

By His Light
Character and Values in the Service of God



Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein

BY HIS LIGHT
CHARACTER AND VALUES
IN THE SERVICE OF GOD

ADAPTED BY
Rabbi Reuven Ziegler

Yeshivat Har Etzion
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By His Light
Character and Values in the Service of God

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ספר זה מוקדש לזכר הבחור היקר

YAAKOV LEVI MATANKY

יעקב לוי ז"ל בן הרב אריה ומרים אסתר מטנקי
שנקטף בדמי חייו, ב' מנחם אב תשס"ב

Yaakov was an outstanding *talmid* of
Yeshivat Har Etzion (5760–5761)
who was taken from us much too soon,
but whose memory will live on forever
in the hearts of his family,
teachers and friends.

שמאי אומר עשה תורתך קבע. אמור מעט ועשה הרבה.
והוי מקבל את כל האדם בסבר פנים יפות. (פרקי אבות א:טו)

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Preface

It is a privilege and a pleasure to present before the reading public this collection of discourses by Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein *zt"l*, one of the premier Torah educators and thinkers of recent times. For both those who experienced his profound and powerful teaching and those who did not, this is an opportunity to be enlightened by the depth and breadth of his learning, and inspired by the scope and beauty of his vision. It is our hope that sensitive readers will be stirred by the book's teachings and motivated to incorporate them into their personal lives.

The issues explored in this book are of concern to anyone seeking to fashion his or her religious personality. Its major theme perhaps is encapsulated best in the dual import of the verse, "*Be-khol derakhekha da'ehu*, In all your ways, know Him" (*Mishlei* 3:6). First, this verse indicates that there is more than one way for a person to serve God. Concomitantly, it calls upon us to make each of our actions into part of our service of God, instead of regarding whole areas of our life as being religiously neutral. The advocacy of a theocentric life—and specifically one that, despite its focus on the single goal of serving God, nevertheless recognizes multiple paths and entails multiple demands—is a hallmark

of Rabbi Lichtenstein's thought. Indeed, it characterized Rabbi Lichtenstein's life; anyone who knew him can attest that he was a living exemplar of the ideals set forth in this book.

Beyond the actual positions espoused, these presentations are noteworthy for their methodology: the recognition of complexity, the openness to a plurality of approaches, the eschewing of simplistic black-and-white positions, the attempt to view issues in a broad perspective ("to see life steadily and see it whole," in a phrase much beloved of Rabbi Lichtenstein), the bringing to bear of a wide range of thought and experience on the problems addressed, and the sensitivity to nuance. The result is a treatment that, while passionate in aspiration, is nevertheless balanced and moderate in judgment. It is also striking in its intellectual honesty. Although Rabbi Lichtenstein articulated a specific vision of Judaism in these essays, he nevertheless was honest enough to acknowledge the legitimacy of other positions. And while the essays are exhortatory and not only analytic, Rabbi Lichtenstein's strong advocacy of certain positions did not blind him to their risks and potential pitfalls, which he confronted squarely.

The balanced and multifaceted nature of these essays stems from the proposition that the Jewish value system, like life itself, is indeed complex and dialectical. The essays' style therefore is a manifestation of a way of looking at the world in general and at Judaism in particular. Thus, apart from its specific messages, the book conveys a world-view, a manner of approaching the questions of life and religious existence. It encourages the reader to fathom the complexity of human experience and to view his or her individual, communal and historical contexts in a wider perspective.

This breadth of vision—employed in the perception of both experience and values—is perhaps the defining quality of Rabbi Lichtenstein's thought. It manages to encompass both religious and humanistic elements, drawing them into closer relation. Rabbi Lichtenstein brought to these essays not only a staunch commitment to Halakha and a firm grounding in rigorous Torah study, but also a deep spirituality, a profound moral sensitivity and a keen awareness of both the challenges and opportunities of the contemporary era, which distinguish his teachings from much current discourse. He harnessed the crystalline forces

of intellect—subtle and acute powers of analysis, orderly patterns of thought and presentation, and literary sensitivity to the relationship between substance and form—to an overflowing capaciousness of spirit and a vigorously pulsating faith that coursed through his words and animated his educational endeavors.



