment is for the

sake of the Creator, then the greater the Creator is in our perception, the greater the enjoyment is. And since the greatness of G-d has no limit, so too our enjoyment will have no limit. In the World to Come, G-d will keep revealing a little bit more of His greatness each day, and this in turn will make the pleasure that the *tzaddikim* receive from Him more pleasurable all the time, since their receiving will be for the sake of a King who never stops becoming greater in their eyes!

But because this type of receiving (for the sake of the Creator) is a very high level, to get there one must first be willing to forgo any receiving for the self at all. The more we are willing to give up our desires for G-d's sake over the course of our lifetimes, the more we become worthy—and able—to accept all the good that G-d wants to give us for His sake.

In all honesty, most of us are probably far from these lofty levels of pure *lishmah*, but the more we train ourselves to emulate the attributes of the Creator in our actions and in our intentions, and by developing an attitude of outer focus instead of inner focus, the closer and more similar we can become to the Creator, and the more we are preparing ourselves to receive His great light.

THE BLUEPRINT FOR LETTING GO OF THE SELF

The *Zohar* explains that the 613 mitzvos of the Torah have two functions: (1) *taryag ittin*, which means “613 pieces of advice, and (2) *taryag pikudin*, 613 commandments, which include the great light of each mitzvah (*pikudin* stemming from the word *pikadon*, deposit, referring to the light “deposited” in each mitzvah). When a person reaches the level of *lishmah*, he merits to feel the great light inside each of the mitzvos. But before we reach that level, the commandments function as *ittin*, advice, i.e., 613 tools that help us learn to let go of the self and give our will and our lives over to G-d.

Each mitzvah teaches us to give up another aspect of the self. In every detail of our lives there are mitzvos. Whether we buy a house and put a mezuzah on the door and a fence on the roof, whether we dress and put on tzitzis, eat and bless G-d, harvest our fields and give tithes, we Jews are blessed to have mitzvos at every step and stage of our lives. And if this weren't enough, our Sages came and instituted hundreds of Rabbinical commands, prayers, halachos, and *minhagim*. It seems that there isn't a single aspect of our lives that is not governed by some halachah or another, even the way we put on shoes in the morning and the way we bathe ourselves.

The Torah—and by extension, our Sages—teaches us to constantly live *with* G-d and *for* G-d, and to love G-d with all our hearts and with all that we have. Why? Does G-d need something from us? No. But it is the peeling away of the self that is the secret to the great light and happiness that He wants to give us.

With this understanding, perhaps we can now comprehend what is meant by the light of Creation being hidden in the Torah. The Torah is a blueprint for letting go of the self and learning to give over our will to G-d. Not only do the mitzvos give us this, but Torah itself (when studied) also has the power to help us let go of the self, as our Sages say: “*Hamaor shebah machziro lemุตav*—The light in it [the Torah] brings one back to good” (*Mesilas Yesharim*, ch. 5).

But giving up one's will feels like death at first. This is what the *Zohar* is referring to in the parable of the smell of death on the tip of the vial. G-d specifically asked the nations to give up the very source of their strength and existence before they could receive the Torah. Why? Because the great light of G-d is hidden in the Torah under the heavy mantel of the self. If the nations had been willing to give up their deepest desire, the one thing that defined them more than anything else, that would have been the opening for them to be given the Torah and access the great light of Creation.

It follows from the above that attaining happiness and the great light of G-d is achieved when a person merits to change his or her focus from the self to that of being of service to G-d. We find this concept hinted at in *Tehillim* in a number of places. Here are three examples:

- » “*Pitachta saki vate’azreini simchah*—You have opened my sack and girded me with joy” (*Tehillim* 30:12). I have heard it explained that “opened my sack” refers to giving and providing. With an attitude of outward focus, one finds true joy.
- » “*Hashivah li sasson yishecha v’ruach nedivah sismecheini*—Return to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me with a spirit of giving” (*ibid.* 51:14). Again we see how the spirit of “giving,” of being of service to others and to G-d, is directly connected with happiness.
- » “*Yismach lev mevakshei Hashem*—The hearts of those who seek G-d will rejoice” (*ibid.* 105:3). What does “seeking G-d” really mean? Those who seek G-d want to be *like* G-d; they want to be givers and not takers. This, implies David HaMelech, is the secret to true happiness.

THE SECRET OF MESIRAS NEFESH

The *passuk* says (*ibid.* 86:4): “*Samei’ach nefesh avadecha ki Eilecha Hashem nafshi esa*—Give joy to your servant, for to you, G-d, do I lift up my soul.” The Beis Aharon of Karlin explains that “lifting up one’s soul” to G-d refers to *mesiras nefesh*. When we give over our will to G-d, we are essentially letting go of the illusion of being in control of our own happiness in any way.

