**Giving – The Essential Teaching of the Kabbalah**

**by Rabbi Yehuda Lev Ashlag**

**“Baal Hasulam”**

**With Commentary and**

**Insights for Living the Kabbalah**

**by Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Gottlieb**

**Translation by Aryeh Siegel**

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**Translator’s Introduction
(excerpt of book which can be ordered online)**

Fruitful study of Kabbalah is not dependent on one’s knowledge, intelligence, or talent. It requires only a desire to work on one’s character, sincerity of intention, and faith. So the intended audience of this book includes any human being with that desire. The Torah teaches that every person is destined to take part in the service of God.

**What is the approach of this book?**

This is not the typical book on Kabbalah. It does not provide details of the systems of Kabbalah or its practical use. Nor does it give a guide to meditative techniques, or outline the history of Kabbalah.

Instead, Rabbi Ashlag inspires us. He boldly and succinctly states the purpose of the Kabbalah, and our spines tingle. His message resonates even with readers that have no prior knowledge of the subject. For that reason, this book is an excellent place to begin when learning Kabbalah. The book also offers many subtleties of wisdom that experienced students of Kabbalah can appreciate.

According to Rabbi Ashlag, the Torah has one single purpose. The purpose of every element and aspect of the Torah is to enable us to acquire the desire to give to others without any intention of receiving a reward. To embrace and adopt this character is to attain the state of cleaving to God.

The teachings of the Kabbalah expose the inner wisdom in every detail of the Torah. Learning and practicing these teachings transforms our nature in the way the Torah intended. In this way, the Kabbalah transmits the essence of the teaching of the Torah.

In plain language, God asks of us to love. This may sound simple, but it turns out that it doesn’t come naturally; and it takes time and effort to learn to do it. To love others, we must uncover hidden forms of our self-interested concerns. Only then can we direct our thoughts, feelings, and actions toward giving to others. In addition, we need to recognize the aspect of divinity in each human being we encounter. When we see the greatness of others, this awakens within us our love for them. In particular, the greatness in their aspect of divinity connects our love of them to a love of God.

The divine is also within ourselves, and thus a certain form of self-love is a worthy trait. But “self-love” generally implies the preference we give to ourselves over others. So throughout this book, “self-love” refers to this undesirable love of the ego. Spiritual progress consists of moving from self-love to loving the other.

As individuals internalize loving the other, the world will draw closer to its destiny of mutual love and responsibility. Our societal focus will shift from identification with our group’s values towards identification with God’s will. The dynamics of this individual and societal transformation are spelled out in detail in the Kabbalah.

There is no shortcut to this lofty level of selflessness. Progress is gradual and not always easy. At first we will continue to seek reward, but we can refine our desire to receive, and increase our desire to give. This gradual process of refinement also brings significant rewards along the way. Yet, a crucial element of this wisdom is that we continue to aspire to the highest goal. And at the same time, we keep a clear, honest accounting of our current distance from the ideal.

Here are the words of Rabbi Gottlieb about our spiritual path: “We need to refine our desire to receive. But we need to be honest with ourselves. Our individual digestive systems cannot immediately adjust to the healthiest food. We need to change our diet step by step. In the same way, we must sense what spiritual message we are capable of digesting at each point in our development. We must move forward one step at a time in attunement with our spiritual sensitivities. On the one hand, we need to recognize the great distance between where we are and where we should be. But there’s no necessity to be in despair over the long road ahead. We should nourish ourselves with spiritual enrichment only in a way that assures we keep the strength to correct our failings.” [“Insights for Living the Kabbalah,” V. Levels of Self-love]

The open “secret” of this path is the joy that awaits one who works to develop the character of selfless giving. Why is this a secret? Because if we seek the *joy* of giving – and not just the giving – then our goal is to please ourselves. So the joy will remain hidden from us. Only after we reach a state in which our only desire is to give, will we then experience the joy.

