



Likkutei Sichos

Volume 16 | Kaf Daled Teves¹

Matter Over Spirit

Translated by Rabbi Moishy Goldman

General Editor: Rabbi Eliezer Robbins | Editor: Rabbi Y. Eliezer Danzinger

Content Editor: Rabbi Zalmy Avtzon

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Considerable effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the translation, while maintaining readability. The translation, however, carries no official authority. As in all translations, the possibility of inadvertent errors exists.

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¹ The date of passing of the Alter Rebbe (in the year 5573 [1813]), on *Motzoei Shabbos parshas Shemos*. In a note of the Tzemach Tzedek (printed in the Introduction to *Maaneh Lashon*, Kehot ed.) {the time of the Alter Rebbe's passing is indicated as having occurred} “at the halfway mark of the eleventh hour.”

1.

ACTION IS SUPERIOR

Two Torah dissertations (that have reached us) were composed by the Alter Rebbe just prior to his passing:

- (a) The epistle that begins: “He and His life-giving emanations {“lights” (*oros*) of the *sefiros*} are one.”²
- (b) The journal entry, entitled, “The Humble Soul,”³ which reads:

For the truly humble soul, its mission in life lies in the physical aspect of Torah, both in studying it for himself and explaining it to others, and in doing acts of material kindness by empathizing and “advising from afar” regarding all matters of family members. Although the majority, if not all, {of these things} concern false matters, it is impossible to do otherwise, to practice true kindness, for “the only truth is the Torah,”⁴ and “Truth said: ‘He should not be created’”⁵ (for he will be full of falsehoods); “Kindness said: ‘He should be created,’” for he will be replete with acts of kindness. And truth was cast to the ground, and the world was built on kindness that was not true.

In early generations, when the Torah study the primary Divine service,⁶ (symbolizing truth) the abundant kindness was included within truth. Namely, because of the preeminence of a deed {of kindness} by compelling others,⁷ by coercion and pressure {to give *tzedakah*}, etc., by the authority of the Torah of truth as taught by the talmudic Sages.

However, in these days of the “footsteps of Moshiach,” the tabernacle of David has fallen to the ground, to the level of action. So our primary Divine service now is only at the {lowly} level of the “heels” {of a foot}, without {the focus on the study of} the Torah of truth, the *Mishnah* and *Beraisa*, the “wings” and “thighs” {of the Torah}. Thus, most, if not all, of the kindness is not in accord with the Torah of truth, preeminent deed. Good deeds are performed motivated only by the empathy and good will of the doer, which is truly far. And the last action is rooted in the original thought {that motivated the deed}

² *Iggeres HaKodesh*, ch. 20 — which the Alter Rebbe composed “in the village of Pyena in the days prior to his *histalkus*” (*Derech Mitzvosecha*, 170a).

³ It says in *Sefer Shivchei HaRav* that the Alter Rebbe composed this “after *havdalah*, moments before he delivered his soul, in purity, to the Life of all worlds.”

⁴ *Jerusalem Talmud, Rosh Hashanah*, ch. 3, *halacha* 8.

⁵ *Bereishis Rabbah*, ch. 8, section 5.

⁶ See *Tanya*, “*Iggeres Hakodesh*,” ch. 9.

⁷ {Based on the teaching, “One who pressures others to perform [*tzedakah*] is greater than one who performs that act himself” (*Bava Basra* 9a)}.

(and the beginning is wedged in the end).⁸ But even if there is no other way, and it is a lowly one, a person's consolation is to accept it with love, or to examine his behavior and return unto Hashem in his distress, and then he shall find relief.⁹

The subject of both teachings is the superiority of **(physical) action**:

The epistle that begins, “He and His life-giving emanations are one,” discusses the “sublime worth of the practical mitzvos, for they are the ultimate purpose of the descent of souls to this material world,” for “the beginning is wedged in the end”: The “beginning” — the infinite power of “the Essence and Being of the Emanator” is found specifically in the “end” — in action, and in the material world. [Similarly, within the material world itself, the power of growth, which resembles the aspect of infinity, is found specifically within the lowest element — the **earth** (as explained further on in that epistle,¹⁰ in *Iggeres Hakodesh*.)]