But no human can live without at least *some* happiness or motivation. That is why David HaMelech asks G-d, “Please give me joy, G-d, for I am totally Yours.”

When a person lets go of the self, he is basically saying to G-d, “I will no longer attempt in any way to make *myself* happy. I throw myself into Your arms, and You, G-d, will care for me and provide

me with the joy and motivation necessary to live and be of service to You.” When we do this, G-d Himself provides the happiness. And when G-d provides happiness, you can imagine that it will be a much greater and truer happiness than when we attempt to bring it upon ourselves by running after our own petty desires.

What is *mesiras nefesh*? Many people think it means throwing oneself into a fire *al kiddush Hashem*. This is true as well, but there is a common misunderstanding regarding this concept. After all, there are many terrorists who are willing to detonate suicide belts and kill themselves for Allah. What differentiates them from a Jew who is ready to die for G-d?

The answer is simple, yet profound. *Mesiras nefesh* has nothing to do with what you are willing to sacrifice, even if it is your very life. As long as you are sacrificing it ultimately for your own self, it is a selfish act. When a terrorist blows himself up, he believes that he will go straight to Heaven and be given seventy-two young maidens. He is actually doing the most selfish act possible—killing other human beings for what he imagines is his personal ticket to eternal bliss. This is the very opposite of *mesiras nefesh*!

The words *mesiras nefesh* mean “giving over the soul,” and this does not require death or pain to be real. It can be achieved even during the highest levels of *simchah*. It is simply the desire deep in the Jewish soul to give everything away to G-d, to let completely go of the self, as David HaMelech said, “To You, G-d, I lift up my soul” (ibid. 25:1). Every time we do an action that goes against our own will for G-d’s sake, it is *mesiras nefesh* at some level. Setting aside a time for learning Torah each day, davening with a minyan, and not going after forbidden desires are all *mesiras nefesh*, to whatever level that we feel we are giving over our *nefesh* (soul/desire).

Of course, when a Jew dies *al kiddush Hashem* and cries “*Shema Yisrael*,” he achieves the highest level of *mesiras nefesh*. The words “*Hashem echad*” don’t just mean that there is only

one G-d. Declaring “*Hashem echad*” really means that we want to give ourselves completely over to G-d so that our will no longer exists as separate from G-d, but rather that there only exists G-d’s will. When a Jew gives up his very life with this intention, he is giving up his entire self to G-d and causing the greatest unification of G-d possible. “*Hashem echad*” really means that all I have, all I do, and all I desire—it should be G-d’s will. I am His; there is only Him. That is why reciting the Shema is called “*mesiras nefesh*” in the holy books.

When we recite *Krias Shema* twice a day, we can have lofty thoughts of *mesiras nefesh* while either imagining that we are being thrown into a fire for G-d’s sake, or while we are rejoicing in being children of such a great and awesome G-d. It doesn’t matter, for when a person truly gives himself over to G-d in his heart, he doesn’t care anymore whether he is given everything by G-d (even all the pleasures of the world!) or whether he is being thrown into a fire. Because when it’s not about me anymore, there is only G-d’s will.

THE BASIC STAGES OF ALTRUISTIC TRAINING IN LIFE

Because learning to let go of the self and give over our will to G-d is the purpose of Creation (so that we can receive the light of G-d), every human being is given training in this area, from the time he is born until the day he dies. Indeed, G-d structured the world in such a way that no good things come easily, as the saying goes, “No pain, no gain.”

Pain, by definition, requires some level of letting go of the self. If we want health, we must learn to sacrifice our desires and eat healthy foods (which seem not to taste as good and to be less readily available than unhealthy foods). We must learn to exercise regularly, exerting ourselves and fighting laziness in the process. Even getting up in the morning is difficult for this reason.

It seems preprogrammed into the human experience to have to work hard, to be of service to others, and to let go of at least some of our desires for a greater purposes. We were put in this world for this and we cannot escape it. But because the self is so strong (for it is who we are), we cannot just let go of it in one shot. It would be like trying to lift a van with our bare hands. But when a mechanic uses a jack to lift the van, he distributes his energy over many incremental pushes. By using the lever principle (as Archimedes remarked: “Give me a lever and a place to stand, and I shall move the Earth with it”), he is able to easily lift the van.

