

*the*  
AIM  
*of*  
LIFE

OBADIAH S. HARRIS, PH. D.

*The Aim of Life*

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## INTRODUCTION



### *Your Second Chance*

BY MITCH HOROWITZ

**O**BADIAH HARRIS'S BOOKS have a way of finding me just when I am in great danger. They arrive as lifelines. You may have the same experience in encountering this book, *The Aim of Life*.

Although I am known as an author and editor of “spiritual” books—and my life is presumably dedicated to some kind of higher search—I often succumb, willingly and without any kind of fight, to the quest for success, applause, and audience-size. I sometimes catch myself, and more often do not catch myself, weighing the merits of a project based on how much attention or prestige it will bring me. That is not an easy admission, but it is the truth.

Just when I find myself getting sucked into the fervid, often empty-handed quest for fame and public admiration, I encounter a book like this one—and I take a very deep breath and realize that I have been allowing my life to slip away from me.

In this book, Obadiah, to whom I refer by first name because I am honored to know him as a friend as well as a teacher, returns us to essentials—real essentials. He begins with the inarguable

premise that no degree of success, money, pleasure, or adoration is, in the end, ever enough—life never concedes itself to the satisfactions of worldly achievement, no matter how desirable the rewards may appear. It is not that these rewards are worthless. To say so would be sanctimonious and dishonest. But they are secondary. They are nonessential.

What is essential? The pursuit of truth, as Obadiah reminds us. This book revolves on a passage from 2 Chronicles 1:7-12, in which King Solomon is offered anything by God—and Solomon chooses wisdom. To this all other things are added. Obadiah puts it this way:

*The Bible states that when Solomon became King of Israel, God appeared to him and said: "Ask what I shall give thee." Solomon replied, "Give me wisdom and knowledge... for who can judge thy people that is so great?" And God said to Solomon, "Because this was in thine heart and thou hast not asked riches, wealth, or honor, nor the life of thine enemies, neither yet hast asked long life, but hast asked for wisdom and knowledge that thou may judge my people, over whom I have made thee king, wisdom and knowledge is granted thee; and I will give thee riches, wealth, and honor, such as none of the kings have had that have been before thee, neither shall there be any after thee that shall have the like."*

Christ affirms the same truth in Matthew 6:33: "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." Why do we constantly forget this simple, compelling guidance? It must have something to do with the tremendous pull exerted by the world of tactile rewards. We have been miseducated to think that religion would deny us those rewards. But that is not so.

Years ago, I knew a brilliant man, a true teacher, who was divided between pursuing his spiritual search and his studies as a physician. He felt torn and unsure of what to do. Then he grasped that passage from Matthew 6:33 (it could likewise have been the exchange between God and Solomon)—and he found his answer. Nothing in his search would deter him from his medical education. He was simply being guided to “seek first” the kingdom of heaven—and then all else, including medical degrees and training, would be added. It was not a choice of one or the other, but a setting of priorities.

How can we set priorities in a world that constantly bombards us with choices and possibilities? Unlike ancient men and women, whose social roles were highly stratified and whose lives were dictated by birth, geography, and background, we modern Westerners face an incredibly tantalizing array of choices, at least compared to earlier eras. And even if we consider ourselves “spiritual,” we are not hermits, monks, or contemplatives. We are people of the world. So, allowing that work, family, and outer activities will necessarily consume most of our lives, how do we honor the precept to “seek first” God and the kingdom? Obadiah offers an exquisitely simple guidepost when confronting this question:

*All motivation for action should come from the Divine. Whenever we are prompted to act we should first refer the action to God. We should ask ourselves whether the contemplated action leaves us quiet and composed, or whether the mere thought of it throws us in a turmoil of worry and distraction. If it has the latter disturbing effect, it is not Divinely inspired or directed. Any action that does not proceed out of inner peace and silence cannot have the right spiritual base.*

This principle does not ask too much of us—it meets us where we live. Does the action under consideration leave us “quiet and composed” or does its prospect throw us into “worry and distraction?” We may ignore the “worry and distraction” in hopes of receiving some trophy or reward that seems to make it worthwhile; but we cannot claim that we lack the necessary perceptual ability or contemplative skills to follow or at least acknowledge the principle that Obadiah offers us.