This book's title, *By His Light*, is inspired by a number of Biblical verses. The first two verses (*Tehillim* 89:15-16) enumerate qualities associated with God, which, by extension, man should seek to imitate. As such, these verses are fitting for a guide to the development of *Character and Values*:

Righteousness and justice are the base of Your throne;
Kindness and truth shall go before You.
Happy is the nation that acknowledges You;
O Lord, they shall walk *by the light of Your countenance*.

Beyond individual qualities, these verses express a general tendency: the need for our path in life to be illuminated by divine light, all our decisions informed by religious considerations.

The ideal religious personality sketched in the pages of *By His Light* is, in fact, guided by a passionate quest for the divine, from which he or she derives strength and inspiration. The book's title thus echoes another verse as well (*Tehillim* 36:10):

With You is the fountain of life;
by Your light do we see light.

As indicated by the Rambam in the opening to his *Sefer Ha-madda*, the next verse (36:11) clarifies that this quest for the divine should be expressed in both spiritual and moral terms:

Bestow Your kindness upon those who know You,
And Your righteousness upon the upright in heart.

By His Light

The psalm thus points to knowledge of God and uprightness of heart as the ends of the religious pursuit.

Yet the opening verse of this psalm (36:1):

To the conductor, to *the servant of God*, to David,

places the yearning for sanctity and goodness within its proper framework. The book's subtitle, which speaks of *the Service of God*, thus provides a necessary complement to its title, for the spiritual aspirationism implicit in the phrase *By His Light* is grounded in an overriding sense of duty and discipline. While the title expresses human grandeur, man's capacity for emulating the divine, the subtitle indicates the necessity of submission to God's will, viewing oneself as a servant of God. The interplay between these two themes—duty and aspiration—is central to the book, and indeed is basic to Rabbi Lichtenstein's outlook on life.

The phrase *Character and Values* highlights the book's emphasis on inwardness and character development, while signaling that these are constituent parts of *the Service of God*. Furthermore, this cultivation of character is to be rooted in the traditional components of *avodat Hashem*—namely, Torah study and mitzva observance—and expressed concretely via both specifically-defined acts of worship and the broader area of *devar ha-reshut*, encompassing the entirety of one's life.

Clearly, then, the layers of meaning contained in the title indicate the multiple thrusts of the book's message. In Chapter Eleven, Rabbi Lichtenstein notes that if a thinker acknowledges a multiplicity of values and desires to maintain a balance between them, then he will find it necessary to weight a presentation in one direction in order to rectify the imbalance he perceives in his audience towards the opposite direction. Since many of the addresses in this book employ this educational technique, it is important to note which audience Rabbi Lichtenstein is addressing in each of them. As the head of a *yeshivat hesder*, an advanced Torah institution whose students also participate in Israel's military defense, and as a *rosh yeshiva* at Yeshiva University, Rabbi Lichtenstein was a leader of the Religious Zionist community in Israel and the Centrist Orthodox community in America, and his speeches gathered here

address audiences of those communities. (One can distinguish between these two groups, which, though similar, face a different set of issues in their daily lives.) More importantly, the overall balance that Rabbi Lichtenstein advocates makes it crucial to treat the book as a whole, and not to regard any part in isolation as expressing the entirety of his broad-ranging and nuanced position.

Although most of these addresses focus on individual spiritual growth, the book concludes with a vision of a community animated by the ideals espoused throughout the preceding chapters. In this sense, the final chapter is the most inclusive one and constitutes a coda to the volume as a whole.



It is important to note that although Rabbi Lichtenstein sanctioned the publication of this book, he did not have a hand in selecting and preparing its chapters, nor did he review the book's contents before publication. Nevertheless, I believe the book accurately conveys his ideas, and I hope that his trust was not misplaced. Although these adaptations hew closely to Rabbi Lichtenstein's original wording, those familiar with his own writings will immediately note that the style here is somewhat simpler, if less elegant. This difference in styles reflects the book's origin in oral presentations, as well as an attempt on the part of the editor to make it accessible to a broader audience. For the same reason, Hebrew terms are explained (generally in parentheses) the first time they appear in each chapter, and a glossary is appended at the end of the book. For further treatments of some of the issues raised in this book, readers are encouraged to refer to Rabbi Lichtenstein's own collections of essays, *Leaves of Faith* (2 vols.) and *Varieties of Jewish Experience*. The challenge presented by those essays (in comparison with the essays in this book) is more than matched by their rewards.