Our lives consist of thousands of these incremental pushes, slowly teaching us how to let go of the self. And to this end, G-d has designed the lives of all human beings with the following stages of altruistic training:

» **Level 1—Parents:** Every human being is given parents when they are born. Through our parents, we learn what it means to have to listen to someone wiser and more experienced than ourselves, whether we like it or not. It’s not easy for us at the age of two or three to accept authority, but we quickly learn that we have no choice and do it anyway. Slowly we develop the wisdom to understand and trust that our parents have our best interests in mind and simply know better than we do.

We learn from our first experiences that we can’t have everything we want, and that life will require some discipline and sacrifice. These lessons are forced upon us at a very young age. Indeed, these are man’s first and most crucial lessons in getting a step above the pure selfish desire that we are born with, as the *passuk* says: “*Ayir pereh adam yivaled*—Man is born a wild beast” (*Iyov* 11:12).

» **Level 2—Siblings:** Through our siblings, we are forced again and again throughout childhood to recognize that the

world doesn't center around us. We learn that there are others we must share with, give in to, live with, and stick up for. This is a higher level of altruism than level one. It is a known phenomenon that children who don't have siblings grow up to be much more self-centered than children who do have siblings. There is also a much higher divorce rate among only children later in life. This points to siblings being an important and crucial part of the maturation of a human being.

- » **Level 3—Marriage:** Marriage counselors will tell you that the secret to a happy marriage is learning to put your spouse's needs before your own. Marriage allows us the chance to mature to a much higher level of selflessness. While parents and siblings were forced upon us, marriage is not. Yes, we are sort of tricked into it by nature, but if we want to keep the marriage going and remain happy, we must learn what it means to care for another human being. We must learn to understand someone who thinks differently from us, and really be there for our spouses, both physically and emotionally.

Perhaps that is why G-d made men and women's brains so different (as the famous book *Men are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* eloquently describes). If we had the same way of thinking as our spouses did, marriage would be too easy and we wouldn't learn to let go of our selves as we need to. Marriage teaches us the sacrifices that are necessary to the self for the purpose of building a true loving relationship.

- » **Level 4—Children:** Until we become parents, we are still living in our own selfish bubbles. As much as marriage can help us mature (if done right), it is still in a sense a business deal, where both sides stand to benefit. But once we become parents, we are thrown into a whole new level of selflessness. Our children don't give us back anything for all the tireless effort we put into them and the sleepless nights we spend

rocking them to sleep and caring for all their needs.

Besides the immense amount of effort and sacrifice that parenting involves, we must learn to step down to the level of those who can't understand us (and who throw tantrums when they don't get what they want, no matter how much you try to reason with them). Parenthood is a big step forward in maturity and altruism. And as a wise man once said: "The secret to being a good parent is putting our children's needs before our own." If we want to raise emotionally healthy children, this new level of altruism is something we will have to learn.

ADDITIONAL STAGES OF ALTRUISTIC TRAINING

- » **Level 5—"By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread" (Bereishis 3:19):** By Divine design, we must provide some sort of service to others if we are to survive and put food on our table. And if it were easy to provide these services, our potential customers presumably wouldn't need us to do it for them, hence they wouldn't be willing to pay for it. So we have no choice but to learn some sort of discipline that not everyone can do on their own, which allows us to be of use to other human beings. Learning a discipline often takes years of hard work and sacrifice.

It is the need to provide for others, in whatever capacity that one works, and the need to please the customers and interact with other human beings that provides a much needed step in the maturity cycle of a human being.

- » **Level 6—"You shall love your fellow man as yourself" (Vayikra 19:18):** "Rabbi Akiva said: The commandment of 'And you shall love your fellow man' is a great foundation of the Torah" (*Yerushalmi, Nedarim 30:2*). Why is this commandment considered such a foundation? Because the

entire Torah was given to us for this purpose, to teach us altruism and how to let go of the self! When Hillel was asked by a non-Jew to sum up the Torah on one foot, he said, “That which you would not want done to yourself, do not do to your friend” (*Shabbos* 31a).

Over the years, mankind has progressed and matured to understand that society can’t exist without all of us accepting that what I would not want done to me should not be done to my neighbor. From the barbaric world of thousands or even hundreds of years ago, the enlightened nations have progressed to the level where slavery has been abolished, human rights are embraced, and justice systems have been installed to ensure that every human being has the right to live in peace and freedom.

The United Nations was established for the purpose of ensuring that all countries live in peace with each other and uphold basic human rights. In our day and age, when a nation on the other side of the world commits a crime against its people, the enlightened nations protest and come to the aid of the downtrodden. When there is a natural disaster somewhere in the world, many nations send help and aid.