In reading his principle, I am reminded of another from Carlos Castaneda’s 1968 book, *The Teachings of Don Juan*. Forget, for a moment, about the controversies surrounding Castaneda—we all know them. But his book, for me, offers splendid insights, and it left an impression on me as a child, when my sister first brought it home, which has probably resulted in my writing this introduction. The figure of Don Juan tells Carlos:

*Look at every path closely and deliberately. Try it as many times as you think necessary. Then ask yourself, and yourself alone, one question. This question is one that only a very old man asks. My benefactor told me about it once when I was young, and my blood was too vigorous for me to understand it. Now I do understand it. I will tell you what it is: Does this path have a heart? All paths are the same: they lead nowhere. They are paths going through the bush, or into the bush. In my life I could say I have traversed long, long paths, but I am not anywhere. My benefactor’s question has meaning now. Does this path have a heart? If it does, the path is good; if it doesn’t, it is of no use. Both paths lead nowhere; but one has a heart, the other doesn’t. One makes for a joyful journey; as long as you follow it, you are one with it. The other will make you curse your life. One makes you strong; the other weakens you.*



Often, I have chosen the path *without* a heart—the path of frustration and anxiety—because it seemed to hold what I wanted, and what would make me feel safe, secure, and honored. I won't lie to you or use evasive language, because life is too short and is afforded us in too precious a spooning for evasion. My path without a heart has been the pursuit of fame. Whether I arrive there or not, does it lead anywhere? Does it leave me sated? I used to think that I'd like to find out—but Obadiah reminds us that no one, in any record, has ever said that the worldly garland leaves a person satisfied.

I was once offered a Buddhist chant—a very lovely practice—and was told that I could use it to attain whatever I wanted. I wished for fame. In so doing, I failed the test that God put to Solomon. Will I—or will you—be granted a second chance at this test? This book may be that second chance. Drink up its words. Note carefully its principles. This book may be reaching you, as it did me, as a safety line at a moment of great danger.



## CHAPTER ONE



### *The Aim of Life*

**T**O BE OR not to be, wrote Shakespeare, is the question. We shuffle off this mortal coil, he said, to sleep, perchance to dream. Many others, writers, poets, and ordinary men, like the character in Shakespeare's drama have wondered about the question of life. But surely there is more to human life than this, more than what Shakespeare writes elsewhere; our little life is ended with a sleep. So, let us contemplate the aim of life. That is really the question, not whether to be or not to be, if we may be permitted to contest Shakespeare's philosophy, if we cannot match his poetry.

Rishabhchand, says that man's eternal quest, his aim in life, is the absolute. What do men seek in life, he asks? In their desires and dreams, in their hopes and aspirations, what have they all been seeking since time began? Is it not an absolute? The scientist in his laboratory, the philosopher in his ivory tower of thought, the artist and poet in their moments of creative inspiration, the mystic in his ecstatic contemplation, the farmer in his fields, the soldier in the fury of battle, the grocer in his shop, the beggar on the street. Do they not all seek an absolute of bliss or power, of

space or knowledge of energy or life satisfaction. No success ever succeeds in giving us permanent satisfaction, no fulfillment ever quenches our heart's desire. In spite of all the power we acquire, all the conquest we achieve, all the glory we attain, all the wealth we amass, all the love and esteem we win and enjoy, a discontent pursues our step, as if there were something more, something else--we know not what--that had to be discovered and possessed. This discontent is so universal, so patient, so persistent, that even the most confirmed pleasure-worshipper cannot deny it. All life struggles in quest of something that will give it eternal satisfaction and perfect fulfillment. Everywhere there is this thirst, give it what name you will. It is this that assures a perennial flow of force for a ceaseless advance and adventure.<sup>1</sup> Solomon says the same thing in the Bible in fewer words: The eye is never full of seeing and the ear is never full of hearing.

If we apply these observations to everyday life, we shall find that they are true. Let us ask ourselves if we are not always aiming for the absolute, an absolute of health and joy, an absolute love. No man wants his joy broken by grief or his health by disease. Even the athletic team strives for an absolutely victorious season without the loss of a single game. In the game of life it is the same. We seek its prolongation in some way and not its extinction. We seek a life that is more than a fleeting moment on a spinning globe, more than a little life ended with a sleep. The life that we seek is absolute, immortal. Man is not satisfied to die and make an end. For this reason his heart and the various religious systems assure him of an immortal life. He wants his existence to be an absolute existence. He will not rest until he understands the mystery of creation and the riddle of the universe.

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<sup>1</sup> Rishabhchand, *In the Mother's Light Part 2*, (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Press, 1951, pp. 123-24).

It is this quality which brings man nearest to God. For God is the absolute of all absolutes. Of all the absolutes that man seeks the Divine is the highest. For God is ineffable, indefinable, and His glories are always fresh, novel and growing. He is absolute in increasing joy as He is in illimitable power. It is for this reason that material things may pall on you. But he who learns to look within to the Spirit always finds the new, the fresh, the adventuresome, the intense interest, and the more and more joyful and loving. He cannot be bored, apathetic, or disinterested because the limitless vistas of the eternal stretch forth within and above him in their infinite beauties. Life is real, and the absolute for which it yearns is real, and the absolute is the Divine.