The key is to stay on the path. I hope this book will be one of the steps along the path in the reader’s spiritual journey. Ideally, it will also show the way towards further progress. The bibliography provides suggestions of sources for further study.

**Rabbi Yehuda Lev Ashlag**

Rabbi Ashlag wrote the essays in this book with the intention of introducing the path of the Kabbalah to the general populace. An authentic spiritual path can be learned only from people of advanced spiritual development who have been blessed with an ability to communicate their experience and knowledge to others. Rabbi Ashlag met these conditions perhaps more than anyone in the modern era. Through his genius and intensity in learning, as well as complete devotion and integrity in spiritual work, he merited knowledge and revelation of the greatest heights to which a human being can aspire. His teachings and voluminous writings display clarity and systematic organization in a field rife with vagueness and confusion. These qualities have enabled him to inspire countless men and women – religious and secular, Jewish and non-Jewish – to draw closer to their Creator by means of the Kabbalah.

Rabbi Ashlag was born in Poland in 1885 and lived in the land of Israel from 1922 until his death in 1954. More details of his life can be found in the excellent biography *The Master of the Ladder* (Nehora Press, 2019). One of the two monumental works of Rabbi Ashlag is his Hebrew translation with commentary of the many volumes of the *Zohar*, which is considered to be the central text of the Kabbalah. Rabbi Ashlag titled the work *Hasulam* – Hebrew for “The Ladder” – and since its publication he has become known as “Baal Hasulam,” which means both “author of ‘Hasulam’” and “master of the ladder.” The ladder is a reference to the patriarch Jacob’s dream of a ladder connecting heaven and earth, the classic metaphor for the spiritual climb, step by step, from our earthly, selfish character toward an internalization of the divine, loving character of our Creator. Rabbi Ashlag both delineated in writing the details of the steps on the “ladder” and actually mastered the climb – hence the appropriateness of his distinctive name “Baal Hasulam.”

Since the 16th century, the teachings of Rabbi Isaac Luria – known as “the Ari” – have dominated the study of Kabbalah. However, Baal Hasulam was disappointed to find that even revered Kabbalists had failed to perceive that the intricacies of the Ari’s metaphysical system are actually a detailed guide for spiritual transformation. In *Talmud Eser Hasefirot* – the second monumental work of Rabbi Ashlag – Baal Hasulam reorganized the teachings of the Ari and clarified with extraordinary precision the definitions of Kabbalistic terms and their logical relationships – all without reliance on imagery of time or space or anything physical – only in terms of the desire to give or the desire to receive in various mixtures and levels. This element of the heart – the intention that directs our desire – provides the key to understanding the Kabbalah and to fulfilling its purpose.

Baal Hasulam lived every moment in the Kabbalistic reality he described. All his life he slept very little, preferring to study, teach and write throughout the night. When working on *Hasulam,* he sometimes wrote for eighteen hours a day. The depth and breadth of Baal Hasulam’s writings take on a further dimension when we consider that, for the most part, they were published as they were written, without changes from the first draft. Apparently, he was simply systematically describing the spiritual world as he directly perceived it.

**Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Gottlieb**

Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Gottlieb is a disciple of the firstborn son of Baal Hasulam – Rabbi Baruch Shalom Ashlag. After Baal Hasulam left this world in 1954 on *Yom Kippur*, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, Rabbi Baruch Shalom was among those who continued to disseminate Baal Hasulam’s teachings. When he first encountered Rabbi Baruch Shalom, Rabbi Gottlieb felt spellbound and electrified. According to his report of that moment, Rabbi Gottlieb sensed he was in the presence of a man of God – a person with an extraordinary strength of will that was put to work in service of the Creator.

Although he was only a young teenager, and the students of Rabbi Baruch Shalom were extremely advanced, Rabbi Gottlieb became accepted as a regular participant in the classes that Rabbi Baruch Shalom gave throughout the night, as well as during part of the day. However, at the same time that Rabbi Gottlieb was absorbing the wisdom of Kabbalah, his rebbe – Rabbi Baruch Shalom – expected Rabbi Gottlieb to excel also in the traditional learning of a young Torah scholar. And Rabbi Gottlieb did indeed become recognized as an outstanding student in the study of the Talmud and the other standard areas of Torah study. This, of course, was in addition to his acquiring an extraordinary depth and breadth in his knowledge of Chassidic and Kabbalistic teachings.