As much as parents, siblings, marriage, and parenthood can help us mature, at the end of the day, these “significant others” are really extensions of ourselves. It is human nature to want to have a good marriage and to desire only the best for our children. But through learning how to truly love our fellow man and care even about those with whom we don’t have any connection, we are able to grow to even higher levels of selflessness.

- » **Level 7—Religion:** The main tenets of the world’s largest religions, Christianity and Islam, were taken from the Bible—the Book of all Books. Some Sages say that even the tenets of Buddhism originate from Avraham, as the *passuk* says,

“And to the children of his concubines Avraham gave gifts and sent them from upon Yitzchak, his son, while he was still alive, eastward to the land of the East” (*Bereishis* 25:6).

The Rambam writes that inasmuch as the religions of the nations may be misguided, G-d orchestrated for the nations to adopt these religions in preparation and training for the Ultimate Truth. By teaching their followers to let go of self, to love their fellow man, to serve G-d and trust Him, and to give their will over to G-d, even misguided religions were intended to be important players in preparing humanity for the real truth and great light that G-d ultimately wants to bestow on His creations.

- » **Level 8—Old age:** If a person retained his full strength and power for as long as he lived, it would be a tragic blow when he died, going in one instant from a state of full ego to the soul state where only lack of self can allow for G-d’s light to be felt. Rebbe Nachman once said, “A human being is like an onion; after one passes away, layer after layer is peeled away and all that is truly left at the end are a few tears.”

Perhaps this is the reason that G-d created the phenomenon of old age. As we mature and go through the stages of life, we get closer to the time where we must return to G-d as a soul. Old age is G-d’s way of teaching us how to start letting go of the mundane, the self, the ego, and all the trappings of this vain world. We become weaker, humbler, and more dependent on others. Slowly we are forced to let go of worldly pursuits, the fire of lust dies down, business and money making are no longer our top priorities, and our bodies begin to slowly break down and become weak and sickly. Our eyesight and hearing often dulls, further distancing us from full interaction in the physical world.

If used correctly, the aging process can be a valuable tool

in the Divinely devised stages of life, helping us learn to let go of the ego and self, ultimately preparing us for G-d's great light.

THE HEIGHTS OF ALTRUISM THAT JEWS CAN REACH

The Talmud (*Shabbos* 33b) relates a story where the Sages were discussing the beautiful architecture, bridges, and bath-houses that the Romans had created for the benefit of the masses. Some of the Sages praised their munificence, but Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai exclaimed, "All the kindness that they do is really for themselves." When the Romans heard that he had said this, they wanted to kill Rabbi Shimon, and he was forced to flee with his son Elazar to a cave for twelve years.

Why did Rabbi Shimon's statement bother the Romans so much? The Baal HaSulam in the *sefer Matan Torah* writes that the most significant difference between the Jewish people and the other nations is that only the Jews currently have the ability to reach levels of pure unadulterated altruism through the great light of the Torah. Non-Jews are capable only of reaching a level of altruism that can be called "enlightened self-interest." Through the giving of the Torah, the Jewish nation was tasked with being the trailblazers, as the *passuk* says, "U'nesaticha l'ohr goyim—I have given you as a light to the nations" (*Yeshayahu* 49:6).

Ultimately, though, writes the Baal HaSulam, even the other nations will achieve this ability, after the Jews have reached their full potential. But this will occur only after Mashiach comes. Perhaps it is for this reason that Rabbi Shimon's words distressed the Romans so much. They were loath to admit that the Jewish people have a unique Torah and unique souls, allowing them to reach a higher dimension than the Romans were capable of reaching.

In addition to the previous levels, let us explore two additional

levels of altruism that the Jewish people were provided with:

- » **Level 9—Subjugation to tzaddikim:** Ever since we became a nation, G-d sent us *tzaddikim* to guide us, as the *passuk* says, “And they [the people] believed in G-d and in Moshe, His servant” (*Shemos* 14:31). The *tzaddikim* in each generation are the bridge between *klal Yisrael* and their Father in Heaven, as the Jews said to Moshe, “You speak with us and we will hear, and let G-d not speak to us, lest we die” (*ibid.* 20:15), and as Moshe told them, “I stand between you and G-d” (*Devarim* 5:5).

The Torah commands us to listen to our sages “and not turn from their words right or left” (*ibid.* 17:11). Chazal explain: Even if they tell us that our right is our left, we must listen to them (*Sifri* 154, cited by *Rashi, Devarim* 17:11).