One philosopher said that "Man can be divided into four categories from the standpoint of a goal in life." The first category consists of those who give little or no thought to the question we are discussing, and this category includes the great majority of mankind. These live only from day to day wrapped up in the pleasures, pain, and pursuits of the moment. Their interest is not so much the ultimate aim of life as it is their busy concern with supplying their immediate needs and pleasures, attaining their successes and overcoming their failures if they can. This is not to say that there are not to be found in this category of humanity many beautiful and noble traits, sacrifice, courage, loyalty, friendship, devotion, sympathy and love. Among them are the unknown and the unsung, like the villager of whom the poet Gray wrote in his *Elegy In a Country Church Yard*, "A village Hampden who with dauntless breast withstood the petty tyrant of his fields. But such people enjoy their pleasures and bear their burdens without probing deeply or at all into the meaning or aim of life."

The second group is composed of those who begin to be aware of the need for an aim in human life, but do not know what it is or have not found it. This group lives much like the first category. But at least they have made a beginning. They begin to ask questions, they have become aware that a mere desultory or aimless wondering is not their purpose here. They begin to see that without an objective they will encounter dead ends, heart-breaking detours, and wasted travel on the road of life. They seek a deeper understanding of their lives than the famous lines in Omar Khayyam's Rubaiyat, "What without asking whither hurried hence?" Omar is referring here to that which spiritual philosophy considers the fundamental questions of the Soul--who am I, whence have I come, wither am I going,--all of which have to do with the aim of life.

The third category consists of those who have begun to have some distant vision of the goal and have started to beat their way toward it, some faster than others according to individual stages of development and qualities of persistence. In this category are those who rise above their own egoistic affairs and become interested in justice and righteousness for the entire human race. They take on a devotion of life. No longer wound up in personal matters only, they are able to possess a sympathy and love for mankind. This broadening extends to all noble cultural patterns.

Such people want to bring an end to war, to inaugurate necessary reforms in human conditions, to preserve and extend liberty and justice for all. Life for them is centered around the ideals of the good, beautiful, and true like those who studied in Plato's Academy. Some in this category, deeply affected by the sorrows of mankind which they despair of solving, retreat from life and enter into a personal union with God. Thus merged with the Divine they seek a personal salvation for themselves leaving

the world as it is. But personal salvation alone, or apart from life is not the aim of life. Certainly it was not the aim of Jesus, Buddha, Krishna, Mohammed, Aurobindo or other spiritual seers. The aim of human life to them was not directed toward themselves alone but for the salvation of all humankind.

The fourth category includes those who seek the ultimate divine perfection of humanity. They seek to fulfill the words of Jesus, "Be ye therefore perfect even as your Father in Heaven is perfect." They seek an end to all divisions, oppositions, and schisms between man and man, between spirit and matter, religion and science, between the individual and society, between liberty and order. They reject the temptation to which those in the third group succumb, which is to limit themselves to certain social improvements or to withdraw into some personal ecstatic union with God. Those in this fourth and highest category are resolved that the world shall not remain as they found it, but shall become what it is destined to be, the Kingdom of God, peace, love, and purity on earth. To those in this category God's work is not finished until that transpires. God allows the evolution of all that is necessary to bring about harmony and world order in the end.

No man should be reason of misguided religious beliefs fail to perform his duties on earth, as a man among men. He must be able to stand the test of life. He must learn to strengthen and purify the intellectual, emotional, and physical parts of his being, and not to suspend or abrogate their use. On this point a saintly woman wrote the following: "Even he who might have arrived at perfect contemplation in silence and solitude, could only have done so by abstraction of himself; and thus the substance of his body would remain as impure, as imperfect as before, since he would have abandoned it to itself; by a misguided mysticism, by

the attraction of supra-physical splendors, by the egoistic desire of being united with God for its personal satisfaction, he would have turned his back upon the reason for his earthly existence, he would have refused cowardly to accomplish his mission to purify matter...for hastening the earthly transfiguration, for accomplishing God's Divine work."<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps now we can begin to have some insight into the aim of life. We are here to transform ourselves and the earth, to complete God's work in making creation perfect and in his likeness. Thus did Jesus say, "My meat is to do the will of Him who sent me and to finish His task." Let us put ourselves in this fourth category of those who both understand the aim of life and are acting to fulfill it. You will recall that Jesus used the example of four categories in the parable of the sower in the Bible. Let us be, as in this fourth category, the seeds that fall in fertile soil and bring forth a hundred-fold of their fruits.

We have found that the highest aim of life is not the idealistic alone, although ideals are necessary. Nor is it personal salvation, although personal salvation is necessary before we can aid in the salvation of others. It is to bring the Light, Love, Power and Eternality of God into ourselves, into humanity, into the world. It is to realize God in life, not to be the instrument or the channel only, but a Soul of the Great Soul. It is to penetrate the mystery, remove the veil, to attain the absolute, to receive as Jesus said, "the power to become the sons of God." Such is the aim of life and may we dedicate ourselves to fulfilling it in our individual lives and in the life of the world.

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<sup>2</sup> *Prayers and Meditations of the Mother*, June 15, 1913. (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram).