



by Rabbi Dov Heller, M.A.

It starts with getting rid of the entitlement attitude, which puts one's "rights" ahead of everything else.

What in life do you feel is coming to you? Health? A good job? Children? A peaceful retirement? Check yourself out.

If you're like me, you probably have a whole list of things you feel entitled to, and if you don't get them, you feel cheated. If you are unable to take a vacation or buy the home you've dreamed of, then life has robbed you of something you are entitled to!

We live in a society that feeds an entitlement attitude. Compare the Bill of Rights, which focuses on our entitlements, to the Torah, which focuses on our responsibilities and obligations.

LIFE OWES US NOTHING

The entitlement attitude says, "life owes me something," or "people owe me something," or "God owes me something."

You know if you're into entitlement because the result leaves you constantly feeling angry, resentful, or frustrated. If you believe that someone owes you something and that person doesn't come through, you feel angry. You feel you've been ripped-off and cheated out of what I rightly deserve.

But entitlement is a lie. It's a perversion of reality.

There is nothing in the universe that states, "Dov Heller deserves to live a long, happy, and successful life!" My feelings of entitlement are born from within my own mind. Objectively speaking, there is no basis for such claims.

Everything good we do get must be looked at as a gift.

Even though Judaism maintains that God created us for pleasure and wants us to have pleasure, we still should not feel entitled to getting what we desire. This is because everything good we do get must be looked at as a gift. Understanding this creates an awareness that the source of all our good is God.

This understanding that everything is a gift forms the basis of our relationship with God. Judaism also looks at the bad as coming from God and it should ultimately be viewed as a gift. However a discussion of this complex issue is beyond the limits of this article.

Neither God, nor anyone else for that matter, owes us anything. Do you believe this is true? Most people do not.

THE ENTITLEMENT ATTITUDE

There are many things we feel entitled to. For example, aren't we entitled to have people treat us fairly, with sensitivity, with respect? Where is that written? The truth is that any kindness we receive from others is always a gift.

What about marriage? This is an area of life which is full of expectation. What do you think your spouse owes you? Financial support? Emotional support? Is he or she the one who is supposed to make you happy for the rest of your life?

Your spouse owes you nothing! Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler emphasized this point in his Strive for Truth when he said, "When demands begin, love departs." If we would focus on our responsibilities to our spouses and what

we can do to make them happy, our marriages would be much more fulfilling. Focus on what you are not getting that you feel entitled to and your marriage will be painful.

A distinction must be made between the illegitimacy of "entitlement" in an absolute sense and our legitimate claim to seek "justice" and the fulfillment of one's rights under society's laws or under a body of religious laws. For example, when a person isn't paid for his work, he is "entitled" by society's laws to sue for his wages. A wife who is being treated disrespectfully by her husband is "entitled" by Torah law to be given respect.

But in an absolute sense, a person is not entitled to be paid or to be given respect because there is nothing in the universe that guarantees any kind of individual rights.

THE GRATITUDE ATTITUDE

Eliminating entitlement from your life and embracing gratitude is spiritually and psychologically liberating.

Gratitude is the recognition that life owes me nothing and all the good I have is a gift. My eyes are a gift. So is my wife, my clothes, my job and my every breath. This is a major shift from the entitlement mode.

Recognizing that everything good in life is ultimately a gift is a fundamental truth of reality.

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To speak of seeing everything good we have as a gift leads us to confront the reality of a giver and the source of all this good: God.

Gratitude is where we begin to experience God in a powerfully personal way. "Thank you" is the simplest and one of the most powerful prayers a person can say. If you can say, "Thank you," you can connect with God and begin to develop a personal relationship with Him.

A powerful, although tragic, example of someone who mastered the gratitude attitude was a great Jewish woman named Bruria. The story of Bruria is told in the Talmud. Bruria and her husband, Rabbi Meir, had two sons who both died one Friday afternoon before Shabbat. Bruria decided not to tell her husband of the tragedy until after Shabbat since, according to Jewish law, one is not permitted to have a funeral on Shabbat or to openly mourn. There was nothing they could do until after Shabbat so she kept the information to herself and allowed her husband to enjoy the day (imagine being able to do that!). Explaining where the boys were was the least of her challenges.

When Shabbat was over this is how Bruria broke the horrible news to her husband. She asked him a legal question: What is the proper course of action if one person borrows two jewels from another and then the original owner requests that the return of the jewels. He replied with the obvious answer that one is obligated to return the loan upon demand. She then took her husband to where their two dead sons lay and said, "God has requested that we return the loan of our two jewels."

Bruria teaches us a potentially life transforming lesson here: Everything we have is on loan!

ON LOAN

My ears are on loan, my health is on loan, my children are on loan. Everything is a loan that is given as a gift.

What have we done that we could claim we earned life, health, financial success, or children? We have done nothing. As I mentioned earlier, when we internalize this truth, we become spiritually and psychologically liberated.

How freeing to live with a sense that everything good is on loan.

This is the key to internalizing the gratitude attitude. Once we understand that everything is a gift, we can begin to feel gratitude towards God, the source of all good, and grow closer to Him in an authentic and joyful way.