Who are the *tzaddikim* that we must listen to? Chazal say, “If the sage is similar to an angel of G-d, Lord of the hosts, you should seek Torah from his mouth” (*Moed Katan* 17a). Angels have no will of their own. They are completely subservient to G-d and can do only His will. In other words, a human being who has risen to greatest heights of altruism through the stages listed above and through the great light of the Torah and mitzvos is someone who can be a true bridge between us and G-d. Through the submission to the words and will of a *tzaddik* without question or reason, even if they tell us that our right is our left, we learn to submit ourselves to G-d’s will.

- » **Level 10—Serving G-d:** The service of G-d Himself is the highest level of altruism. And we humans need all the stages listed above to learn how to do this right, because G-d is abstract and it is very difficult for us to learn how to give over our will to G-d without being able to see and interact with Him directly.

Chazal say that Chavakuk came and summed up the

entire Torah in these words: “*Tzaddik b’emunaso yichyeh*—The *tzaddik* lives by his faith” (*Chavakuk* 2:4; see *Makkos* 24a). By serving G-d without seeing Him, through faith alone, we can achieve the most refined and altruistic level possible for humans to reach, and this indeed sums up the entire purpose of the Torah and all the levels that we described above.

Serving G-d through faith doesn’t mean “blind faith.” It just means being ready to go beyond our understanding. This is because when we serve G-d only at the level that we understand, it is ultimately the self at work again. When we are ready to go beyond our understanding, we aren’t giving up just our will but also our minds to G-d. Many *tzaddikim* are given high levels of understanding and Divine light, yet they still choose to live through *emunah*, as *Chavakuk* said above. This means that they are always ready to go one step above what they understand, preferring faith over understanding in their Divine service.

Ultimately, we all need to reach this high level of true altruism, giving our lives over fully to G-d. It is for this purpose that we were given all the previous levels as a training ground. Through these levels, and through the great light of the Torah and mitzvos, we can finally become proper vessels for the hidden light that G-d wishes to bestow upon His creations.

Rabbi Moshe of Kobrin said over 150 years ago, “How bitter and dark is the world when one is immersed in it, and how sweet and bright is the world for those who are not immersed in it.” Being “immersed in the world” means being immersed in one’s desires. One can only feel the great light and sweetness of G-d if he lets go of the self.

When Moshe said, “I stood between Hashem and you,” the commentaries say that this means that the “I,” the self, is the barrier between man and Hashem. All the works of

mussar and Chassidus stress the importance of *bittul*, of self-effacement.

THE EXODUS—TRUE FREEDOM AND LIBERTY

The Jewish people's redemption from Egypt is mentioned fifty times in the Torah and we are instructed to remember the Exodus every single day of our lives. Also, so many of the mitzvos we do are *zecher l'yetzias Mitzrayim*, a remembrance of the redemption from Egypt. Why is the Exodus so central to the Torah and to Judaism?

The holy books explain that our slavery in Mitzrayim (which comes from the root *meitzarim*, meaning “boundaries and suffering”) symbolizes the slavery that humans have to the self and to their desires. G-d freed us from the bondage of Egypt and brought us to Har Sinai to give us the Torah. The purpose of all this was to free us from the bondage of the self and learn to serve G-d instead. The bondage was symbolized by painful slavery to an unrelenting master who asked, “Who is G-d that I should listen to His voice?” (*Shemos* 5:20).

This is similar to our self, the ego or the *yetzer hara*, which refuses to recognize G-d and let us serve Him. After the redemption, we followed G-d blindly into the barren wilderness on faith alone, and G-d provided us with all our needs. We had to let go of the slavery mentality and become a people of G-d through the receiving of the Torah.

One may ask, though, why is the Exodus considered real freedom? After all, even though we stopped serving Pharaoh, we now became servants of G-d instead! Aren't the Torah's many laws restrictive and not freeing?

When G-d gave us the Tablets at Har Sinai, the *passuk* says that the words of the Ten Commandments were “*charus al haluchos*—engraved on the tablets” (*ibid.* 32:16). The word *charus*, engraved, also spells *cheirus*, meaning “freedom.” From this

our Sages derived: “*Ein lecha ben chorin ela mi sho’eseik baTorah*—There is no true freedom but for those who are involved in the Torah” (*Avos* 6:2). As explained above, the more we are involved in the Torah and mitzvos, the more we learn to let go of the self. And there is no greater freedom than from the bondage of self, which allows us to receive G-d’s great light.

A small example of restrictions being freeing is the game of soccer. Compared to other sports, soccer is very limiting, because you can’t use your hands. So is it a frustrating game to play? For a beginner, perhaps it would be. If you constantly focus on the fact that you can’t use your hands, it would seem pretty annoying. But once you get the hang of it, you realize that precisely because in soccer you are restricted from using your hands, you become “free” to develop other skills—like kicking, chesting, and heading—that otherwise you would never have known you had.

