

A stylized graphic of a ladder with two vertical blue rungs and a horizontal red base. The rungs are positioned in the center of the page. A light blue circle is partially visible behind the rungs, and a white horizontal bar is located at the top of the red base.

The Path of the Ladder

Principles in the Service of God

as taught by

Rabbi Yehudah Lev Ashlag

Elucidated by

Rabbi Avraham Mordecai Gottlieb

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as he received them from his teachers
Rabbi Yehudah Lev Ashlag

and
Rabbi Baruch Shalom HaLevi Ashlag

Translated from the Hebrew by Yedidah Cohen

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Note: Although the masculine gender is used throughout this work, the inner work of serving God applies to men and women equally. Linguistically it was not possible to address this issue within the text itself. Yedidah Cohen

This booklet is an extract from the forthcoming spiritual biography of Rabbi Yehudah Lev Ashlag by Rabbi Avraham Mordecai Gottlieb

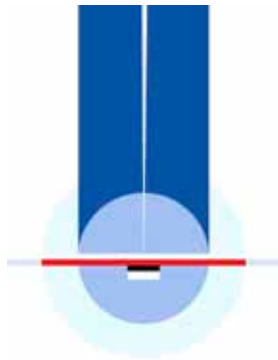
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Returning Light Meditation

The image on the cover art was created by Avraham Loewenthal, an artist, resident in Safed Israel, whose work is inspired by the Kabbalah of Rabbi Ashlag. His art may be found at <http://www.kabbalahart.com>



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Introduction

If you will walk in My statutes and keep my commandments...
(Leviticus 26:3)

The principles brought here are practical ways of serving God, which Rabbi Yehudah Lev Ashlag (the Baal haSulam) taught his students. At no time did he ever teach the wisdom of the Kabbalah as technical information divorced from Torah and *mitzvot*, but he taught the wisdom of the Kabbalah as a means by which a person may come to give benefit unconditionally to his fellow man and to his Maker.

The Baal haSulam received this system of service to God from his teachers, the holy Sages of Kaloshin, Prosov and Belz. It is a system that he acquired through immense labour and superhuman effort during the years of his youth, through which he came to *dvekut*, that is unity with God, when the secrets of the Torah and its intimate details were revealed to him.

It is certain that our teacher did not invent this system of inner work, but he received it from his teachers, which they themselves received, in an unbroken tradition stretching all the way back to our forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; Moses; the Prophets; the Sages of the Talmud; the Ari; the Baal Shem Tov; the Gaon of Vilna; and Rabbi Moshe Chayim Luzatto. Our holy Rabbi, the Baal haSulam merited to find favour in the eyes of God and obtained permission from Above to reveal these holy matters that concern the service of God, which he did with tremendous clarity, and in a form that is suitable for our generation—the generation that precedes the coming of the Messiah.

The purpose of this e-book is to give us access to these principles of the service of God within the context of our daily life: in the office, in the supermarket, in the bank, and in the home, so we may uphold them, not only during our periods of study, but at all times.

However, it is not our intention to present these principles as axioms separate from the study of the Torah. On the contrary, the only chance we have of actually succeeding in carrying them out, is through the labor in Torah. Rabbi Baruch Ashlag writes, in a letter to one of his students:

Introduction

In order that we shall be able to fulfill the *mitzvot*, we were given the especial light of the Torah, as the Sages have told us, “the light within the Torah leads a person back to the good way.” This light is drawn to us through studying the Torah. According to the measure that a person puts effort into his study, so does he draw towards himself the especial light of the Torah, through which he gains the strength to fulfill the *mitzvot* (as they should be fulfilled, that is without a reward).

We see that putting effort into our study has a great power, in that it can transform all the evil that is in a person to good. Therefore, we have to distinguish two aspects in the learning of Torah: 1) to learn the rules so that we know what it is we need to do, 2) to put effort into the study of the Torah so that we may fulfill it. Regarding this second aspect it is not important whether we learn rules, or whether we learn a part of Torah which does not speak at all about rules, only we need to study Torah and put our effort into it and then the Torah gives the person the light that is within it.