All these speeches, with one exception, were taped and then transcribed word-for-word. Chapters 7, 8 and 9 were originally delivered in Hebrew; the rest of the discourses were delivered in English. After reviewing the transcripts against the tapes, I adapted them for print by breaking them into subsections, translating Hebrew quotes

and terms, editing for style and occasionally abridging or reorganizing. Chapter 8 is an exception to this rule: it is based on a student's summary of an address by Rabbi Lichtenstein, but nevertheless was included because it covered a more comprehensive range of themes than other lectures on the same topic that had been recorded. The titles of all the chapters and sub-chapter divisions are my own. Footnotes containing references and cross-references are my additions, while substantive footnotes derive from Rabbi Lichtenstein's lectures.

The following people prepared the initial transcripts of these lectures: Rabbi Eli Clark—chapters 5, 10 and 12; Rabbi David Debow—chapter 6; Prof. Aviad Hacohen—chapter 9; Reuven Lavi—chapter 2; Rabbis Hillel Maizels, Saul Adler and Mordy Friedman—chapter 11; Shira and Dr. Avi Shmidman—chapters 2, 3 and 4; Rabbi Ramon Widmonte—chapter 1.

The *sichot* which form the basis of Chapters 1-4 were delivered as a unit; the rest of the addresses included in this volume were delivered independently of each other. The following is a list of the original venues and dates of these speeches:

- Chapters 1-4 were delivered to first-year foreign students at Yeshivat Har Etzion in Winter 5747 (1986-7).
- Chapter 5, "Determining Objectives in Religious Growth," was an address at Yeshiva University's Gruss Institute in Jerusalem in 5744 (1984).
- Chapter 6, "Being *Frum* and Being Good," was an address to Yeshiva University Rabbinic Alumni in Cheshvan 5747 (1986).
- Chapter 7, "*Bittachon*: Trust in God," was delivered to a conference of senior educators of the National-Religious school system in Israel in the wake of the Yom Kippur War. This adaptation is based on a transcript of that lecture published in Elul 5735 (1975) by the Israeli Ministry of Education.
- Chapter 8, "I Am with Him in Distress," was delivered at Yeshivat Har Etzion on *Asara Be-Tevet* 5746 (1985).
- Chapter 9, "If You Remain Silent at this Time," was delivered at Yeshivat Har Etzion on *Ta'anit Esther* 5744 (1984).
- Chapter 10, "*Teshuva*: Repentance and Return," was delivered at the Gruss Institute in Jerusalem in Tishrei 5748 (1987).

- Chapter 11, “A Pure Heart,” was delivered at the Gruss Institute in Jerusalem in Tishrei 5763 (2002).
- Chapter 12, “Centrist Orthodoxy: A Spiritual Accounting,” was an address to the Educators’ Council of America in Cheshvan 5746 (1985).

The fact that all of these speeches (apart from Chapters 7 and 11) are from the mid-1980’s is not meant to exclude Rabbi Lichtenstein’s earlier or later thought. Rather, this is due to the simple biographical fact that those were the years when I was first exposed to Rabbi Lichtenstein. When selecting speeches for inclusion in this collection, I found that these addresses, which I had heard years before either live or on cassette, were the ones that remained most vivid in my memory. It is my hope that the powerful impact these speeches made on me at the time will be felt by a new generation encountering them for the first time.

Prior to the publication of this book, the majority of these adaptations were distributed on the Internet by Yeshivat Har Etzion’s Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash (<http://etzion.org.il>) as part of a series entitled, “Developing a Torah Personality.” Several thousand readers subscribed, and we received many enthusiastic responses. Especially gratifying were the responses of those readers who had used the material in educational settings: classrooms, youth groups, adult education and private study circles. We welcome feedback: please write to office@etzion.org.il with your questions or comments. Also, if you do utilize these essays in an educational setting, please drop us a line to let us know about your experience.