Similarly, the underlying purpose of many laws and customs of the Torah is not to tie us down. On the contrary, they serve to quiet the noise of our ego and self, allowing us to tune in to the greatness of G-d’s light and love.

Perhaps this is why the Exodus is mentioned fifty times in the Torah and why so many of the other mitzvos are tied to this remembrance as well; all to instill in our hearts that the underlying purpose of the mitzvos is to allow us to break free of our bondage to the self and to serve G-d instead. *Yetzias Mitzrayim* is indeed the story of our lives and a parable for the entire purpose of Creation.

On Pesach we are commanded not to eat or own *chametz*, while at the same time we are commanded to eat matzah, unleavened bread. Leaven symbolizes ego and self-inflation. Matzah symbolizes the opposite, humility and subjugation to G-d’s will. The words *chametz* and *matzah* have the same letters besides for one, the *hei* and the *ches*. And the difference between those two letters is but a tiny dot.

In the physical reality as well, the difference between the matzah remaining unleavened or becoming *chametz* is but a moment of time. This commandment fits in beautifully with the overall theme of *yetzias Mitzrayim*. As we explained above, the difference between bondage to the self—even when it is “enlightened self-interest”—and between truly acting *lishmah*—for G-d’s sake only—is but a hairsbreadth. And yet, it is the difference that makes all the difference.

(One may ask, if *chametz* symbolizes the *yetzer hara*, why isn’t it prohibited all year round? Perhaps the answer is because enlightened self-interest is also a worthy level. Most people would be fortunate to live selflessly, even if their motives are ultimately selfish. But on the festival of Pesach—which symbolizes true freedom from the self—G-d wants to point us all in the direction of the end goal that we should all be striving for.)

THE ROLE OF PAIN AND SUFFERING

If the purpose of Creation was for G-d to bestow His good on us, what is the role that suffering and pain play in the overall scheme of things, and why is there so much of it in the world?

Many people have a misconception of G-d as vengeful or scary, threatening us with punishment if we don’t listen to Him. Yet when the Torah speaks of “fear of Heaven,” it doesn’t mean that we should be *afraid* of G-d. The Maggid of Mezeritch is quoted (in the *sefer Toldos Yaakov Yitzchak*) as saying that while fear of G-d is a great achievement, being afraid of G-d is one of the worst mistakes a Jew can make (as in, “Who knows what G-d will do? He might kill me for this or for that!”).

After all, how can we truly trust in G-d if we’re afraid of Him? Could a perfect G-d who has no needs and created us only for our own good possibly be “scary,” “mean,” or “threatening”? Surely G-d understands us and loves us much more than we can imagine! He can’t possibly hurt us.

Basic fear of G-d is simply the fear of His awesomeness and His judgment (as we are all taught from a young age). But a higher level is the fear of disappointing such a great and loving G-d. It is the fear of not doing G-d's will and causing pain to the *Shechinah* by preventing Him from bestowing His good upon us as He wishes to. True fear of Heaven in any form will increase our trust and comfort with G-d, not detract from it, G-d forbid.

The pain and suffering in the world are not “punishments of a vengeful G-d” but rather like surgery for a sick person. As we've discussed above, the universe was structured in a way that leads us all in the direction of altruism so that G-d can bestow His good on us. When humans act immaturely and run away from the tools that G-d has given us to help us achieve altruism in a peaceful and beautiful way, pain and suffering are the only recourse, serving to strip us of the self until our hearts are broken, as the *passuk* says after the *tochechah*: “Az yikana levavam he'arel—Then their uncircumcised hearts will submit and be humbled” (*Vayikra* 26:41).

Why have the Jewish people suffered so much throughout history? All the curses of the Torah's retributions (known as the *tochechah*) have come to pass upon us through endless wanderings, expulsions, decrees, pogroms, Crusades, and the terrible Holocaust of the last century that wiped out two-thirds of European Jewry in the most horrible ways imaginable. The reason we seem to be singled out by G-d for suffering is because the Jewish people were chosen by the Master of the Universe for an awesome responsibility. We are the King's inner guards, and the Torah and mitzvos that we have are the special uniforms that we wear at all times with pride. All those who see the Jewish people should be reminded that there is a Creator of the Universe.

It is our destiny—from which we cannot escape—to represent the King and to be the ones to spread the will of the King in the world. How? First and foremost by changing *ourselves* through the Torah and mitzvos, and by being an example to the

world of an altruistic people who live for G-d (and whom G-d, in turn, takes care of with love). The Jewish people are the closest to the purpose of Creation. When we fail at our task, we are “forced” back onto the path.