May God help us so that we may merit that light of the Torah.

1. God is Good and does good

The first principle is that God is Good and does good. As it is written: "He is Good and does good to both the evildoers and those who do good." (*Hazarat haShatz Musaf Yom Kippur*). He does not need to receive pleasure at all, since He is whole and perfect in every possible way. From whom could the One receive anything?

Thus we see that God has no need to receive joy or pleasure because such a desire would imply that He has a lack or is imperfect, which is not the case.

2. The purpose of creation

The second principle is that God wants to give benefit to the created beings. The essence of this benefit is the revelation of Himself to the created beings, because there exists no greater joy for the created being that can be greater or more wonderful than the conscious knowledge of the Creator, even in a limited measure.

3. The purpose of creation created the will to receive

Since He desired to give benefit to the created beings, He created in the souls a will to receive good and joy, because only then can they receive the good that He wants to give them, as without will or desire it is impossible to receive the good. Likewise, in the physical world we see that the more a person longs for something, so is the greatness of his joy when he receives it.

4. The opposition of form that exists between the Creator and the created being

Since it is the will of the Creator to benefit the created beings only in order to give them benefit, and He has no will to receive, and since the desire of the created beings is to receive pleasure and joy, we find that there exists an opposition of form between the Creator and the created beings. This causes the created beings to become distanced from the Creator.

As we see in the physical world: If two people have opposite attributes and ideas then they cannot join together with each other. Likewise, in

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spirituality, there is no possibility for the created being to join with the Creator and to merit the revelation of His Divinity unless he is able to change his attributes to those of the Creator. These are the words of the Sages on the phrase, “to walk in all His ways and to cleave to Him” (Deuteronomy 10:22), “How may a person cleave to Him? Behold! He is a consuming fire! But cleave to His attributes; just as He is merciful so you be merciful, as He is compassionate so you be compassionate” (Rashi on that verse). Likewise, the Sages of the Talmud said, “As it is written, ‘And you should walk after God’ (Deuteronomy 13:5). Can a person walk after the Divine presence? We have already learnt in the Scripture: ‘For the Lord God is a consuming fire’ (Deuteronomy 4:24), but one may walk in the attributes of the holy Blessed One. Just as He clothes the naked so you should clothe the naked. Just as He visits the sick so you should visit the sick” (*Sotah 14a*).

5. The essence of good and the essence of evil

The essence of all the good that is in the world is the will to give benefit. This is also called “the good inclination (the *yetzer hatov*)”, and applies to purity, holiness, love of one’s fellow, and all other positive attributes.

Whereas the essence of all the evil in the world, is the will to receive pleasure and joy for one’s own self. This is also referred to as “the evil inclination, (the *yetzer hara*)” and refers to the shells (*klipot*), the “other side” (*sitra achra*), egoism, selfish love and all the opprobrious attributes such as laziness, pride, lust and others.

Therefore, the general principle of serving God does not in fact contain many different subjects, as the world thinks, but only these two principle ideas: 1) **subduing the will to receive for oneself** and 2) **acquiring the will to give benefit**. All the other matters and natural virtues are only branches which stem from these two main issues: the will to receive for oneself alone, and the will to give.

Since we have mentioned the idea of the *klipot*, (shells), I would like to explain what these are. In his book, *Or haBahir*, the Baal haSulam defines them as such:

The *klipot* are powers that rule over people, such that they don't search out deeply any matter until its end, but are satisfied with only a superficial understanding. That is they are satisfied with a very superficial understanding of the outermost peel of the wisdom but they leave the real essence. Therefore, their human intelligence doesn't serve them to understand the service of God. Their iniquities govern them with the power of the *sitra achra*, and they do not take sufficient interest in the Torah and the holy wisdom. Therefore they rebel against the holy Blessed One.

