

*A Teacher's Book  
for*

**Jewish ethics,  
philosophy and  
mysticism**

*The  
second volume  
in*  
THE  
CHAIN OF  
TRADITION  
SERIES



*A Teacher's Book*

*prepared by* BEN EZRA GREEN

*for*

# **Jewish ethics, philosophy and mysticism**

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**Behrman House, Inc.**

PUBLISHERS NEW YORK



## Foreword

THIS BOOK attempts to provide you not with lessons, but with the embryos of lessons. For each chapter of text you will find an introduction, which is in most cases a paraphrased precis of the material, and two or more suggestions for handling the material with your class. Some of these suggestions could consume an entire class period, some deserve only brief treatment; no hard and fast rules have been followed here, just as you cannot follow any hard and fast rules in using this text with your class. How you treat the material depends not only on it, but on you, on your class, and even on your mood the day you teach it. No teacher's guide can tell you what to emphasize, which discussions to prolong, which to cut short, what to omit; that must come out of your estimate of what you and the class can most benefit from. There is nothing obligatory here, nothing that must be learned; but there is everything to learn.

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## On gratitude

*How our benefactor's self-interest in doing good should affect our gratitude to him.*

### SUMMARY OF CHAPTER

Bahya wants to show that one owes gratitude to one's benefactor, whether it is another man, or God. If the benefactor is human, one's debt is not less even if the man intends to do good out of his own self-interest.

Bahya begins by noting that the good must be intentionally done for the doer to be called a benefactor. But what is behind the intention? He divides all human acts of good into five classes; if we accept his division, then anything he shows true of all five classes will be true of all human acts of good. Considering each class in turn, Bahya demonstrates that the intention to do good actually stems from the benefactor's own self-interest, but proves from Scripture that gratitude is nevertheless due. How much more gratitude, he says, does man then owe the One Benefactor who cannot act out of self-interest!

### SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The president of a small corporation quit smoking, felt better, and decided to offer a substantial cash bonus to employees for every month in which they refrained from smoking. Many of them quit smoking as a consequence, and their efficiency on the job increased considerably, raising the corporation's profits. Do they owe thanks to their employer for health and for money? Does he owe thanks to them for the increased profits?

Which of Bahya's categories might the employer's action fall under? What about the employees' increased efficiency? Was it intentional? Does it make any difference?

2. Notice the distinction Bahya makes between intention and act. If good is intended, it deserves thanks, even if something prevents its being done. If good is accidental, it deserves no thanks, even though it is actually done. Yet the good intention may flow from the self-interest of him who has it. This means that one who purposely does good out of self-interest is owed thanks, whereas one who does good unintentionally, *and therefore without self-interest*, does not deserve thanks. Does this make sense?

Have the class provide examples, and discuss them. Why does Bahya make these distinctions? Suppose the distinction between intent and accident were not made? Why not be grateful for all good? What does being grateful entail?

3. Help the class sketch the structure of Baḥya's argument. Why does he divide human acts of good into five classes? Suppose he treated them all together: would he say anything substantially different? Would what he says be more or less convincing? Why?

Can we accept Baḥya's division? Are there acts which fall under none of his categories? Under more than one? Have the class find examples. If there are acts which fall under more than one category, does that invalidate Baḥya's argument? No, but it means that Baḥya has simplified (successfully). Motives may be complex, then. What do we mean by motive? Does Baḥya distinguish different levels of motives? (see 2)

4. Two business competitors, traveling in different compartments on a train which runs from Pinsk to Minsk, meet in the corridor. After the usual amenities, Hersh asks Greenberg, "And where are you going?"

"To Pukhavitch, to visit my cousin Mendel," replies Greenberg. "And you?"

"Also to Pukhavitch," answers Hersh as they part.

Sure enough, when he gets off the train at Pukhavitch Greenberg spies Hersh lugging his baggage along the platform. He runs up to Hersh and says triumphantly, "Aha! Caught you, you liar!"

Taken aback, Hersh asks, "What can you possibly mean by calling me a liar? I said I was getting off at Pukhavitch, like you, and here I am."