The theme of the journal entry, “The Humble Soul” is how we must practice “acts of **material** kindness,” and how this path of *avodah*¹¹ is specifically the “final **action**” (that originates) in “the original thought.”¹²

Being that the Alter Rebbe wrote both teachings in the period leading up to his *histalkus*,¹³ clearly, these themes express his¹⁴ {mode of} Torah teaching and his Divine service during that time (as he was preparing to depart from this world). We must clarify: What is the connection between the superiority of **action** and the matter of *histalkus*? On the contrary — *histalkus* denotes departure and ascent from the affairs of this material world!¹⁵

⁸ {*Sefer Yetzira* 1:7.}

⁹ {The translation of this esoteric journal entry is mostly that of Rabbi Dr. Nissen Mindel, in *Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi*, vol. 1, p. 259, with minor edits by this translator.}

¹⁰ {*Iggeres HaKodesh*, ch. 20.}

¹¹ {Divine service.}

¹² Similar to what was described earlier, regarding the superiority of action in general, based on the concept that “the beginning is wedged in the end.”

¹³ {Lit., departure — a respectful term for the passing of a saintly person.}

¹⁴ For he certainly would not write this **only** for the sake of others; he wrote it regarding his own *avodah* (as well). This parallels the well-known expression (found in the *pidyon nefesh* {written prayer request} of one of our Rebbes regarding his *maamarim* in Chassidus): “May it be Hashem’s will that the words influence me and those who are listening.”

¹⁵ As the epistle in *Iggeres HaKodesh* concludes: “As it says, “Today [is the time] to do them” {*Devarim* 7:11}, and, “Better one hour of repentance and good deeds in this world than all the life of the World to Come” {*Avos* 4:17}.”

2.

INVOLVEMENT IN THE MATERIAL NOW?!

Additional points need clarification: In the journal entry, entitled, “The Humble Soul,” the Alter Rebbe explains how we must engage in “acts of material kindness” of which “the majority, if not all, concern **false** matters.” This is puzzling: In general, a *tzaddik*’s life revolves around not “a fleshly life, but a spiritual life.”¹⁶ For a *tzaddik*, the value of material matters is only that they serve as a vehicle to carry out the interests of his soul. This is true throughout his entire life in this world; even more so is this true as the time of *histalkus* approaches. For the righteous, the material realm holds absolutely no value in and of itself.¹⁷

Yet precisely at the time prior to his *histalkus*, the Alter Rebbe urged we practice “acts of *material* kindness” by paying attention to matters of family members (not as they are performed strictly with the aim carrying out a goal encouraged by “the Torah of **truth**,” but) in the **simple** sense — to give others *material* advice for the sake of the *material* matter itself (for which reason, it is seen to be included in “false matters”)!¹⁸

¹⁶ *Iggeres HaKodesh*, elucidation of ch. 27.

¹⁷ It is noteworthy that just prior to his *histalkus*, the Alter Rebbe said that he does not see the materiality of the rafter, but rather the Divine energy that enlivens it (*Beis Rebbe*, vol. 1, ch. 22).

¹⁸ Especially in light of the lengthy explanation in *Iggeres HaKodesh* ch. 22, that those who ask “for advice in mundane matters as to what one ought to do in matters of the physical world,” do so “because of their great love for the life of the body,” and that they must {instead} “return to Him with humble spirit and submission of the body.” Note that the Alter Rebbe adds that even when “their love for the life of the body” is “**for the sake of Heaven, so that with it [the body] they can serve Hashem...**” — there should still not be the reaction that “they are extremely irate when their bodies suffer.”

3.

FROM SPIRITUAL TO MATERIAL — AND BACK

This will be clarified by prefacing with an additional explanation of the aforementioned theme that “the life of a *tzaddik* is not a fleshly life, but a spiritual life, comprising faith, awe and love {of Hashem}.” This needs to be clarified: The *avodah* of **performing** mitzvos can only be achieved with the body and material objects, and in fact: “Study is **not** the main thing. **Action is.**”¹⁹ How, then, can we say that the life of a *tzaddik* is “a spiritual life, comprising faith, awe and love {of Hashem}?”

The explanation: For a *tzaddik*, his *avodah* in performing mitzvos is not isolated from his spiritual *avodah* — “faith, awe and love.” His performance of the positive mitzvos is a result and culmination of his love of Hashem. His fulfillment of the negative mitzvos is the result and culmination of his awe of Hashem,²⁰ and all of this is built on his faith in Hashem.²¹

And even {his emphasis on physical action, on} the principle that “action is the main thing” brings to light {the profound import of} his spiritual *avodah*:

He is “one who loves Hashem’s name and truly desires to cleave to Him, and one cannot truly cleave to Him except through the fulfillment of the 248 positive mitzvos. They are the 248 ‘organs of the King’”²² — and as the Alter Rebbe explains, attachment to Hashem by fulfilling Torah and mitzvos (which constitute **Hashem’s will**) is a form of the “indwelling of the Divine Presence.” Such a bond transcends the attachment to Hashem through a **mortal’s** experience of love. Consequently, the *tzaddik’s love* requires that he occupy himself by observing Torah and mitzvos.