We can conclude from our teacher's words that every person certainly has a will to receive joy and pleasure, for that is the will of God. However, it is within a person's ability to work to transform this from the will to receive pleasure for oneself alone, which causes separation between himself and the Creator, if he were to put his attention to the necessity of so doing. But his will to receive for himself alone chases after the lights provided by the *klipot*, and thus prevents the person from putting his attention into the most fundamental aspects of Judaism, which involve understanding the issues that touch on the transformation of the human being.

So there is a tendency amongst the religious to practice Judaism as rote, instead of searching out the way to connect to the Creator through each and every *mitzvah*, and through every opportunity of learning Torah. People tend to forget their distance from the Creator, their lack of faith, their lack of *Yirat HaShem* (fear of being separate from God) and their lack of love for God. If a person were to make a true accounting, he or she would see for themselves that he doesn't conduct himself in the way one should in the presence of the King. This follows from lack of faith, or that his or her faith is defective and weak. So a person doesn't fear God adequately or love the One. Because who could delude himself and say that he walks around in his daily life with constant awareness and awe of God?

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And so the Talmud teaches (*Masechet Nazir 23a*):

Rabba the son of Bar Chana said, in the name of Rabbi Yochanan, “What is the meaning of the Scripture, ‘For the ways of God are straight, and the righteous shall walk in them, but the transgressors shall stumble in them.’ (Hosea 14:10)? It is like two people who roasted their paschal sacrifice. One eats for the sake of the *mitzvah*, and one eats for the sake of enjoying the food. The one who eats for the sake of the *mitzvah* is referred to in the Scripture as ‘and the righteous shall walk in them,’ and the one who eats for the sake of the food is referred to as, ‘and the transgressor shall stumble in them.’”

The commentator, the Meiri, says on this, “The righteous do their actions for the sake of Heaven, until through their actions they apprehend the glory of their Creator; but the wicked carry out the *mitzvot* by rote, without intention, and so they only gain bodily pleasure through their actions.”

The Meiri is not talking here about people who desecrate the Sabbath or eat food which is unfit (*treifah*), but he is designating as wicked those who are not interested in considering the true essence of the practice of the Torah and the *mitzvot* and what is required in keeping them according to their essence.

6. The rectification of the will to receive via the mind through faith, and via the heart through service

The will to receive is the basic constitution of a person and expresses itself in the person in two ways:

1) **via the mind:** A person wants to know and understand the purpose for, and the logical consequence of, every act of his. For it is through the intelligent understanding of matters that the will to receive gets pleasure. This is not the case when a person performs an act whose purpose or use he does not understand. This causes him suffering.

2) **via the heart:** This concerns the sensual will to receive, which is part of every person’s make-up, which desires to sense and feel pleasure and delight in the different situations in this world, through the animal

appetites of eating, drinking, sleep, desire for money, honor, power, and intelligence.

These two aspects of the will to receive are two halves of the same nature, and they work in an integrated way within a person.

Rabbi Baruch Shalom Ashlag used to define it thus: "It is as if there is a vessel which goes directly from the heart to the brain and says, "There is none quite as wise and clever as you...!"

Over and against these two aspects of the will to receive there are two modes of rectification (*tikkunim*):

1) for the mind—the work of faith

2) for the heart—the work of serving God and one's fellow, not in order to receive a reward

The Sage, Rabbi Baruch Shalom spoke on this (in the year 5751):

We need to work on the aspect of both the mind and the heart. Because if a person were solely to work on his intellectual side, only taking on himself the yoke of faith, it is possible that he is doing so in order to receive a reward. Therefore a person also needs to work on his will to give benefit in an altruistic manner.

However, if the person were to work solely on the aspect of giving benefit and love of one's fellow, without working on his faith, that would also be insufficient, because he would remain disconnected from God. This is what happened in communism, which held up as its banner love of one's fellow man, but persecuted men of faith, and thus, from its very outset, was doomed to failure.