Says Greenberg, "Don't play dumb with me! What do you take me for, an idiot, a man of no comprehension? I knew that when you told me you were also getting off at Pukhavitch you wanted me to think you were actually going on to Minsk, whereas really, *you deceiver*, you *intended* to go to Pukhavitch all along. You didn't fool me for a minute!"

Why does Baḥya spend so much time talking about motives? In the end, how much attention are we supposed to pay to motives, according to Baḥya?

5. Why does Baḥya bring God in at all? Of human acts, he reasons that they are all motivated by self-interest, but what else does he say of them that might invalidate their worthiness to be praised? He says that a man who does good is not the source of the good done, in any case; he is merely using the good which God, who is the source of all good, has given him. If God is the source of all good, why not speak first of Him? Why consider human acts first? What is Baḥya most interested in proving? That we owe gratitude to man? To God? Is he equally interested in both?

Can Baḥya's focus tell us anything about the focus of ethics? Does ethics ignore God? Distinguish and define "focus" and "context." What is the context of ethics?

6. Dr. Jacobs comments that ethics is concerned with the proper resolution of conflicting urges. If, as Baḥya has it, all human action is out of self-interest, out of "egotistic instinct," how may we decide what urge is worthiest of being followed?

It may well be correct to call Baḥya's view "cynical," but is it necessarily negative? It is hopeless and destructive? The view that all actions are self-interested could lead to despair and throwing up of the hands (why?); does it here? Does Baḥya equate self-interest with "evil urges"? Is there necessarily a contradiction between Baḥya's view and Dr. Jacobs' specification of the concern of ethics with the conflict between man's good and evil urges? For Baḥya, what would evil be? If motive is an insufficient criterion (but see 2 and 3 for different levels of motive), is the Law sufficient? Refer to Dr. Jacobs' introductions to the book and to this section.

In much of the next nine chapters we will be concerned, implicitly or explicitly, with these questions; there is no need (nor any possibility, perhaps) for final answers here. Sufficient to arouse serious thought.

7. Can it be argued that, rather than being cynical, Baḥya's view is very positive and accepting of mankind? How accepting are we of other men? Would we, before reading what Baḥya says, have been

inclined to think that the rich man who does good in order to assure himself a place in Heaven is deserving of thanks? Or the man who does good in order to improve his reputation in the world? Or who *intends* to do good to improve his reputation? Can we even accept what Baḥya says *after* having read it?

What about a politician who makes promises in order to obtain election, but who is unable to carry them out once elected? Who promises civil rights for all, the end of poverty, the end of war? Many make such promises sincerely, yet are unable to fulfill them.

What about a parent who promises a treat, say a trip or a movie, and is later unable to fulfill the promise? The child may be disappointed and bitter; what does Baḥya say? Suppose the parent continually does this, always with the best intentions; is he still due thanks?

8. We may find it difficult to accept Baḥya's contention that all good is done out of self-interest. Consider the case of the father and the son: is the son (or daughter) "a part of the father"? What about doing what may seem like harm: a father says, "This hurts me more than it hurts you!" when he administers punishment; is this the truth?

Baḥya's argument here reduces to the contention that the father and the son are really one person, so that in doing his son good, the father is only doing himself good. Is this such an unusual contention? John Donne says (in quite another context, to be sure): No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the mainland. We say, "We're all in the same boat, brother." Hillel asks: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am not for others, who am I? If not now, when?" What is the relation between Hillel's first and second questions?

In support of full rights for all, we often say: No man is safe if all are not safe. What does this mean?

9. Perhaps hardest of all to accept is Baḥya's assertion that he who does good to alleviate another's misery because that misery pains him is actually acting out of self-interest, namely, in order to alleviate his own pain. If this category were not dealt with, then the rich man could slip through Baḥya's net by saying that he is not motivated by the thought of Heaven, but by compassion. What does "com-*passion*" mean? It has the same roots (although in a different language) as "sym-*pathy*." What are the roots?

What is an altruistic urge? How can we know what urge motivates a man?