As a result, even his *avodah* of “practical mitzvos that are performed with the body itself”²³ — to execute the Divine purpose: “Hashem desired to have a home in the lowest realm”²⁴ — is performed in such a way that he draws down “the

¹⁹ *Avos* 1:17.

²⁰ See *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 4.

²¹ See *Makos* 24a; “*Chidushei Agados Maharsha*,” loc. cit.; *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 33.

²² *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 4.

²³ *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 35.

²⁴ *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 36 ff.

light and radiance of the Divine Presence upon his body too.”²⁵ He transforms his body into a vessel for (spirituality) “the light and radiance of the Divine Presence” to the extent that the vessel (which is **critically** needed) loses its independent identity.

4.

A GREATER DEPTH

The epistle that begins, “He and His life-giving emanations are one” adds to this, by explaining that “the sublime value of the practical mitzvos” stems from the fact that Hashem’s infinite power is **specifically** found in the **material** realm:

This concept is unrelated to the idea that a material object (and similarly, also a person’s body) becomes a **vessel** for spirituality and the “indwelling of the Divine Presence” once a mitzvah is performed with it. But on the contrary: This epistle articulates how it is specifically a created being,²⁶ whose sensation of selfhood is so acute that he feels he has no “other cause and reason preceding” him, within whom is found “the Essence and Being of the Emanator, Whose Being is of His Essence — He is not, Heaven forbid, brought into being by some other cause preceding Himself.”²⁷

Put differently, the true advantage of practical mitzvos lies in {the superiority of} the material realm itself; the corollary in a person’s *avodah* is that even when a Jew is in a state where he feels no sense of spirituality when performing mitzvos — he does not feel how he cleaves to Hashem by performing a mitzvah, to the extent that his mitzvah performance is entirely **physical** — he is still bound with “the Essence and Being of the Emanator,” specifically by doing this simple action.

5.

THE TRUTH OF THE MATTER

²⁵ *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 35.

²⁶ {In the original, יֵשׁ הַנְּבִרָא.}

²⁷ {*Tanya*, “*Iggeres Hakodesh*,” ch. 20.}

This also clarifies the theme of the journal entry, “The Humble Soul,” which discusses the need for “acts of material kindness... although the majority, if not all of them, concern false matters,” as the Alter Rebbe goes on to explain: “the world is built on kindness that is not true,” for “Truth said: He should not be created’ (for he will be full of falsehoods)”:

This does not mean, as it seems at first glance, that “Kindness said: He should be created” — something disingenuous. On the contrary, “All beings (that is, created beings, as they exist **in this world**)... came into existence only from **the truth of His being**.”²⁸{Therefore, the world and its creations cannot be essentially spurious.}

Rather, the explanation is: “Truth said: The world should not be created” only insofar as the **attribute** {*midah*, literally, “measurement”} of truth is concerned — the truth of Divinity that is of *seder hishtalshelus*²⁹ which is circumscribed, measured and limited. **This** {aspect of} truth applies only where {a created being} **perceives** (His) truth. Since this material world is a world of falsehood, where the “truth of Hashem” is not recognized, “Truth said: The world should **not** be created.”

The truth of His Essence, however, has no such limitation. This truth is not bound by the imperative that “the truth of His being” be recognized. For even an environment of concealment and obscurity — even the sort of concealment that appears as falsehood (which, from the perspective of *seder hishtalshelus*, can only exist due to the attribute of **kindness**) — its entire existence, in truth and at its core, “(came into existence **only** from) **the truth of His being**,” the truth of Essence.³⁰

Therefore, even the “matters of family members” of a Jew, concerning which a person's focus is on his family's material needs (which is why they seem to be “false matters” with no connection to “the truth of Hashem”) — **this** material realm is also connected with “the truth of His being.” This connection is expressed

²⁸ Rambam's wording in *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah*,” ch. 1, par. 1.