For the rectification of the intellect—the work of faith

A person should not rely on his intellect, but have faith in all the ways of the Torah. This may be broken down into different points as set out below:

a) Faith that the way to draw near to God is only through giving benefit and love to one's fellow human. This is so, even though the body — that is the will to receive for oneself alone—denies this. This faith needs

to obligate a person to establish his life on giving benefit to his fellow, in actual practice, without which closeness to God is impossible.

b) Faith in the reality of God as the root of all; faith that only He can give us faith in Him; faith that His Divine Providence is present at all times and in every detail. This faith is designated as accepting the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven (that is the reality of the Divine providence) in the paradigm of faith, which is higher than the paradigm of knowledge.

A person should educate himself to behave in a way that is fitting for one who is in the presence of the King, the King of Kings. (In the language of the Kabbalah, this means the ultimate channel of Good). He needs to visualize for himself how he would behave, speak, and think, if he were in the presence of a very great man. Similarly, he needs to conduct himself in no lesser way in the presence of the King of Kings.

Rabbi Baruch Shalom Ashlag writes in the Book *Shamati* (article 209) as follows:

A person who sits in his house is not like someone who is in the presence of a king. A person's faith has to be of the quality that he should be feeling the entire day as if he is in the presence of the King. Then he would certainly have both *Yirat haShem* (the fear of being separate from God) and *Ahavat haShem*, (love of God) in a complete manner. So long as he or she did not reach this level of *emunah* (faith) he should not rest. As we say in the daily prayers, "With everlasting Love you have loved your people the House of Israel, You have taught us Torah and *mitzvot*, statutes and laws. Therefore, O Lord our God, when we lie down and when we rise up we will meditate in Your statutes and we will rejoice in the world of Your Torah and Your *mitzvot* for ever and ever. For they are our life and the length of our days and in them we will meditate day and night, and never remove Your love from us for ever. Blessed are You who loves His people Israel." (evening prayer) And if the person were to so act, then for sure he would never wish to receive for himself alone. The longing for faith needs to be woven into his limbs until it becomes

second nature, according to the phrase, “when I remember Him, He doesn’t let me sleep!”

Rabbi Baruch Shalom Ashlag further writes (in *Shamati* article 211):

Whoever believes in the reality of the holy Blessed One that all the world is filled with His glory, then he is filled both with *Yirat haShem*, (fear of being separated from God) and with *Ahavat haShem* the love for God. Such a person does not require any preparation of meditation, since he places God first naturally. Just like we see in the physical world: When a person truly loves his companion, then he thinks on and longs for his friend’s benefit. He stops himself from doing any action which would not benefit his friend. This is done naturally, without thinking about it. One doesn’t need any great intellect for this, because this is natural, just like the way a mother loves her child, that all she desires is the best for her child, and she doesn’t require any conscious preparation to love her son. Because something that is natural does not need intellect to compel the matter, but one’s actions come forth from our instincts. Our natural instincts themselves work to such a degree that it is in our nature that we are ready to sacrifice ourselves for the love of something, until we achieve our purpose, and until we fulfill our purpose our lives are not worth living. Therefore, whoever feels for himself as if he is standing before the King certainly will achieve perfection, that is to say perfect faith in the Creator. Until he feels that he is standing before the King then he doesn’t have complete faith (God forbid).

Here we need to distinguish two modalities:

1) If a person acts in order to gain a reward in this world, whether it be money or honor or even just a good feeling, or, if he acts in order to gain a reward in the next world, then his will to receive for himself alone doesn’t oppose him so much. This is because his focus is not actually on the holy Blessed One, who is the Giver, but he is only looking at what he will receive.