The “curses” of the retribution are not punishments, per se. They are just the “long path” towards the goal that results when we refuse to take the short path. Our self needs to ultimately be “peeled off of us,” whether we like it or not. G-d desires to bestow His good on us, and nothing will stand in the way of His goal.

As the parable of our Sages goes, there are two paths in life: The long-short path, and the short-long path. The long-short path has thorns in the beginning, but is short and sweet afterwards. The short-long path is easy in the beginning, but is long and full of thorns the rest of the way.

CLINGING TO G-D

To reiterate the premise of this essay: the great happiness and pleasure of G-d’s light is waiting for all of us in plain sight. We just need to be ready to strip our self away and it will begin to flow through us.

It is important to point out, though, that if our only intention in being selfless is to receive G-d’s light, it won’t work very well (because this once again becomes about me). Instead, we need to develop a true desire to emulate G-d and become givers so that we can do His will and become One with Him.

In the *Shirah* (Song of Triumph), we read, “Zeh Keili ve’anveihu—This is my G-d and I will beautify Him” (*Shemos* 15:2). The Talmud (*Shabbos* 133b) interprets the word *ve’anveihu* by dividing it into two words, *ani veHu*, I and Him [Hashem]. It then goes on to explain that one can achieve the *ani veHu* relationship by emulating the Divine *middos*. Just as Hashem is gracious, a person should be gracious. Just as Hashem is merciful, a person should be merciful, etc.

There is great significance in this Talmudic statement. The two-party relationship is contained in a single word, *ve'anveihu*, which indicates that the two parties, *ani veHu*, are actually a single unit. This is reinforced by the statement in *Zohar* (*Acharei Mos* 73a) that “Israel, the Torah, and Hashem are a single unit.” Not only do we bond with Hashem, but we also identify with Him.

Also, we must understand that letting go of the self is not just a technicality necessary for receiving G-d's light. G-d seeks a real relationship with us. Our intention in letting go of the self should come out of awe and love for G-d (for how can we not love Someone who has only our very best interest in mind at all time, and who is the source of all good?). And like a man who loves a woman deeply does everything he can to please her, our intention in letting go of our will for His should be to merit a loving relationship with the Master of the Universe. And when we learn to strip away the self with these intentions, the light of G-d will automatically begin to flow through us and we will merit true joy.

A Chabad chassid once asked Rav Aharon of Karlin, “What is Chassidus?” Rav Aharon replied simply: “Chassidus is all heart.”

The entire chassidic enterprise, begun by the Baal Shem Tov and continued until this day with hundreds of thousands of followers worldwide, was established only to underscore this one concept: bringing the actions of the mitzvos of the Torah more into the realm of the heart. As the *passuk* says, “With their mouth and lips they honor me, but their hearts are far from me—and their fear of Me has become a matter of rote” (*Yeshayahu* 29:13).

Indeed, all the basic tenets of Chassidus, such as doing the mitzvos with joy, simple faith, faith in *tzaddikim*, and so on, are all part of this underlying theme, of bringing our Divine service into the realm of the heart (how exactly they each tie into this path is

beyond the scope of this essay). In order for the mitzvos that we do to accomplish the stripping of the self that they were designed for, they must be done with the proper intentions of the heart, without bias, with fear and love, and by seeking to create a real relationship with G-d. "Clinging to G-d" is ultimately all about becoming a giver like He is. And the Torah and mitzvos allow us to develop this mentality more than anything else by creating a true love relationship between G-d and the Jewish people.

A story is told about a chassid who came to the Alter Rebbe of Chabad to pour out his heart about his many misfortunes and troubles.

The Alter Rebbe responded, "You speak only about what you need. But have you considered what you are needed for?"

The chassid fainted; the Alter Rebbe's attendant had to help him out of the Rebbe's room. When he came to, he began to devote himself to prayer and study, without thinking of his problems and concerns.

After the chassid had conducted himself in this fashion for some time, the Alter Rebbe sent for him. Standing before the Rebbe, the vision of his previous meeting flashed in his mind, and he could barely muster the strength to look the Rebbe in the face. This time, however, the Alter Rebbe spoke to him gently: "Now that you have understood this truth, you can return home. May G-d grant you success."

The man made his way home and discovered that the gloomy picture he had seen previously could be corrected. A few favorable strokes of fortune had given him the opportunity to right his course.