²⁹ {“*Seder Hishtalshelus*” refers to the chain-like descent of spiritual worlds until this world. Each spiritual world denotes a complete realm of existence, with the distinctions between realms resulting from their general sensitivity to Divine revelation, or lack thereof.}

³⁰ See *Hemshech 5666*, p. 343, pp. 431-2; end of the *Maamar Yechayenu 5694*; et al.

in the fact that although a Jew only senses the material aspect of his worldly matters, in **actuality**, he uses them for good and holy matters.³¹

The Alter Rebbe's practical guidance is a corollary of this reality: We must busy ourselves with “acts of material kindness” and offer “counsel from afar regarding all matters of family members” without questioning the motives of the other Jew. Because even **these** material affairs that appear to be “false matters” are intertwined with “the truth of His being.”

6.

THE UNIQUENESS OF *TESHUVAH*

This idea — that even the falsehood of the material world derives from “the truth of His being” — is (primarily) expressed in the *avodah* of *teshuvah*:³²

The primary “falsehood” of the material world consists of the three impure *kelipos*³³ whose Divine life-force — the “truth” within them — is utterly concealed and hidden, which is why they cannot be rehabilitated.³⁴

Teshuvah can transform “intentional sins into merits.”³⁵ Through *teshuvah*, we reveal the sparks of holiness found in entities that totally oppose the will of Hashem (the ultimate in falsehood). In doing so, intentional sins become merits. This is achieved by *teshuvah*, which touches Hashem's Essence, and from the perspective of His Essence, the truth of the existence of **everything** (even intentional sins) is perceived. This is why even the sparks found within intentional sins are elevated to holiness.

[The same dynamic is true about a *baal teshuvah*³⁶ himself: Although on a conscious level, he was disconnected from Divinity (due to his sins), his essential

³¹ See *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 20, pp. 334-5, and fn. 100 loc. cit.

³² {Repentance, lit., “return.”}

³³ {Lit., husks or shells — a kabbalistic term for entities that present as being opposed to Divinity, due to severe concealment of the Divine energy within them.}

³⁴ *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 7; et al.

³⁵ *Yoma* 86b; see *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 7, p. 22 ff. (**and this is explained there**); et al.

³⁶ {A penitent — the term *baal teshuvah* refers to an individual who has sinned in the past, has regretted his conduct, and turned himself around, resolving never to repeat his sins. Throughout Chassidus, the term *baal teshuvah* does not relate only to someone who actually sinned, but to the Divine service of “returning” to Hashem.}

bond with Divinity remains, nevertheless, intact even while sinning. This bond is then manifested openly when he **returns** to Hashem, after previously being disconnected.]

For this reason, the aforementioned superiority of created beings and of the material world (which the Alter Rebbe explains in the epistle that begins, “He and His life-giving emanations are one”) is discerned (primarily) by a *baal teshuvah*.³⁷

7.

THE ALTER REBBE AND TESHUVAH

On this basis, the connection between the time of the *histalkus* of the Alter Rebbe with both the epistle that begins, “He and His life-giving emanations are one,” as well as the journal entry, “The Humble Soul,” will become clear:

The virtue of *teshuvah* (for intentional sins) is (mostly) absent in a *tzaddik*’s own *avodah*.³⁸ However, by inspiring another person to do *teshuvah*, a *tzaddik* gains **this** quality as well³⁹ (because he was the one who brought this person⁴⁰ to do *teshuvah*).

But the virtue of *teshuvah* is revealed, in the main, specifically prior to the *histalkus* of a *tzaddik*, when “**all** of his actions, his Torah, and the Divine service in which he engaged all the days of his life”⁴¹ converge. This is especially so, since he then experiences the drive of *teshuvah* — “and the spirit shall return to Hashem, who gave it”⁴² — with greater strength and power. Therefore, within **his** process of *teshuvah*, the virtue of *teshuvah* for intentional sins is also revealed,

³⁷ *Sefer Hamaamarim 5661*, in the discourse, s.v., “*Ulekachtem Lachem*,” explains that the degree of *bittul* of created beings below, known as “*ein od*” (i.e., that the Essence of *Ein Sof* constitutes their entire existence) is the level of the Divine name ך״ו. This name is associated with the *avodah* of *teshuvah*, as explained, *ibid.*, in the discourse, s.v., “*Tiku*.”