10. Why should we obey the Law at all, much less the ethical teachings that amplify it? What does Scripture tell us? (See especially Deuteronomy 28, or *The Rabbis' Bible*, Volume I, Chapter 27.)

## On right and wrong

*The difference between not wanting to do wrong and the exercise of self-control.*

### SUMMARY OF CHAPTER

On the question of whether the man is better who refrains from evil naturally and because he does not desire it, or who desires it but refrains through self-control, Maimonides sets up two seemingly opposed views. One holds that the second man's desire is a fault of character, and that therefore the first man is superior. The other holds that the second man's self-control and the pain he suffers by exercising it are virtues, and that he is therefore superior to the first man.

To reconcile these views, Maimonides proposes a distinction between two sorts of moral criteria, statutes and precepts. Statutes test man's obedience to God, which must be forged by a struggle of will, by self-control; since what they forbid is not intrinsically evil, it is no fault of character to desire it and, indeed, desiring it makes the necessary struggle possible. Precepts forbid those acts which all men agree are intrinsically evil; the good man has no difficulty refraining from them. Both views are true, but they apply differently.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Dr. Jacobs proposes a counter-example to Maimonides' argument: we might well feel that the man who refrains from stealing, although sorely tempted by poverty, is superior to him who has no need to steal at all; yet Maimonides would have to say otherwise. A variation on the same theme is the case of the poor student who fears he will fail unless he cheats, but who refrains from cheating. Notice, of course, that the question is not whether he *should* cheat or the other man *should* steal; it is assumed that they should not. It is whether the two unfortunates are superior or inferior to those fortunate enough not to be tempted.

How might these cases contradict Maimonides' distinction? What is that distinction? What sort of evil is involved here, and how does it differ from the other sort of evil from which Maimonides would distinguish it? According to Maimonides' argument, this sort of temptation is a fault of character; does this seem so from the way the cases are stated? Might it be so, or might the temptation have another root than character?

We would have less difficulty if presented with the case of a man who has all he needs to maintain his existence, but who is tempted by greed to steal. Why? What defines a "need"? Are there needs other than physical ones which may be quite as strong? What do we mean when we say we "need a rest," "need to watch t.v.," "need a friend"?

If this sort of temptation is a result of circumstance rather than character, then can we remove all temptation by removing all need? Can we make ourselves good by arranging our lives so that we will never be tempted? Can we know what character a man has if his circumstances do not test him? Can a rich man be greedy, a bright student want to cheat?

2. Why does Maimonides distinguish between two sorts of commandments, between two sorts of evil? How does his argument depend on the distinction? Suppose we could not accept the distinction; could we accept the argument? What is the argument? Why do you suppose Maimonides wants to preserve both views?

3. Returning to the two students of 1, consider them for a moment apart from the question of cheating. Suppose the poor student works very hard, and manages to do as well as the bright student, who breezes by without effort. Who is the better student? Does our judgment change if the poor student works hard but simply cannot do quite as well as his bright friend?

Who is the better athlete, one who has to run hard to make a hundred yards in eight seconds, or one who can do it loping? Who'll do better at the quarter mile?

Do these questions, these judgments, differ in any way from judgments about who is the better person? How? Is there a difference in the way the word "good" is used in the following phrases: "a good student"; "a good person"? What is it? Can you make a case for there being no qualitative difference at all?

4. One sort of evil is acknowledged to be so by all men; another is arbitrarily defined, and meant to test our obedience to God. Does the division make sense? Are there decisions we must make that will fall under neither category? Are there things about which men honestly disagree, but which have little to do with obedience to God and which no partisan will admit could be decided arbitrarily? If so, how are we to guide ourselves in deciding? Are these then not moral decisions, or ethical decisions at all?

Everyone agrees that poverty and discrimination should be eradicated. Should Federal money be used to fill immediate needs by giving all who cannot now earn it an annual income above a certain minimum, or should it be used to develop training and job placement programs, or to expand opportunities for higher education? Is there a moral issue in whether or not it is right to give people an annual income? What arguments do opponents to the "negative income tax" use?