The sequence is noteworthy. When a person changes his perspective from thinking about his own needs to what he is needed *for*, i.e., changing from inward focus to outward focus, all his troubles will quickly fade away, for he has learned the secret of true happiness and has opened himself up to receiving G-d's light.

THE GOOD FORTUNE OF THE ADDICT

Those who struggle with addiction and feel deep down that it is the most precious thing in the world are fortunate to have an opportunity that few others have. By surrendering to G-d's will and giving this up, we have a direct channel into the great light of true happiness. When we are willing to surrender that one desire that overshadows all others, we are able to leap to very high levels and the light of G-d immediately begins shining through us. We can experience an inner happiness and serenity that few people merit in this world.

As we described in the previous sections, the secret light of Creation is hidden behind the barrier of the self. Giving up our deepest desire is the opening to the Torah for us. The nations of the world wouldn't give up that one thing they wanted the most, but when we do, we accept the yoke of Torah and give our lives over to G-d. And the rest follows on its own.

The twelve-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous has been used to help millions of people around the world to break free of all kinds of addictions. The first and second steps of the program are simply about recognizing that one has a problem that one can't deal with on one's own, and believing that a Higher Power can help. But the real secret to the success of the program lies in step 3: "We made a decision to give our lives and will over to the care of G-d."

The rest of the steps are only follow-up to this step, enabling one to do step 3 properly. For faith without action is like a soul without a body. Step 3 can't take root without the rest of the steps. But in essence, the program is really just all about step 3. (No one should ever expect to do step 3 *perfectly*, but we work in that direction.)

Based on all we've discussed above, it is clear why this program works so well. Addiction is a symptom of self-will run amok, as explained in *The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous*:

Selfishness—self-centeredness! That, we think, is the root of our troubles... So our troubles, we think, are basically of our own making. They arise out of ourselves, and the addict is an extreme example of self-will run riot, though he usually doesn't think so. Above everything, we addicts must be rid of this selfishness. We must, or it kills us! G-d makes that possible. And there often seems no way of entirely getting rid of self without His aid. Many of us had moral and philosophical convictions galore, but we could not live up to them even though we would have liked to. Neither could we reduce our self-centeredness much by wishing or trying on our own power.

(Bob Smith and Bill Wilson, *The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous* [Lark Publishing, 1939], p. 61)

In the first two steps, we come to the difficult realization that a life run on self-will simply doesn't work. When we try to control and produce our own happiness, we fall into behaviors that only end up destroying us, and the addict is the best example of this phenomenon. When addicts no longer have a choice because their life has become unmanageable, they are forced to learn "enlightened self-interest," and learn to give over their will and their lives over to G-d to run. The rest of the steps help the addict to make this real, and when it does, G-d takes over and takes good care of them.

The self is stripped away, all the channels are unblocked, and the light of G-d starts to flow through us. We become free of the obsession, no longer needing to resort to these destructive, self-medicating behaviors. We feel happy in G-d's hands, and are able to achieve sobriety and serenity. As they say in the program, "Give it all away to get it all back."

To quote *The Big Book* again:

We had to have God's help... God was going to be our Director. He is the Principal; we are His agents. He is the Father, and we are His children... When we sincerely took such a position, all

sorts of remarkable things followed... Being all powerful, He provided what we needed, if we kept close to Him and performed His work well... We became less and less interested in ourselves, our little plans and designs. More and more we became interested in seeing what we could contribute to life... We discovered we could face life successfully. As we became conscious of His presence, we began to lose our fear of today, tomorrow or the hereafter.

(Ibid., p. 62)

Religious Jews often question how the twelve-step program can help a Jew who was suffering from lust addiction and committing grave sins. After all, such a person should need a great deal of *teshuvah* and suffering to atone for their past!

There's a beautiful piece by the Beis Aharon of Karlin in his commentary on the first *passuk* of *Parashas Ki Sisa*: "*Ki sisa es rosh b'nei Yisrael lifkudoseihem, v'nasnu ish kofer nafsho laHashem*—When you shall count the heads of the Jewish people, each man shall give for Hashem an atonement for his soul" (*Shemos* 30:12). He writes that when a Jew wants to be uplifted and "fixed" from his sins and achieve true *teshuvah*, he should give his soul for an atonement. What does this mean? That he should be ready to accept upon himself complete *mesiras nefesh* for the faith of G-d, and through this *mesiras nefesh* all his sins become automatically fixed and he can reach the highest level of clinging to G-d.

Those who truly work towards the third step to give their life and will over to G-d to the best of their ability may be able to achieve very high levels of *teshuvah*. For when we truly belong to G-d, the past is automatically fixed and G-d will care for us in the future as well.