³⁸ Although *tzaddikim* also engage in the *avodah* of *teshuvah* in a mode in which “the spirit shall return to Hashem” (see *Likkutei Torah*, “*Shir HaShirim*,” p. 66c, beg. of “*Haazinu*,” et al.), this does not compare to the quality of the *avodah* of *teshuvah* for intentional sins. (See Mittler Rebbe’s *Shaar HaTeshuvah*, vol. 2, “*Chinuch*,” ch. 48; *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 18, pp. 124-5).

³⁹ See *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 10, pp. 164, 166.

⁴⁰ Similar to (but not precisely) the teaching of the Baal Shem Tov (in the addenda to *Keser Shem Tov*, end of ch. 3) explaining {the mishnah}, “*shnayim ochazin*” {*Bava Metzia 2a*}.

⁴¹ *Iggeres HaKodesh*, beg. of ch. 27, and its explanation; see ch. 28, loc. cit; *Siddur im Dach*, p. 304b ff.

⁴² {*Koheles 12:7*.}

(especially for) a *tzaddik* who was concerned {during his lifetime} with making *baalei teshuvah*.

So it is with respect to the Alter Rebbe: As known,⁴³ the Alter Rebbe told the Mittlerer Rebbe that his, the Alter Rebbe's, innovation (in comparison with the Maggid of Mezeritch) consisted of his focus on making *baalei teshuvah* (as my father-in-law, the Previous Rebbe, explains at length in his talk).⁴⁴

Therefore, specifically prior to his *histalkus*, when he came into the **revelation** of all his life's actions, etc., and in a manner of *teshuvah*, his Torah teachings then focused on revealing the advantage of the material realm. He taught how we must perform “acts of material kindness” — because this is precisely how we can connect with “the Essence and Being of the Emanator.”

⁴³ *Toras Shalom*, p. 86.

⁴⁴ Cited in the *sichah* of *Yud Tes Kislev*, 5692 — *Likkutei Dibburim* vol. 4, end of 755a, ff.

8.

BRIDGING GENERATIONS

The twenty-fourth of Teves always occurs during the week preceding Shabbos⁴⁵ *mevarchim*⁴⁶ Shevat, or immediately on the following day — as is the case this year.⁴⁷ And in this month of Shevat, the anniversary of my father-in-law's passing falls on the tenth.

We find that in the *maamar* that **he** prepared for release on the day of his passing {Yud Shevat} — *Maamar Basi Legani* — the same concept is emphasized:

The *maamar* begins by describing **this** world as Hashem's garden (since “the Essence of the Divine presence was in **the lower realms**”)⁴⁸ — a garden being a place (used not for a dwelling, a basic **necessity**, but rather it is a place) of **pleasure**.

The reason for this is that “Hashem desired this lower world to be a dwelling place for Him”: The desire and delight of Hashem's Essence is specifically in the lower realm — in the *avodah* undertaken in this lowest of worlds, beyond which nothing is lower. And in this realm itself, **action** is paramount. Hashem desires we should descend into the world — into the folly of unholiness — to transform (through the *avodah* of “sacred folly,”⁴⁹ *avodah transcending* reason) this world's falsehoods into beams for the *mishkan*⁵⁰ (to manufacture a “שִׁקְרָה” {beam} out of a “פְּשָׁרָה”⁵¹ {falsehood})⁵² — a *mishkan* and dwelling place for Hashem.

— From the talks of Shabbos *parshas Shemos*, 5732 (1972) & 5736 (1976)

⁴⁵ For the “eating on Shabbos” depends on “toiling on *erev* Shabbos” (*Avodah Zarah* 3a), and the intent is that this begins (even) from the first day of that week (see *Ramban* on *Shemos* 20:8).

⁴⁶ {The Shabbos preceding any new Jewish month is called “Shabbos *mevarchim*,” the Shabbos on which the upcoming new month is blessed.}

⁴⁷ {5740, the year this *sichah* was published.}

⁴⁸ *Shir HaShirim Rabbah*, beg. of ch. 5.

⁴⁹ {שטות דקדושה in the original, folly for the sake of holiness which goes beyond the rational, expressed through exuberance and enthusiasm in serving Hashem.}

⁵⁰ {The portable temple that Moshe constructed in the desert, which will be restored in the Future Era.}

⁵¹ {In Hebrew, the words שִׁקְרָה and פְּשָׁרָה are comprised of the same letters, indicating a connection between them.}

⁵² As elucidated in the series of Chassidic discourses beginning with *Basi Legani 5710* (ch. 6 ff.).