Is it possible to eliminate discrimination, or to secure full rights for all by setting up two societies side by side, black and white? Suppose that it is possible (is the supposition one about ethics? was the question a question of ethics? what sort of question was it?), would it be right to do so, good to do so? Where do such questions fit in Maimonides' scheme?

5. What differences exist among a good action, a good person, a good painting, a good party, a good hamburger? Define esthetics and distinguish it from ethics. Does defining it differently make it different? Keats says: "Beauty is truth, and truth beauty—that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." Is this beautiful or true?

6. Maimonides' argument concerning statutes rests on two legs: not only is it not a fault of character to desire what is forbidden by them, but it is a positive necessity, since, as Dr. Jacobs says it, "obedience implies a struggle!" The first leg may stand up, but what about the second? Why must obedience imply a struggle? Can your class think of any analogy that will make the matter clearer? Can they *show* that the analogy applies?

Don't all men agree that obedience to God is a virtue, that disobedience is evil? If so, then is it not after all a fault of character to desire to disobey statutes? Shouldn't it be pleasurable, and not painful to obey them?

Why do we praise sincerity in people? Isn't it insincere to act contrary to one's nature, a sort of lie? Suppose you meet a person whom you dislike; should you make a cutting remark, or put on a false air of pleasantness? Aren't you damned no matter which way you jump? How can we distinguish hypocrisy from self-control? I am self-controlled, but you are hypocritical!

What is the purpose of the commandments Maimonides calls statutes? Do we still believe that all of them are obligatory? Why or why not? Suppose that we no longer think them obligatory, does anything take their place? What *can* take their place?

7. In support of his argument, Maimonides quotes: "According to the amount of pain involved in doing good so is the reward." What would Bahya say to this? The "saintly man," according to the other point of view, "not only *does* good but *wishes* to do so and takes pleasure in so doing." How would Bahya comment? Is there any common ground between Bahya and Maimonides?

8. Besides the distinction between the two sorts of evil, which Maimonides makes explicitly, there is an implicit difference between the two views which he presents here, a difference in assumptions and focus. The first point of view focuses on character in judging between two men, the second focuses on conflict and difficulty. Help the class discover this difference by examining closely the words in which each point of view is expressed.

Do these differences in focus lead us to understand differences in assumptions? What does each view assume, to be as broad as possible, about the nature of man? Of God? Can a difference in assumptions be related to the difference in subject (precepts vs. statutes) which has already been enunciated? Is there any way of reconciling the differences in assumptions?

Carry each point of view to an absurdity; let your class propose examples as exaggerated as they can imagine. What does the view that pain and struggle are virtuous imply if carried out strictly and universally? The view that character is paramount? Does Maimonides guard against absurdity in any way? Are actions, for instance, unimportant as long as character is good?

9. Are we always capable of self-control? Are mentally ill people sinful? If not, how do you distinguish a criminal from a sick person? Is a criminal sinful? Does he have a faulty character?

Although we may not be mentally ill, doesn't it sometimes happen that we are so enraged, or so possessed by an emotion, that we simply *cannot* control ourselves? Does this show faulty character? Are we temporarily mentally ill?

What is the legal definition of insanity? Has it changed in recent years, or is it changing? What does a plea of "temporary insanity" mean?

## How the good Jew should behave

*How one may develop a well-balanced character.*

### SUMMARY OF CHAPTER

Starting with an analogy to physical sickness, Maimonides posits that evil inclinations are symptoms of spiritual disease, which, like any other, can be cured. In most traits of character the middle way is best, and the sickness consists of an excess in one direction; it may be cured by adopting the opposite extreme until one's character returns naturally to the middle ground.

In some traits the middle ground is unsatisfactory. Maimonides discusses the desirability of humility, even temper, silence, and sincerity. But for most, he says, closing with the example of serenity as the mean between melancholy and mania, the middle way is best.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Consider the inequality between races that still exists in America, theory to the contrary. One extreme holds that black men should never be given equal economic and political rights; another that equality must be an immediate reality. The "moderate" position is that the black man should be patient, taking his rights slowly, as they are ceded to him by the rest of society; he may have to wait generations, generations during which he is treated as less than an equal, but he should not "make a stir."