It quickly became clear to Rabbi Gottlieb that his connection with Rabbi Baruch Shalom and the study of Baal Hasulam’s teachings were to constitute the single direction of his life; and so from a young age he began to devote himself whole-heartedly to this purpose. Over the course of about 14 years, Rabbi Gottlieb spent many hours daily studying with Rabbi Baruch Shalom and assisting him in a variety of capacities until Rabbi Baruch Shalom departed this world in 1991.

Since that time, in accordance with the wish of a group of students of Rabbi Baruch Shalom, Rabbi Gottlieb himself has taken on the role of a transmitter of the teachings of Baal Hasulam and Rabbi Baruch Shalom. He has already published dozens of books that elucidate their writings. A community of followers from diverse locations is centered on Rabbi Gottlieb’s *bet midrash* in Kiryat Ye’arim. Classes are given there and throughout Israel, and can also be watched online at the website: [www.birkatshalom.org](http://www.birkatshalom.org).

Baal Hasulam had many devoted students of great stature. Yet, due to his filial, as well as spiritual, connection perhaps none could reach Rabbi Baruch Shalom’s level of devotion and understanding. Also Rabbi Baruch Shalom had many students of a very high level. Yet, perhaps none were blessed with the single-minded devotion to his rabbi that Rabbi Gottlieb developed from an early age. Baal Hasulam himself was on a level that bars comparison to anyone. But the devotion and genius of Rabbi Baruch Shalom and Rabbi Gottlieb qualify them to be among the few that continue the authentic teachings of Baal Hasulam. Both have demonstrated an integration of heart and mind in the course of intense, ceaseless holy work. Their writings and teachings have made it possible to present the inspiring outlook of Baal Hasulam in this book.

**History of the Essays**

The main portion of this book consists of the first four essays from Baal Hasulam’s *Matan Torah* (“The Giving of the Torah*”*). These essays were written in the summer of 1933 in response to the increasing estrangement of Jews from their tradition, as well as the lack of familiarity, even among many Torah-observant Jews, with the inner meaning of Torah and its observance. Baal Hasulam saw this as “a time to act” to heal this spiritual emptiness.

In order to reach the widest possible audience, his essays were written in a language that would be readable also to people with little knowledge of Judaism, and they were distributed as pamphlets throughout the land of Israel. Although the clarity of his expression and the significance of his message did succeed in making a strong impression on his readers, at some point Baal Hasulam decided that the time was not ripe to continue publication of the pamphlets. However, in 1974 the essays were collected for the first time in the book *Matan Torah* which has since been published in several editions. This book has transformed the lives of innumerable people and merits the standing of a classic of Jewish thought.

A fuller history of the essays can be found in the highly-informative introduction to a recent Hebrew edition of *Matan Torah* (titled *Maamaray Hasulam – Sefer Matan Torah Hamurchav*), published by the organization Or HaSulam ([www.orhasulam.org](http://www.orhasulam.org/)) as part of their project of making available all of the writings of Baal Hasulam.

**The structure of this book**

At the end of each essay, I have added basic questions for review that are intended to assist the reader in capturing the essential points of the essay. Two of the Baal Hasulam’s essays – “The Giving of the Torah” and “The Mutual Guaranty” – are divided into numbered sections. I have included bulleted highlights for these two essays at the beginning of each numbered section with its essential points. Another feature that makes this publication reader-friendly is that I have researched the sources that are quoted by Baal Hasulam and Rabbi Gottlieb and have added their references in brackets.

Rabbi Gottlieb’s notes and clarifications are critical to understanding the text and getting a wider perspective on the Kabbalistic outlook according to Baal Hasulam. Therefore, in order to enable the reading of Rabbi Gottlieb’s notes together with the text of Baal Hasulam, they have been placed immediately at the end of each paragraph to which they refer. **The text of Baal Hasulam remains distinguished by its indentation and by a vertical line alongside the text.**

In addition to his running commentary on the essays, Rabbi Gottlieb included some expanded notes on significant issues that are touched upon by Baal Hasulam. (Although some of these notes were actually written by a student, his writing was of course under the guidance of Rabbi Gottlieb.) I have created a separate section after the essays, called “Insights for Living the Kabbalah,” which includes ten of these topics. This section will be helpful to those who are interested in the practical application of the approach described by Baal Hasulam.

It should be emphasized that Rabbi Gottlieb’s commentary has never before been translated into English (apart from isolated quotations in Avraham Loewenthal’s highly-recommended book, *Inner Work*). The commentary’s presence here is a unique opportunity for the English reader to benefit from a living master of the teachings of Baal Hasulam.

**Translation conventions**

At the end of the book, there is a glossary for some non-English words that appear italicized in the text. Square brackets [ ] are used for all references. For example, [Lev. 19, 18]. There are also occasional interpolations and explanations by the translator, wherever this was considered necessary for the purpose of clarity. These additions by the translator also appear within square brackets.

Permission was received from Rabbi Gottlieb and the Ohr Baruch Shalom organization to base this translation on the Hebrew book *Matan Torah* published by Ohr Baruch Shalom. The Hebrew text in the appendix is also from the Ohr Baruch Shalom edition. The commentary that appears in this book is a revised selection from Rabbi Gottlieb’s Hebrew commentary. In translating the words of Baal Hasulam, care was taken to retain the form and manner of expression as much as possible. However, regarding Rabbi Gottlieb’s comments, the essential concern was to faithfully transmit the ideas to English readers, with less strictness regarding preserving the order and form in which the ideas were expressed. Rabbi Gottlieb was consulted only regarding general issues of the translation, and of course the translator alone is responsible for any inaccuracies that may exist.

Conventional Hebrew uses the male gender form to refer to men and women collectively. However, in order to emphasize that everyone is being addressed regardless of gender, and in accordance with current practice, the translation avoids using the male gender form in this way.

**A personal note**

The work on this translation required personal reflection on the meaning behind the words of Baal Hasulam and Rabbi Gottlieb. For that reason, it seems appropriate to describe briefly my connection to spiritual wisdom.

I was first awakened to the reality of the spiritual domain via the abstract metaphysics of the philosophy of logic. Subsequently, several inspiring adventures of a mystical nature led to a universalistic faith. In the search for a means of retaining a sense of the miraculous within the routine of daily life, I participated in myriad psycho-spiritual workshops, meditations and trainings. However, the study of the Torah was unquestionably the most authentic path. My studies quickly developed into a commitment to serve God through the discipline of studying Torah and living according to its guidance. After many years of Torah study and observance, the revelation of Baal Hasulam’s teachings via Rabbi Gottlieb (more than twenty years ago) connected the astounding depths of the Torah with an uncompromising path toward self-transformation. Today my life is centered on continued study of Baal Hasulam and contact with Rabbi Gottlieb in classes and other contexts. For all this, and much more, I thank God.

I thank the many special souls that have inspired me. In particular, I thank Rabbi Gottlieb – first, for authorizing the undertaking of this translation; but more importantly, for continuing to illustrate by his example what it means to serve God with integrity and authenticity – “with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.” May God bless the Rebbe with ever-increasing success in connecting the world to the Creator by means of the teachings of Baal Hasulam and Rabbi Baruch Shalom Ashlag. I hope that this book makes some meaningful contribution towards that goal.

I also express my gratitude to all those who have given encouragement and assistance along the way to the completion of this project, with special thanks to Avraham Loewenthal whose detailed, sensitive comments were invaluable.

Putting a twist on Descartes’ maxim, I declare:

**I thank therefore I am.**

Aryeh Siegel