Many people deserve thanks for their help or guidance in preparing this book: first, Rabbi Eli Clark, who initiated the enterprise of transcribing Rabbi Lichtenstein’s English lectures and who provided many helpful editorial comments for this volume; the other transcribers listed above, especially Dr. Avi Shmidman, who had a number of tapes professionally transcribed; Naomi Tabory, for her sharp eye; Debra Berkowitz, for preparing the source and name indices, and for overseeing all technical matters with characteristic graciousness and efficiency; Rabbi Yoseif Bloch, for preparing the subject index; Andrea Riffkin and Rabbi Mordechai Friedman, for helping prepare the glossary; and Drs. David

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Shatz and Joel B. Wolowelsky, for their always beneficial advice. This book was first printed in a limited edition by the Etzion Foundation in 5762 (2002), and then for the general public in a revised and expanded edition in 5763 (2003). Our thanks to Perry Davis, Dassi Lewis, the Etzion Foundation, Dr. Mayer Brayer ז"ל, and Bernard Scharfstein for their help in bringing the first two editions to print. Special thanks to Eli Weber, Matthew Miller and Tomi Mager for their help with the current edition, and to Shira Schreier for proofreading it. *Acharon chaviv*, a world of thanks to my wife Yael and to my parents, Rabbi Zvi and Sandra Ziegler, for their constant love and support.

Finally, the publication of this book is a way of saying thank you to Rabbi Lichtenstein for formulating and embodying the vision presented herein, for his unstinting educational efforts, and for being an inspiration and a lodestar to his students. It is rare for a *talmid* to have the opportunity to repay his *rebbe* in some small measure for all that he has received from him; I, and all those involved in the preparation of this volume, are thankful for the opportunity. In his discussion of the commandment to love God, the Rambam (*Sefer Ha-mitzvot, aseh 3*), based on the *Sifri (Vaetchanan, 32)*, says that if you love someone, you want others to love him as well. We hope that we have accomplished something analogous in this book.

May Rabbi Lichtenstein's teachings and personal example continue to enlighten and inspire seekers of God for generations to come.

Reuven Ziegler
Elul 5776
Alon Shevut

Chapter One

To Cultivate and to Guard: The Universal Duties of Mankind

When seeking to shape our personalities according to Torah values, we must relate to at least three levels of expectation and responsibility. These can be regarded as concentric circles, moving from the broader to the more specific:

1. the universal demands placed upon one simply as a human being;
2. the demands of a Jew;
3. the responsibilities of a *ben-Torah*, one who makes Torah study a central part of his life and embodies its values.

I wish to deal now with the first level.¹ What are the basic, cardinal, universal values for which every person should strive?

1. The second level of responsibility is addressed in Chapter Three and the third level in Chapter Four.

TWO TASKS

Let us open a *Chumash* (Pentateuch) to the chapter describing the creation of man and see what task was assigned to him.

The Lord God took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and to guard it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you are to eat; but as for the tree of knowledge of good and evil, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die.” (*Bereishit* 2:15-17)

In the seventh chapter of *Sanhedrin*, the *Gemara* derives the seven universal Noachide Laws from the last two of these verses. However, I would like to address the first of these verses: God placed man (Adam) in the Garden “*le-ovdah u-leshomrah*,” to work or cultivate the Garden and to guard it. Here we have two distinct tasks. One, “*le-shomrah*,” is largely conservative, aimed at preserving nature. It means to guard the world, to watch it—and watching is essentially a static occupation, seeing to it that things do not change, that they remain as they are. This is what Adam was expected to do, and part of our task in the world is indeed to guard that which we have been given: our natural environment, our social setting, our religious heritage.

In a sense, we are expected also to be a *shomer* (guard) of the Torah itself. What do *Anshei Kenesset Ha-gedola*, the Sages of the Great Assembly, mean when they instruct us to “Make a fence around the Torah” (*Avot* 1:1)? They mean to guard it, to watch it. Similarly, *Chazal* speak of “*Asu mishmeret le-mishmarti*, Set a guard around My guard” (*Mo’ed Katan* 5a, *Yevamot* 21a). We often use the term *shomer mitzva* to describe someone. This doesn’t just mean that he does what the *Shulchan Arukh* says, but also that he guards it; he sees to it that the mitzva as an entity, as a reality, remains pure; he envisions himself as having a sense of responsibility towards it. All this is included in the term “*le-shomrah*” (to guard it).

At the same time, there is the task of “*le-ovdah*” (to cultivate it), which is essentially creative: to develop, to work, to innovate. This applied even in the Garden of Eden, which, according to some of the *midrashim*, was already a perfect environment.