Although he admits exceptions, Maimonides says that in most things the middle way is best. Is that true here? Can it be moral to ask (or force) another human being, or another group of human beings, to live without full dignity in the name of "the middle way"?

Another example: many college students (and perhaps many less vocal younger students, too) believe that the way they are being educated is wrong, that in one way or another (there is much disagreement about how) their schooling must be made more relevant to their present and future lives. There are adults who agree, but who counsel against sweeping change, who say that moderation must be the by-word. There are also adults, and many students, who disagree. Suppose that one is a member of the first group of students: does it make sense to settle for anything less than instant change? If one believes that the present situation is all wrong, isn't it immoral not to try to change it as quickly as possible?

We live in a time of social change, and of debate over that change. The foregoing examples by

no means explore the possible quandaries fully, but they at least lead to one of the general questions that may be asked: in a time of rapid and radical upheaval, is the middle ground a safe or a moral place to inhabit? Is serenity, which Maimonides discusses in his last paragraph, a valuable quality to have when there is much to be done in the world, or is continual indignation more appropriate?

We must note, of course, that Maimonides' own time was anything but quiescent. In his youth he and his family were driven from Cordova (Spain) to Fez (North Africa) to Palestine, only after years coming to rest in the city of Fostat in Egypt. We may not charge him with an ignorance of upheaval. Yet he advocates serenity and the middle way. We have to examine what the middle way means to Maimonides, and only then try to decide if it is appropriate as an ethical criterion. Suppose the middle way means the human average: can there be more than one middle way? Does Maimonides mean that if we live in Sodom we should be only moderately evil? What can the middle way mean, then?

Suppose that, in the first example given above, we decide that the true middle way is that represented by the advocates of immediate equality: what are the extremes? If the middle way is not merely the human average, how do we find the extremes to determine the middle? What is supposed to guide us?

Serenity is a more difficult question. Must it mean passivity? Is there any clue in what Maimonides says about temper?

2. Suppose that one could act properly without adopting the middle way in character; would one, according to Maimonides, be immoral? Is his advice legal? Is he telling us what the Law would have us do? What *is* he telling us? Distinguish goals and means.

Why is there a need for such advice as this, supposing it to be good advice? Why doesn't the Law cover these grounds? Why is ethics necessary?

Is Maimonides' advice about the middle way meant to be applied in all circumstances, then? Is there any discernable difference between those traits which he enumerates as falling under this criterion, and those in which an excess is best? Which is primary, the Law or the middle way? Return to the examples and general question posed in 1 and discuss from this point of view.

If the criterion of the middle way is so restricted in application, of what use is it? Dr. Jacobs notes that later Jewish thinkers say that the Jew should not be moderately, but exceedingly generous. Yet we are also taught that we should not give more than one-fifth of our earnings to charity. Considering a man with wife and children, why should this be taught? What other applications might there be?

3. Maimonides speaks of correcting evil inclinations by "treating" character. What is the assumption here? Are other assumptions possible? What relation does the choice of assumption have to the controversy about self-control that Maimonides deals with in the previous selection?

What possibility is assumed in detailing a "cure" for spiritual disease? Is the possibility self-evident? Do we always act as if it is? How are ex-convicts treated when they try to get a job, to return to society? How do we treat a friend who we think has wronged us?

At one time the insane were lowered into a pit full of wriggling snakes on the premise that anything that would drive a sane man crazy might drive a crazy man sane. Does Maimonides' prescription apply to all sorts of "spiritual" illness? Is it valuable nonetheless?

4. In his discussion of anger, Maimonides notes that "the sages of old say that anyone who flies into a rage is like an idolator." What can this mean? Toward the end of the selection, he quotes the sages as saying: "Jealousy, lust and ambition put a man out of this world." Compare this to an earlier statement, again about anger: ". . . they said further that whoever loses his temper loses his wisdom if he is a sage and if he is a prophet his prophetic capacity departs from him." In what sense are these statements literally true? Are they more than literally true?

