

## Chapter Four

# The Contours of Jewish Moral Life

### Summary

This chapter explores some characteristics of Jewish moral living by examining a single value (justice), virtue (humility), and rule or obligation (honoring parents). The chapter stresses the religious roots of each of these forms of Jewish morality.

*"Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord." (Deuteronomy 6:18)*

*This refers to compromise and conduct beyond the requirements of the law. The intent of this is that initially God had said that you should observe the laws and statutes that He had commanded you. Now God says that, with respect to what He has not commanded, you should likewise take heed to do the right and the good in His eyes, for He loves the good and the right. This is a great matter; for it is impossible to mention in the Torah all of a person's actions toward his neighbors and acquaintances, all of his commercial activity, and all social and political institutions. So, after God had mentioned many of them . . . He continues to say generally that one should do 'the right and the good' in all matters through compromise and conduct beyond the requirements of the law.<sup>1</sup>*

The focus turns now from the very general features of Jewish ethics as described in Chapter Two to a more substantive description of Jewish moral life. Living morally encompasses a great many actions and attitudes and expresses itself in so many aspects of daily life that it would be impossible to offer a complete account of

what it means to live a moral life, Jewish or otherwise. Nonetheless, it is possible to sketch the contours of such a life, to indicate the types of moral demands and goals that characterize a particular system of ethics. In the case of Judaism, it is possible also to explore the ways in which certain characteristic moral attitudes and actions relate to religious beliefs that Jews have held rather consistently across the centuries. Focusing on just a few salient features of Jewish morality makes it possible to see, if only in broad outline, the Jewish moral landscape. With these points of orientation, the reader will be able to understand and contextualize all other aspects of Jewish moral living—what Nachmanides in the preceding quote considered under the heading of "doing the right and the good."

Scholars of ethics have long understood that morality takes many forms and expresses itself in many idioms. Three forms in particular have been identified: values, virtues, and obligations (or rules). Although not every system of ethics contains moral teachings in each of these forms (and certainly not always in equal measure), most systems of ethics offer some combination of values, virtues, and obligations. This introduction to Jewish moral life will therefore explore briefly the distinctions among these categories of moral teachings, as well as the ways in which they intersect.

Moral values are statements of broad principles or moral ideals. They express goals for interpersonal behavior or for society as a whole without necessarily spelling out specific steps that could or should be taken to achieve them. Examples of values include the dictum "Equal Justice under Law" inscribed over the entrance to the United States Supreme Court Building in Washington, D.C., as well as many statements in the Bible (such as "Love your neighbor as yourself" [Leviticus 19:18]) and in rabbinic literature (such as "Be a disciple of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving your fellow creatures and drawing them near to Torah" [Avot 1:12]). Broad moral principles of this type are useful in indicating lofty ideals and helping focus attention on the goals of moral living. Of course, their very generality leaves them open to varying interpretations, for example, of the way in which justice should be actualized in particular situations or of the best way to demonstrate love of your neighbor, or of the proper means to pursue peace. Still, values provide in a rather succinct way a general orientation to moral life.

Virtues describe the inner qualities of the moral person, the character traits that he or she should develop to live a proper moral life. Moral systems that focus on virtues understand that moral life depends as much (or more) on inner attitude as on outward behavior. Western moral tradition commonly promotes the virtues of honesty, prudence, courage, and generosity, among others. Classical Judaic statements of virtues include these: "Better a patient spirit than a haughty spirit. Don't let your spirit be quickly vexed, for vexation abides in the breasts of fools" (Ecclesiastes 7:8-9). "Who is wise? Those who learn from everyone. . . . Who is mighty? Those who conquer their evil impulse. . . . Who is rich? Those who are content with their portion. . . . Who is honored? Those who honor all people."<sup>2</sup> Statements of virtue are useful in helping to shape our dispositions and intentions, in focusing on the kind of person we are and not only, or primarily, on the deeds we perform. Because virtues are, in a sense, embodied values, they are often communicated through the stories of heroes

and saints. Within Jewish tradition, stories of Abraham's hospitality and Moses' humility, as well as of the compassion and sensitivity of the *tzaddik* (the righteous individual) represent vehicles for the transmission of specific virtues. Of course, virtues, like values, tend to be open ended, difficult to pin down with precision and difficult (if not impossible) to enforce.

Obligations or rules are perhaps the most common form of moral teaching. More specific than values and more easily enforceable than virtues, rules provide detailed directives for how to behave morally in concrete situations (sometimes accompanied by specific sanctions for failing to do so). Jewish tradition is full of moral rules, for much of Jewish ethics falls within the scope of Jewish law. Classical examples of moral rules include, "You shall neither side with the mighty to do wrong. . . . nor shall you show deference to a poor man in his dispute. When you encounter your enemy's ox or ass wandering, you must take it back to him. . . . Do not take bribes. . . . You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 23:2-9). The power of rules lies in their specificity and in their focus on what can be observed publicly and so regulated. By the same token, their usefulness is limited because no finite set of rules can provide guidance in every situation that demands moral discernment.

Within any moral system, values, virtues, and rules may overlap. What is expressed in one text as a rule may be reformulated in another as a principle or value and in yet another as a virtue. The case of justice illustrates the point. Although some Jewish sources make broad pronouncements about justice (value statements), others offer stories about the traits of a just person (virtue), and still others provide specific directives about how justice should be administered (rules). So you should not be misled into thinking that values, virtues, and rules are mutually exclusive categories of moral teaching. Rather, the point is to observe that ethical systems such as Judaism speak in different idioms and formulate moral teaching in different ways. To appreciate the full scope of the moral life, then, you do well to pay attention to each of these spheres. The remainder of this chapter examines a characteristic Jewish value, virtue, and a rule in the hope that this will enable you to appreciate the scope of Jewish moral life.

## A JEWISH VALUE: JUSTICE

*Rabban Simeon ben Gamaliel said: The world stands on three things—on truth, on justice, and on peace, as it is said, "Execute truth, justice, and peace within your gates." (Zechariah. 8:16)<sup>3</sup>*

*These three are really one: when justice is done, truth is achieved, and peace is established.<sup>4</sup>*

Understanding the value of justice in Judaism, requires an exploration of two sets of questions. First, how is justice defined? What does it demand of people? How do people distinguish justice from injustice? Second, what role does justice play within the

worldview of classical Judaism? What is the significance of dispensing it or failing to do so? What meaning does this moral value hold within this religious community? The first set of questions concerns the *definitive character* of justice, that is, the particular behaviors that constitute a just society; the second concerns the *theology* or *significance* of justice, that is, the beliefs that underlie this concept and the broader context in which they have meaning. In Judaism, the practice of justice cannot be divorced from its theology; for every moral concept is defined and concretized in ways that reflect its conceptual underpinnings and deeper meaning. This brief explanation of justice as a Jewish value will be clearer if practice is discussed separately from theory; that is, the substantive definition of justice from the role it plays in Judaism's theological system.

Moral philosophers have differentiated several different senses of justice. *Distributive justice* concerns the distribution of goods within a society. The gap between the rich and the poor or unequal distributions of power among groups raise questions of distributive justice. *Retributive justice* concerns the ways in which society responds to behavior that threatens its well-being or stability. Thus, the sanctions imposed on those who commit felonies or misdemeanors (and even the way in which those categories are defined) are issues of retributive justice. Finally, *procedural justice* concerns the systems established for dispensing either distributive or retributive justice. In both the Jewish and U.S. systems of government, courts are the primary vehicles of procedural justice. The rules governing the operation of those courts, including the criteria employed for selecting judges, are part of a system of procedural justice. In the discussion that follows, I consider all three dimensions of justice in their classical Jewish expressions.

Judaism has a great deal to say about each of these aspects of justice, and here it will be possible to provide only an overview with some representative examples of classical Jewish views. Before discussing each of these three aspects of justice, I begin with a summary of some general perspectives on justice that remain central to Jewish tradition throughout most of its history and that reflect distinctively Jewish religious beliefs and values.<sup>5</sup>

Justice is part of a family of concepts that includes peace, mercy, compassion, and righteousness (*tzedakah*) as well as law (*mispat, din*). In many texts, the terms for righteousness and law are used interchangeably and either might be equated with justice. At other times, sources distinguish between the law proper and a more expansive sense of justice (which might be called "equity") or between justice and mercy (as when God is portrayed as moving from the throne of justice to that of mercy).<sup>6</sup> Some of these distinctions will be taken up in the following chapter, which investigates certain theoretical issues within Jewish ethics. For now, it is sufficient to note simply that, within Judaism, justice is a complex concept with connections to several related concepts and with deep religious roots.

### The Anatomy of Justice

The essence of justice lies in distinguishing between right and wrong, in giving people what they deserve, and in treating all similar cases similarly. It is about

discriminating between behavior that is positive and negative, desirable and undesirable, and responding accordingly. This is evident even in the early stories of Genesis, as when Abraham confronts God about the decision to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah:

Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly? (Genesis 18:25)

This passage is formulated as an indictment of God, yet on a deeper level it assumes that justice represents a common ground on which humans and God stand together. Like God, people have the capacity to differentiate those deserving of punishment from those who are innocent. Justice establishes a set of standards to which God is subject, just as humans are. Indeed, earlier in the same story, the biblical text refers to Abraham and his descendants being chosen "to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right" (Genesis 18:19). However the particular demands of justice are defined, it is clear at least that justice is essential to the identity of both God and the Jewish people.

**Distributive Justice.** Within the Hebrew Bible the most prevalent and best known principle of distributive justice (the fair distribution of power and resources in society) is the demand to show special concern for the disadvantaged within society: the stranger, orphan, widow, and poor. The reason consistently offered for this striking principle is that "you were strangers in land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:20, 23:9; Leviticus 19:34; Deuteronomy 10:19). For the biblical authors (and arguably for the rabbis of later generations), this is the most important social lesson to be drawn from the Israelites' experience of slavery. Having once been marginalized and disenfranchised within another society, they understood the moral imperative of supporting those within their own society who lacked power and status.

More than historical experience is behind the demand to care for the marginalized, however. Just as God was on the side of the Israelites in their liberation from Egyptian slavery, God will surely support others' struggle for freedom and dignity. As contemporary Latin American liberation theologians have rightly observed, God is on the side of the oppressed.<sup>7</sup> The biblical text (Deuteronomy 10:17-19) is explicit about this:

For the Lord your God is God supreme and Lord supreme, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who shows no favor and takes no bribe, but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

God takes special concern for those in the world who are at the bottom of the social hierarchy. So, in modeling our behavior on God's, people also must reach out to assist those who are disadvantaged. This is what underlies the specific rule that on the Sabbath, which is observed in remembrance of the exodus from Egypt (Deuteronomy 5:15), all members of the household must rest, including aliens and

slaves. On the day devoted to acknowledging God's dominion over all creation, all people must be treated equally, independent of their social status.

This same concern to rectify social and economic inequalities is reflected in the biblical legislation about the Sabbatical and jubilee years.

When you enter the land that I assign to you, the land shall observe a Sabbath of the Lord. Six years you may sow your field and six years the land shall have a sabbath and gather in the yield. But in the seventh year the land shall have a Sabbath of complete rest, a Sabbath of the Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. . . . But you may eat whatever the land during its Sabbath will produce—you, your male and female slaves, the hired and bound laborers who live with you and your cattle and the beasts in your land may eat all its yield. . . . (Leviticus 25:2-4, 6-7).

[In the fiftieth year] you shall proclaim release throughout the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: each of you shall return to his holding and each of you shall return to his family. . . . But the land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me. Throughout the land that you hold, you must provide for the redemption of the land (Leviticus 25:10-11, 23-24).

Every seventh year you shall practice remission of debts. This shall be the nature of the remission: every creditor shall remit the due that he claims from his fellow; he shall not dun his fellow or kinsman, for the remission proclaimed is of the Lord. You may dun the foreigner; but you must remit whatever is due you from your kinsmen (Deuteronomy 15:1-3).

These sweeping social rules prevent economic disparities from becoming permanent features of Israelite society. To the biblical authors, the fact that such disparities arise may be inevitable; nonetheless, they must be remedied. There can be no permanent underclass, for every seventh year, those burdened by debt and those who have sold themselves into slavery are released. Similarly, the land, which was the major source of wealth in ancient Israelite society, could be bought and sold only temporarily, not held by anyone in perpetuity.

Just as the seventh day marks a time when all are freed from the burden of work, the seventh year marks a time when all are freed from the burden of poverty. All that people do and all that they own ultimately derives from God and belongs to them only provisionally. When people act on this principle by redistributing wealth and privilege within society, they make it plain that the social order in this world must reflect the reality that people are all equally God's creatures, all equally strangers on God's earth. The power that they exercise over one another must be restricted, or it would betray the power that God exercises over all of them equally.

If this principle were extended, it would prohibit private ownership of property entirely,<sup>8</sup> but neither biblical nor rabbinic sources demand such a radical renunciation of human prerogative. The underlying principle would seem to be that it is natural and proper for people to own the fruit of their own labor. But this ownership is never absolute, for everything of value ultimately derives from God. What people own, then, must be used as God intends, and it is God's intention that the world be

a place in which no group can use its power, either political or economic, to oppress another. God intends people to use what they have to free the captives, feed the poor, clothe the naked, and care for those disadvantaged members of society who do not yet share in God's wealth.

**Retributive Justice.** The most characteristic feature of retributive justice (the principles governing punishment for those who violate social norms) within the biblical corpus is the *lex taliones*, which establishes the principle of parity between crime and punishment (Leviticus 24:19–20; see also Exodus 21:23–5, Deuteronomy 19:21):

If anyone maims his fellow, as he has done so shall it be done to him: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The injury he inflicted on another shall be inflicted on him.

By contemporary standards, the rule may seem harsh, even barbaric, but within the biblical world, it represented a major advance over existing penal codes.<sup>9</sup> In particular, it established that the punishment cannot be more severe than the original crime (which is to say, there are no punitive damages in cases involving bodily injury). Moreover, the social status of the victim and of the perpetrator is irrelevant for purposes of punishment. The eye of the nobleman and that of the slave are equally valuable, and those who inflict injury, no matter who they are, receive the same punishment.

Behind these rules is the principle that people bear ultimate responsibility for the harm they do to others. Violence cannot go unpunished, for this would only encourage criminals to prey on innocent victims. Thus, while it is sometimes claimed that the biblical law of retribution multiplies violence within a society, its intent is precisely the opposite. When acts of violence are met with proportional, fair, and swift punishment, further acts of violence are discouraged. In fact, the *lex taliones* is nothing other than the essential principle of retributive justice spelled out in graphic detail.

Still, the rabbis of a later time, obviously bothered by the ethic of responding to violence with violence, reinterpreted the rule to apply only to monetary compensation. The point, they said, was that the person who is blinded in one eye is entitled to compensation for the value of that eye, and so too for all similar injuries. This, of course, shifts the emphasis away from inflicting physical punishment and toward making the victim "whole," monetarily, if not bodily.

The biblical view of retributive justice is exemplified most powerfully in the law of capital punishment, which is prescribed not only for murder but also for kidnapping and even striking or cursing a parent (Exodus 21:12–17). On a practical level, these rules aim to deter socially unacceptable behavior. On a more theoretical level, however, they reflect a view that antisocial behavior threatens the holiness of Israelite society. Throughout the Deuteronomic legislation are stipulations of capital punishment followed by the refrain, "thus you will sweep out evil from your midst" (Deuteronomy 13:6, 17:7, 19:19, 21:21, 22:21–24, 24:7). The holy community must

not harbor or tolerate those who flagrantly violate basic communal norms, especially those who would divert people from God's commandments. Because such people defile the holiness of this community, they threaten the very essence of Israel's relationship with God. Seen from this perspective, capital punishment is a form of social purification, a way of ensuring that God's people remains morally pure and holy.

Again, the rabbis significantly modified the law regarding capital punishment. They placed numerous procedural restrictions on capital cases, especially with respect to the testimony of the two witnesses, which had to agree even in the smallest detail in order to obtain a conviction.<sup>10</sup> The practical effect of these rules was to make carrying out the death sentence virtually impossible. Yet, even as they implicitly expressed their reservations about capital punishment, the rabbis affirmed the principle that those who violate certain basic norms forfeit their right to life. For lesser crimes, compensation must be paid, even if retribution would not take place, for retributive justice to be realized.

**Procedural Justice.** The most basic expression of procedural justice (the procedures governing the proper administration of justice) within the Torah concerns the principle of impartiality: "You shall not render an unfair decision: do not favor the poor or show defence to the rich; judge your neighbor fairly" (Leviticus 19:15). At first glance, this rule appears to stand in striking contrast to the principle of distributive justice that we must give special consideration to the needs of the poor, noted earlier. On closer examination, though, a common concern for equality underlies both sets of rules. Equality of treatment is essential to a just society. The law must not be bent to favor any group within society, for doing so would compromise the sense of impartiality that is the very essence of procedural justice. The very same idea lies behind the symbol of a blindfolded woman holding the scales of justice; if justice is not blind, it is not justice. The very same concern for equality, when applied to the distribution of wealth, requires that those with a disproportionate share of society's goods share them with those at the bottom of the social scale.

Procedural justice can be threatened in a number of ways, but particularly when the judge's self-interest compromises his or her objectivity. The biblical authors had this in mind when they forbade absolutely the accepting of bribes, "for bribes blind the eyes of the discerning and upset the plea of the just" (Deuteronomy 16:19). Judges cannot dispense justice if they permit anything to bias their assessment of the evidence before them. The very role of the judge demands subordinating self-interest to the interest of producing a just result. This is especially so since, as I discuss later, justice is a divine quality, the judge serving in the role of God's surrogate on earth. To permit, much less encourage, miscarriages of justice is to subvert God's own work in the world.

### Theology of Justice

Thus far I have examined the requirements of justice—concern for the socially disadvantaged, punishment that is proportional to the offense, and impartiality. I turn now to the underlying meaning and purpose of justice. Why is it so important to

pursue justice? What is gained, according to Jewish tradition, when justice is achieved? The answers to these questions lie in basic theological beliefs that animate all Jewish reflection on justice.

The fundamental belief that human beings are created in God's image implies both that each individual has intrinsic value and that all human life is of equal value to God. As the eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant was to argue, human beings must always be treated as ends in themselves, never as means to the ends of others.<sup>11</sup> In Jewish thought, the rationale for this principle is theological: treating people as means to an end violates their intrinsic nature as creatures of God. Conversely, treating people with respect, as justice demands, is tantamount to honoring the divine image within all human beings. One tannaitic rabbi expressed this principle in declaring that the most important verse in the Torah is Genesis 5:1: "This is the record of Adam's line—When God created man, God made him in the likeness of God." To mistreat another is to mistreat the image of God.<sup>12</sup> This elevates justice from a social good, something necessary for the smooth functioning of society, to a matter of divine significance.

Insofar as law is essential to the pursuit of justice, justice is a divine good in another sense. Throughout Jewish tradition, law is understood as the primary expression of God's will, revealed to Israel at Mt. Sinai. To observe God's laws—including those related to creating and sustaining a just world—is to make God's presence manifest in the world. As the rabbis put it,

Every time a judge issues a judgment of true veracity, this causes the Divine Presence to abide in Israel, as it is said, "God stands in the congregation of God when judgment is determined in awareness of God." (Psalm 82:1),<sup>13</sup> and

The Holy One said to Israel: My children, as you live, I am exalted because of your intense concern for justice, "The Lord of hosts is exalted by judgment." (Isaiah 5:16)<sup>14</sup>

Doing justice is nothing less than bringing God's presence into the world; failing to do so, conversely, drives God's presence from the world. To pursue justice is to pursue a closer relationship with God; for observing God's law is a form, perhaps the most important form, of communion with God.

Moreover, doing justice is a matter of doing as God does, not only doing what God says. God is frequently depicted as a righteous judge and a model of perfect justice. This is especially evident in the following passages from Psalms:

But the Lord abides forever; God has set up His throne for judgment; it is God who judges the world with righteousness, rules the peoples with equity. (Psalm 9:8-9)

Mighty king, who loves justice, it was You who established equity, You who worked righteous judgment in Jacob. (Psalm 99:4)

Modern readers may find much in God's behavior as portrayed in the Bible that is morally objectionable, such as God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart (Exodus 7:13,22; 8:15; 9:35; 10:20; 14:4), God's command that the Israelites dispossess the Canaanites of their land (Exodus 23:27-30), and that they eradicate the Amalekites

(Deuteronomy 25:17-19). The rabbis were confident, however, that God's primary traits were justice and compassion. In reflecting on the verse "Follow none but the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 13:5), they comment,

What does this mean? Is it possible for a mortal to follow God's presence? The verse means to teach us that we should follow the attributes of the Holy One, praised be God. As God clothes the naked, you should clothe the naked. The Bible teaches that the Holy One visited the sick; you should visit the sick. The Holy One comforted those who mourned; you should comfort those who mourn. The Holy One buried the dead; you should bury the dead.<sup>15</sup>

Acting justly, then, is a matter of emulating God, not only making the world conform more closely to God's will, but each person making himself or herself more fully god-like.

Finally, justice is deeply imbedded in a vision of the messianic culmination of history, that idyllic time when God and, hence, justice reigns. The biblical prophets were especially eloquent in expressing this vision:

I will restore your magistrates as of old, and your counselors as of yore. After that you shall be called city of Righteousness, Faithful City. Zion shall be saved in the judgment; her repentant ones, in the retribution. (Isaiah 1:26-27)

... at this time I have turned and planned to do good to Jerusalem and to the House of Judah. Have no fear! These are the things you are to do. Speak the truth to one another, render true and perfect justice in your gates. And do not contrive evil against one another, and do not love perjury, because all those are things that I hate, declares the Lord. (Zechariah 8:15-17)

I will espouse you forever: I will espouse you with righteousness and justice, and with goodness and mercy, and I will espouse you with faithfulness; then you shall be devoted to the Lord. (Hosea 2:21-22)

Because the goal of human history is to reach that time when God will reign supreme, and since humans know that God is the paradigm of justice, it follows that that time will be one of complete justice on earth. When people execute justice, therefore, they bring the world closer to the fulfillment of that messianic vision.

In conclusion, to fully appreciate the religious significance of justice one need only consider the many ways in which God enters the world: through creation (especially of humankind), through revelation, and through redemptive acts in history. Justice is central to each of these modes of divine influence. Because God created all people, all are entitled to equal respect; moreover, treating people justly is simultaneously honoring the image of God. Because God's greatest gift to Israel is the law, by obeying the law, Jews bring themselves and the world closer to God. The fact that God's redemption of Israel from Egypt is the model of all God's action in history means that God champions the cause of the disenfranchised and marginalized in society. And the final act of redemption, the coming of the messiah, will be, above all, a time of justice for all nations under God's rule.

In the last analysis, Judaism affirms that people and their institutions are meant to actualize God's presence in the world and that executing justice is central to this task. As Rabbah Simeon ben Gamaliel indicated, truth, justice, and peace are

corollaries of one another, for truth is affirmed and peace is established only when justice is done. Pursuing justice, then, is a necessary part of emulating God and bringing God's presence into the world. It is nothing less than the means by which we help create the kingdom of God on earth.

## A JEWISH VIRTUE: HUMILITY

*Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: Humility is greater than all other virtues, for it is said, "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord has anointed me; God has sent me as a herald of joy to the humble" (Isaiah 61:1)—not "to the saintly," but "to the humble." From this you learn that humility is greater than all other virtues.*<sup>16</sup>

Joshua ben Levi's teaching is intriguing, in part because it raises as many questions as it answers. What does humility consist of? How can it be recognized in others? How can it be cultivated within ourselves? Why is humility a virtue at all, much less the most important virtue? Answering these questions requires exploring other teachings about humility, paying special attention to the religious roots of this character trait as Judaism construes it. First, though, it is helpful to consider the nature of humility in general.

We should begin by noting that humility encompasses two quite different but related attitudes. The humble person may (1) think little of himself, believe himself to be of little worth or (2) think of herself not at all, believing that paying attention to herself at all is evidence of a moral failing.<sup>17</sup> A certain tension exists between these two ways of conceiving humility: Those who are humble in the first sense will minimize their own achievements or talents and believe themselves to be flawed in some basic respects, perhaps particularly in their moral character. They will focus attention on their shortcomings and will adopt a (hyper-) critical attitude toward themselves, insisting on the importance of carefully monitoring their own character. By contrast, those who are humble in the second sense will attempt to become invisible to themselves, believing that excessive focus on the self (in extreme cases, any focus on the self at all) is misguided, a distraction from the proper object of one's attention. Here the goal is not to pay more attention to the self and its shortcomings but to ignore the self as much as possible. Jewish authorities have advocated both types of humility over the centuries.

Moreover, those who are humble in the first sense may adopt this attitude in either a general or a specifically moral way. One could be humble about one's natural abilities and accomplishments (for example, a person's artistic talents or athletic prowess or intellectual achievements). To be humble in the moral sphere, on the other hand, would entail minimizing the person's moral worth or righteousness while perhaps accentuating his or her moral failings and misdeeds. It is possible to exhibit humility in one sphere of life but not in another (or in both, or in neither). Jewish sources consider the value of humility in general, as well as in the moral

sphere particularly, although the latter receives the greater share of the rabbis' attention.

Finally, although at first glance they may appear to be similar, humility as these sources describe it should be distinguished from what contemporary psychologists would regard as "low self-esteem." A person's tendency to think little of herself or to hold herself in low esteem may represent a psychological disorder: the lack of a healthy self-image or ego, suggesting a dysfunctional personality. As discussed in Jewish sources, however, humility has little in common with a pathological condition of this sort. Those who exhibit humility do so not primarily because they believe themselves to be less worthy of honor than others but because they believe that this is the appropriate posture for *all* people. They do not suffer from a damaged sense of self; rather, they possess a different sense of what a "self" is or ought to be for themselves and others.

With these preliminary observations about humility, I return to the original questions. Why is humility, in any or all of the senses just delineated, a desirable trait to cultivate? What, after all, is objectionable about being proud of one's accomplishments, including moral deeds? What is the value of minimizing (or ignoring) a person's self-worth and so emphasizing the person's lowliness and shortcomings? What makes humility a virtue, let alone the most important virtue, as ben Levi would have it?

### The Roots of Humility

The answers to these questions lie in the particular religious perspective of the self and its place in the world that Judaism offers. The central issue is the nature and source of the individual's value and worth. Pride in oneself<sup>18</sup> is based on two assumptions: (1) a person's traits (e.g., generosity), talents (e.g., athletic ability) or accomplishments (e.g., success in business) add to her importance or worth and (2) a person can take credit for possessing or achieving these things. Jewish moralists have generally challenged one or both of these assumptions on religious grounds.

Consider the following teaching:

Our masters taught: Adam was created on the eve of the Sabbath [the last of all created beings]. Why? So that if one should become excessively proud, [God might] say, "The gnat preceded you in the order of creation."<sup>19</sup>

The rabbis here recognize the intrinsic connection between the way humans think of themselves and the place they believe they occupy in the universe. The antidote to pride, these sages suggest, is to remember one's humble place in the created order. Pondering the end of human life as well as its beginning likewise reinforces an attitude of humility. "Rabbi Lviras of Yavneh said: Be exceedingly humble, for a person's hope is the worm [i.e., the grave]."<sup>20</sup> Remembering that life ends in oblivion and that bodies decompose in the earth naturally gives a more realistic and humble appraisal of a person's own significance.