Here we have, then, two foci of our primary obligation: a) to guard, to have a sense of responsibility in relation to that which we have been given; and b) to work and to develop. Although Adam was commanded specifically to till and guard the Garden of Eden, I think that we would not be stretching things too far if we were to understand that this mandate applies far beyond that particular little corner of the Garden where Adam and Eve were placed. What we have here is a definition of how man is to be perceived in general: as a *shomer* and as an *oved*.

Part 1:

***Le-shomrah*—To Honor, Protect and Preserve**

WHO IS THE MASTER?

As I said, the mandate to guard relates in part to the natural world; the concern for ecology has some basis in this. To some extent, this mandate extends to the society one is in. But to a great extent, it applies in relation to oneself. One must guard the human personality itself and everything appended to it, one's *dalet amot* (four cubits) which he assumes to be his own private domain.

Now, this is of great importance and needs to be stressed, because we are dealing here with a fundamentally religious perception that runs counter to the notions prevalent within the widely secular society in which we find ourselves. The essence of modern secular culture is the notion of human sovereignty; individual man is master over himself, and collective man is master over his collective. This creates problems as to where the line is to be drawn between individual and collective man, and that issue is the crux of much of modern socio-political theory—when the state can and cannot interfere. But the common denominator of all these discussions is that they think fundamentally in terms of human sovereignty, the question being whether you speak of humanity or of a particular person.

From a religious point of view, of course, *eilu va-eilu divrei avoda zara*—both approaches are idolatrous. Here one establishes individual man as an idol, and there one idolizes, in humanistic terms, humanity as a whole. The basis of any religious perception of human existence is the sense that man is not a master: neither a master over the world around him, nor a master over himself.

“THE EARTH IS THE LORD’S”

Of course, this is not to say that the notion of private property does not exist. It certainly exists within religious thought generally, and within Judaism specifically; the notion of private property is a very central concept in Halakha, and large sections of the Talmud are devoted to it. Rather, what this means is that the notion of property is never absolute. It is always relative; ultimately, “*La-Hashem ha-aretz u-melo’ah*, The Earth is the Lord’s and all that it holds” (*Tehillim* 24:1). But within the world in which we exist, we can say that relative to Shimon, Reuven has been granted ownership, or that relative to the individual, the community has been granted authority.

In this manner, one can understand the *gemara* in *Berakhot* (35a-b) which points out a seeming contradiction between two verses in *Tehillim*: on the one hand, “The Heavens belong to the Lord, but the Earth He gave over to man” (115:16), and on the other hand, “The Earth is the Lord’s and all that it holds” (24:1). The *gemara* answers: “This is not really a difficulty. One verse is speaking of the reality before a person has recited a *berakha* (blessing), and the other verse is speaking of the reality after a person has said a *berakha*.”

A person who partakes of the world without reciting a *berakha* has, so to speak, stolen from God; he has committed an offense of *me’ila* (misusing that which has been consecrated to God). However, when he pronounces a *berakha*, this does not mean that the item is now absolutely his. It is not like purchasing a loaf of bread from a storeowner, who then disappears from the picture. Heaven forbid! “Mine is the silver and mine is the gold, says the Lord of Hosts” (*Chaggai* 2:8). Rather, the *gemara* teaches that, at an operational level, there are two different levels of one’s mastery over the object, in terms of the permissibility for one to use it. Initially, you cannot partake in any way. But once you say the *berakha*, you have in effect recognized God’s ownership. You recognize His hegemony, you accept the fact that you live subject to Him, you have acknowledged His sovereignty, and now you partake of the world with His permission. Through our reciting a *berakha*, God grants us permission the way a medieval king might have delegated a fief to a particular person.

Regarding some forms of *kodashim* (sacred items), the *gemara* says, “*Mi-shulchan gavo’ah ka zakhu*, They have acquired it from Heaven’s table” (see *Beitza* 21a, *Bava Metzia* 92a). What the *gemara* says in a narrow halakhic sense is true in a broader sense of our ability to partake of the world. We are guests at God’s table. This means that whatever we have in the world, we have as *shomerim* (guards)—it has been given to us to guard and we are never truly masters.

Now, of course, there are different kinds of *shomerim*. There are those who have only responsibilities and no rights, such as a *shomer chinam* (unpaid guard) and a *shomer sakhar* (paid guard). On the other hand, a *sho’el* (borrower) and a *sokher* (renter) have both *chiyyuvim* and *kinyanim* (liabilities and rights). In the sense that we too have both *chiyyuvim* and *kinyanim*, we are analogous to a *sho’el* or *sokher*. (However, the analogy is not exact, since, unlike a *sho’el*, we do not have rights against the Owner; we merely have rights to use the property, given the Owner’s continuing consent.) And if this is true regarding property, it is equally true of our own selves.

OWNERSHIP OF ONESELF

I mentioned earlier the prevalent secular conception of one’s “ownership” of himself. One hears this argument in various contexts, especially with regard to the question of abortion: it’s a woman’s right, it’s her own body, she can do what she wants, etc. Years back, I was asked to testify before a subcommittee of the Knesset which dealt with abortions.² Among other things, I mentioned that, leaving aside the significant question of whether it is the woman’s body only or whether the fetus has some rights as well, there is a more fundamental problem. Even if we were to accept that indeed it is the woman’s own body, we totally reject the conception that she then can do with it as she pleases. This is a completely anti-halakhic perception. It rests on a secular assumption that, as it were, “My Nile is my own; I made it for myself” (*Yechezkel* 29:3),

2. This was later printed as, “Abortion: A Halakhic Perspective,” *Tradition* 25 (1991), pp. 3-12, and appears on Yeshivat Har Etzion’s Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash: <http://www.vbm-torah.org/halakha/abortion.htm>.

as if we are the source of our own existence and therefore the masters of our own being. This is assuredly not the case. In absolute terms, a person does not own himself.

In fact, there are prohibitions that apply to how a person relates to himself. Just as one is forbidden to injure or curse others, so is he forbidden to injure himself³ or to curse himself.⁴ Similarly, the mitzva of “*Ve-nishmartem me’od le-nafshoteikhem*, Take utmost care of yourselves” (*Devarim* 4:15), specifically prohibits a person from taking unnecessary risks, even though he will not affect anybody else. The very notion that a person should be free to do what he wants with relation to himself is at absolute odds with our conception. We believe that you are never an independent entity, nor do you “own” yourself; you are always a *shomer* appointed by God. That applies to your “property,” to your own self, and certainly to your relationship to what surrounds you.

HONOR GUARD

Let us now further refine our understanding of the duty of “*le-shomrah*.” It has not only a negative aspect, namely, that a person does not have the right to dispose of objects arbitrarily or even to deal with himself as he wishes. It has also a positive aspect: there is an obligation to be a *shomer*, and not merely in order to avoid damage. Although this is essentially a passive activity, there nevertheless is an active aspect to it as well. The Rambam says:

The guarding of the Temple is a positive commandment. This applies even though there is no fear of enemies or bandits, for its guarding is in order to honor it. A palace with guards is not comparable to a palace without guards. (*Hilkhot Beit Habechira* 8:1)

Even though there is no fear of invasion, nevertheless the *Mikdash* (Temple) must have *shomerim*. Why? They serve as an honor guard. *Le-havdil*, the Swiss Guards do not protect the Vatican from enemies, nor do guards stand outside Buckingham Palace out of fear that someone

3. See *Bava Kama* 90b-91b and Rambam, *Hilkhot Chovel U-mazik* 5:1.

4. Rambam, *Hilkhot Sanhedrin* 26:3.

is going to enter. Rather, guards are stationed out of a sense of *kavod* (honor) for the *palterin shel melekh* (palace of the king); there is a sense of elevation, of nobility, of something unique that requires guarding.

Now, this sense of *palterin shel melekh* which requires guarding is presumably part of the mandate Adam initially received. When he was placed in the Garden “*le-ovdah u-leshomrah*,” against whom was it being guarded? The animals were part of the Garden, and there was nobody else around, no one to invade. Rather, you guard something which you value and appreciate; you hover over it constantly. While, of course, the *Mikdash* is *palterin shel Melekh* in a very special sense, the world as a whole is also *palterin shel Melekh*: “The heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool” (*Yeshayahu* 66:1). In this sense, we must all cultivate a concern for and a sensitivity to the natural order as a whole, to that Garden of Eden into which we have been placed. This is part of *kevod Shamayim*, *yirat Shamayim* and *malkhut Shamayim* (the honor, fear and sovereignty of Heaven). In fact, our responsibility with respect to the orders of creation—natural, human, social and personal—is now heightened, since, subsequent to Adam’s sin, there are indeed real dangers which threaten them.