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2) However, if the person is acting only for the sake of God, that is to say, he acts in order to come into affinity of form with God, according to the measure he feels the greatness of His love and His Divine providence, then the will to receive for oneself alone opposes this action with all its power. Because the will to receive for oneself alone does not want to work without getting a reward for that work. Then the person's will to receive for oneself alone comes to him with two questions: "Who is God that I should listen to His voice?"—a question that opposes faith, and "What does this service mean to you?"— a question that opposes service. (Both these questions come from the Passover Haggadah. The first one is Pharaoh's question, the other question is that of the wicked son, of the four sons.)

So now we can understand perfectly, that it is impossible to tread the pathway of the service of God in the true way—which is the way of giving, not for the sake of getting a reward—without experiencing ups and downs. Because going against the will to receive for oneself alone is paved with ups and downs. As it says in the Talmud (*Gittin 43a*) nobody can fulfill the words of the Torah unless he stumbles in them. However, this is not the case for those who don't oppose their will to receive pleasure for themselves. They don't suffer so many ups and downs, but they are to be found in a state that is more or less stationary.

In connection with this we can mention here an occurrence with the Seer of Lublin: One time a man came to him and told him that prior to every prayer he experienced a spiritual descent. The Seer answered him: "Before every prayer I experience four hundred descents!" Our teacher Rabbi Baruch Shalom Ashlag explained: "A person who experiences a spiritual descent, that is to say a "down" has to have had a spiritual ascent first. So if the Seer of Lublin had four hundred spiritual descents he must have had an equivalent four hundred spiritual ascents... . But this only occurs with someone who is truly searching for unity (*dvekut*) with the Holy Blessed One and is self-critical and searches even within his good deeds to see if his will to receive for oneself alone got involved."

Our teacher Rabbi Baruch Ashlag further said,

The process of accepting *Malchut Shamayim* (that is to say, the Divine providence, that everything that happens comes from God) is through ups and downs, like we see in the moon that waxes and wanes, and whose spiritual root is the *Sephirah Malchut*. Our intellect thinks that a person can progress from stage to stage just by going up, without any intervening falls. But in fact this is not so. As it is written, “as the light is seen more clearly when it comes from within the dark” (Ecclesiastes 2:13). It is in fact impossible to see the light except from within the dark. Just as we see in the physical world: If a person is very thirsty and is suffering on account of his thirst, then when he gets water he feels pleasure and gives thanks to God for the water.

The most distinct factor in actualizing one’s faith in God, that He is the Source of all, and that all is conducted by Him, is if a person is prepared to work without getting a reward. Just the fact of serving God is his reward and joy.

As we see in the physical world, a person is prepared to minister to the great Sage of the generation without receiving payment. Not only that, but it often happens that people are prepared to pay for the privilege of so doing. How much more so is the case in spirituality with regard to serving God!

This is the language of the *Tanna* (a Sage at the time of the Mishnah) quoted in Ethics of the Fathers: (Chapter 1 *mishnah* 3)

Antigonus, of Socho, received the oral law from Simon the Righteous. He used to say, “Don’t be like slaves who serve the Master for the sake of getting a reward, but be like slaves who serve the Master, not for the sake of getting a reward. And may the awe of Heaven be upon you.”

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Rabbi Chayim of Volozhyin, may his holy memory be for a blessing, writes in his book *Ruach Chayim*:

Concerning a king's servants: It is a well-known fact that whoever is closest to the king takes a greater salary than a servant who is not numbered amongst his favorites and who does not come into his presence. This operates, because prior to his advancement he was an important and honoured minister and because of his skill, his wisdom, or his work, he increased in status until he became one of the familiars of the court. But one who was born a peasant, and who suddenly found favor in the sight of the king, who raised him up, seating him first and placing him above all the other ministers, would not consider requesting a further reward from the king for his work. That would be wicked, since the king has already been so gracious to him, making him his chief servant and allowing him to stand in his presence with none higher than him.

It is a similar case regarding we human beings, who are so lowly from our material aspect, in which we are like the primitive inhabitants of Canaan, of whom it is written, "my mother's sons were incensed against me," (Song of Solomon. 1:6) yet He has elevated us to the degree that we can serve Him and stand before Him, which is such a great merit and sufficient reward! How could we possibly be so brazen as to request a further reward for serving the holy Blessed One?! And this is what it says: "Do not be like the servants who serve, who stand before the Master and serve in His temple, yet request more salary. But be like the lowly servants who serve the Master in His temple, not for any gain." Understand this deeply.

(Rabbi Baruch Shalom Ashlag said more than once that the pupils of the Gaon of Vilna, of whom Rabbi Chaim Volozhyin was one, were all Sages of great spiritual stature, who knew the matters of serving God in depth.)

In connection with this, Rabbi Baruch Shalom Ashlag taught that the saying, "the reward of doing a *mitzvah* is another *mitzvah*" (Ethics of the

Fathers chapter 4, *mishnah* 2), should be read, “the reward of the *mitzvah* is the great merit of having been asked to do it!” The reward of those who serve God is to merit more and more faith in the Creator as being the Root of all, until they no longer ask anything for themselves, but the service itself is their reward.

c) Faith that there is nothing other than God, according to the Scripture, “You have shown us to know that the Lord is God, there is none other than Him” (Deuteronomy 4:35). That is to say, that there is no other reality in the world except God. A person needs to look at the world from the perspective that all the people and the created beings are bidden to act by God Himself and all their actions are ordained by Him.

It follows that a person’s behavior has to be consonant with this perspective. For example, if someone hurts him, he has to consider that it is not the person who hurt him, but it was God Himself. Therefore, if he responds in a way that is insulting or belittling, it is as if he is belittling God Himself. Likewise, if a person tells a lie to someone, in fact he is telling the lie to God, and so on. If someone were to act against him, then since the person has to consider the action as coming from God, he needs to receive the action with love and not get annoyed, because all the actions of the Creator stem from His desire to give only benefit to His created beings.

d) Faith that the Creator conducts the world according to His attribute that He is Good and does good. Even when a person sees that the opposite is taking place, in his private life, in the life of the community, or in the life of the nation as a whole, he has to believe that what he sees is false. So long as he is given over to the governance of selfish love he cannot see the truth that the Creator conducts the world according to His attribute that He is Good and does good.

A person’s faith in the goodness of God needs to be expressed in practice through actions of joy and satisfaction in the way that God runs the world. The person should not act in a way that conveys the opposite.

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In accordance with this Rabbi Baruch Shalom Ashlag explained, “Why was it that at the Baal haSulam’s table it was customary to drink wine with the blessing, “He is Good and does good?” This was to remind ourselves that this blessing is the greatest thing of all that a person can believe, that the Creator is Good and does good.

e) **Faith that God “hears the prayer of every mouth”** (from the morning prayer). The Baal haSulam said, this saying includes even the most lowly mouth of all; that God hears prayer and God has within His power to rescue even the lowliest person from his situation. Let not a person say that God can only help someone who is not so down, but He has the power to help even the lowest of the low. This faith has to be expressed in practice, that a person should never despair of the help of God.

f) **Faith that all the spiritual descents are sent to us from Above.** There is purpose to spiritual descent. This may occur in order that a person should gradually come to the recognition of the evil that is within him. The evil within a person is only revealed to him from Above when he has progressed sufficiently in his spiritual work to be able to cope with it. The revelation of the evil within the person is in accordance with his work. Only after the evil within the person has become completely clear to him in its true measure can he give a prayer from the depth of his heart that God should take him out of the pit of his exile and from the rule of the seventy nations which lie within the heart.

A spiritual descent may also occur in order to give the person the opportunity to serve God even when he cannot feel any taste for the work. This means serving God unconditionally, as the Scripture says, “Walk after me in a land that is not sown” (Jeremiah 2:2). Faith gives the person the power of commitment, so that he does not despair, but continues all his work in exactly the same way as he does when in a period of spiritual ascent.