There is a term which *Chazal* (the Sages) always apply in relation to *shomerim*: *achrayut*, responsibility. In our capacity as *shomerim*, we must live with a sense of responsibility, obligation and demands. What is demanded is not simply a kind of passive awareness, but rather the application of consciousness. What does a *shomer* have to do? He must be alert. His human self must be asserted, that part of him which can watch, which is intelligent, which guards. One guards with intelligence. When he combines his intelligence, sensitivity and awareness of the importance of what he is guarding with a sense of duty and readiness—that is what being a *shomer* is all about.

Part 2: *Le-ovdah*—The Work Ethic

The sense of duty I mentioned above with regard to “*le-shomrah*” applies likewise to the first component of Adam’s mandate—“*le-ovdah*.” It is not enough to guard; one needs also to develop and to create. Let us

be mindful that this applied even in what seemingly had been a perfect world! “And God saw all that He had made and found it very good” (*Bereishit* 1:31). If all is wonderful and perfect, what need is there for “*le-ovdah*?” There are two possible answers. Although the difference between them is of great significance in many areas, I would prefer not to focus on the clash between them, but rather to see them both as being correct.

MAINTAINING THE WORLD

The first answer is that indeed the world was created perfect—but part of that perfection, and one of the components within that order, is human activity. Part of “And He found it very good” is man, not existing simply as a biological being enjoying the world, but rather as a functional being who contributes, creates and works. The need for man to work is not part of the curse subsequent to the sin; man was originally placed in the Garden in order to cultivate it. The curse was that man would have to battle with an unwilling earth: “Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you . . . By the sweat of your brow shall you get bread to eat” (*Bereishit* 3:18-19). But the fact that one needs to work at all is part of the primeval, primordial order, irrespective of any element of sin. This had been intended from the beginning. Simply put, this is indeed a perfect order, provided that man does his part. If man does not, then one of the pieces of the picture has fallen out, and the world is no longer perfect.

According to this approach, both “*le-ovdah*” and “*le-shomrah*” are designed to maintain the world at its present level, and this entails two components: passively guarding against damage and actively working in order to replenish. We need to work so that the natural processes repeat themselves; if you do not contribute your share, the seasons come and go, but nature does not replenish itself.

PERFECTING THE WORLD

The second approach assumes that “*le-ovdah*” is a mandate to go beyond the original state of creation. “*Le-ovdah*” is not meant simply to maintain the original standard; rather, we have been given the right and the duty to try to transcend it. While the former approach asserts that man was asked to maintain the world as God had created it, this answer claims that man was empowered and enjoined to create something better, as it were.

Although this approach is audacious, we find it advanced by Chazal in several places. Perhaps the most celebrated is the *midrash* (*Tanchuma, Parashat Tazria*) which speaks of the encounter between the Roman governor Turnus Rufus and Rabbi Akiva. Turnus Rufus asked Rabbi Akiva, "If God wanted man to be circumcised, then why did He not create him that way?" Rabbi Akiva responded, "Bring me some wheat." Then he said, "Bring me a loaf of bread." He asked, "Which do you prefer to eat, the bread or the wheat?" "Naturally, the bread," Turnus Rufus replied. Rabbi Akiva retorted, "Do you not see now that the works of flesh and blood are more pleasant than those of God?" There is a certain audacity here, but these are the words of Rabbi Akiva! What you have here is an assertion of human ability and grandeur, and of human responsibility to engage in this kind of improvement.

The extent to which this particular view is accepted depends on whether one adopts, to a greater or lesser degree, a humanistic perspective. Humanists talk a great deal about man placing his imprint upon the world, improving it, building it, and so on. When I say humanists, I am not talking only about secular humanists; I mean religious humanists within our world as well. Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik and Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, for example, talk a great deal about the need for man to create.

Historically, this debate has found expression in some very strange contexts. In late seventeenth-century England, there was a vigorous debate about the hills and valleys. Some assumed that in the Newtonian world of mathematical precision, a perfect world presumably would be perfectly shaped. How, then, to explain the indentations of hills and valleys which seem to mar what should be a perfectly round globe? People with a more Romantic perspective said that it's nicer this way, with some variety; who would want the whole world to be as flat as the New Jersey Turnpike? Others gave a more theological interpretation: really, a perfect world would be a perfect globe without any ups and downs, but God made the mountains and the valleys so that man should have the challenge of flattening everything. To us, this debate seems curious, but the basic notion is clear.

The debate about the role of art similarly reflects these two basic positions about man's relation to the world. Plato claimed that

artists misrepresent reality. He believed that the ultimate reality is the world of ideas, of which our world is just a kind of reflection or image. Now, says Plato, what does the poet or the artist do? He has the image of the image, and is now two steps removed from reality, instead of being one step away. So he banished all of them from his ideal republic. One response was given to this by Plotinus. The best known statement of this response in English is Sir Philip Sidney's "The Defense of Poesy," an essay written in the late sixteenth century. Sidney says that Plato's perception is wrong: the poet does not imitate nature, he goes beyond nature. The natural world, he says, is brass, but the poet's world is gold.

THE IMPORTANCE OF WORK

For our purposes, however, both of these approaches to the value of labor can be regarded as correct. What is important is the sense of human responsibility and the recognition of the importance of building the world and improving society. To us, work is indeed a central value. *Chazal* have numerous statements to this effect. For example, just as there is an obligation to rest on Shabbat, there is also an obligation that "Six days shall you labor and do all your work" (*Shemot* 20:9); the two are somewhat interrelated (see *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, version B, chap. 21, and *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai* on *Shemot* 20:9).

In a famous statement, the Rambam spoke of this in a halakhic context. The *gemara* (*Sanhedrin* 25b) says that a dice-player (i.e. a gambler) is disqualified from giving testimony in court. Two reasons are offered for this. One opinion is that he is a sort of thief, because of the halakhic principle that "*asmakhta lo kanya*." Whoever gambles does so because he assumes he is going to win, and if he knew that he would lose he wouldn't gamble. Thus, he gambles based upon an *asmakhta*, relying on an implicit condition. Therefore, the loser does not really transfer ownership of the money, and the winner does not legally acquire it. The second opinion disqualifies a gambler because "*eino osek be-yishuvo shel olam*," he is not involved in developing the world constructively. The *gemara* then brings a practical distinction between these two opinions. According to the first reason (*asmakhta*), even a person who gambles only occasionally is ineligible to give testimony. However, according to the second approach,

only a professional gambler is disqualified—someone who has no other profession, but rather spends his entire day at the racetrack, or doing something similarly non-constructive.

The Rambam rules according to the latter opinion, but he takes the occasion to generalize:

One who plays dice with a gentile does not transgress the prohibition of stealing, but he does transgress the prohibition of occupying oneself with worthless things, for it is not suitable for a person to occupy himself all the days of his life with anything other than matters of wisdom and the developing of the world. (*Hilkhot Gezeila* 6:11)

I won't deal now with the reason the Rambam thinks that the problem of *asmakhta* doesn't apply to this case. What is relevant to us is his definition of the two things a person should be engaged in: *divrei chokhma* (matters of wisdom) and *yishuvo shel olam* (the developing of the world).

WHY WORK?

This notion of the significance of work *per se*, of engaging in *yishuvo shel olam*, of “*le-ovdah*,” has several bases. First, in a purely psychological sense, in terms of mental health, one's self-fulfillment comes through work. For instance, the *mishna* (*Ketubot* 5:5, 59b) says that if a woman marries, she is expected to perform certain tasks in the house, but if she brings servants with her, she does not have to do them. The *gemara* (*ibid.*) adds that the more servants she brings, the less she has to do, because they will take care of the needs of the household. However, beyond a certain point, this does not apply; her husband can demand that she do something—anything—because, Rabbi Eliezer says, “Idleness leads to lewdness;” it leads to a loose, lascivious life. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel offers a different reason: “A husband who takes an oath that his wife should do no work, should divorce her and pay her *ketuba*, since idleness leads to *shi'amum*.” *Shi'amum* can be understood either as insanity or as boredom, *ennui*, a sense of spiritual degradation. Even if she's as wealthy as Midas, she has to do some kind of work, lest idleness lead to psychological and spiritual problems.