## On humility

*The root of all the other virtues.*

### SUMMARY OF CHAPTER

Nahmanides first explores the antecedents and consequences of humility: if we always speak softly, we will avoid anger and be able to embrace humility; realizing our humble station, we will fear God, and therefore refrain from sin, winning for ourselves heavenly bliss even on earth.

Moreover, man has no justification for pride, since it is God's alone; all of man's riches, his honor, and his wisdom originate not with him, but with God. "Therefore be humble and God will lift you up."

We become humble by speaking quietly and lowering our gaze before all, by acting always as befits one who stands in the presence of his Master, who is God. We must also examine our deeds, constantly repenting and exhorting ourselves to good, and purify our thoughts in prayer. "You will then be worthy of all the good that is stored up for the righteous."

### SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. A group of disciples sat, as their master dozed, quietly extolling his virtues to the newest disciple. "Such a memory our Rabbi has. . .," began one.

"A memory!" interrupted another, "of course he has a memory! Of such a great man one expects a great memory, but it is his learning that is truly outstanding."

"Learning," said a third, "we all have a bit of learning. But our Rabbi has more than mere memory or learning: it is his wisdom that distinguishes him from all others."

The debate went on for quite a while, each disciple proposing his own choice of the Rabbi's chief virtue. Finally, the sage, opening one eye and gazing about, asked slowly, "And about my modesty you say nothing?"

What is humility, then? We respect our parents, we respect our teachers, we respect those who are in positions of authority over us. Although we hold that all men are equal, we mean this in certain specific ways: all men should have the same political rights, all men should have an even chance for a job. But we do not mean that all are alike in all ways. Obviously, some are taller and some shorter, some brighter and some duller, some in higher positions and some in lower. One of the marks of a man's position in society (the local society of his place of employment, the society of his friends, of his community, of his family, and larger societies) is who shows re-

spect to him and to whom he has to show respect: a refined version of the “pecking order,” which you might explain.

How does what Nahmanides says tally with this description? The marks of humility which he describes—do they fit into it? Surely, they are the marks of respect we commonly give or receive. But what can it mean to act this way toward all?

What is the purpose of humility according to Nahmanides? Besides respecting all men, he enumerates other necessary steps to attaining humility, self-examination for instance. What connection does this have with humility, and how does that connection distinguish what Nahmanides means and what we have described above?

According to our description, acting humble to all should result in automatic demotion to the bottom of the pecking order, almost by definition. Does Nahmanides agree? What sort of order of men does he see, then, if not the one we have described? What are the ordering principles behind each sort of order? What assumptions about man (and God) determine these principles? Does Nahmanides assume, for instance, that material success is one of the purposes of man’s life? Other sorts of success?

2. If there is a marked contradiction between the way things are and the way Nahmanides would have them be on the level of social order, what about on a personal level? How easy would we find it to follow Nahmanides’ advice? It is not frivolous to ask whether we wouldn’t simply be laughed at if we attempted to carry it out in full. Would someone who acted according to this advice be dismissed as having “an inferiority complex”? Suppose you are in a discussion with your friends, perhaps about the merits of various ballplayers, or books, or a civic issue, and you make a statement which is hotly challenged: what is your natural reaction? Does it make sense to try to change a “natural reaction”?

The advice given here may or may not be an extreme case, but we are constantly confronted with ideals of behavior which we know we do not even remotely approach: we are told not to envy or to hate, but who has not wanted what another has, and who has never held a grudge? How should we receive such difficult prescriptions? One way is to agree solemnly when they are given, and then try to forget about them as quickly as possible, to repeat them whenever called upon to do so, all the while feeling we can never fulfill them. After all, aren’t they super-human? Wouldn’t you have to be (cf. “inferiority complex”) a *nut* to really try to live that way?

The forbidding thing about all of this is the feeling of impotence and failure engendered by an all-or-nothing attitude. If we expect ourselves to succeed entirely, we must quickly give up. How can humility help?

3. Trace the chain of traits and ultimate rewards which Nahmanides delineates in his first few paragraphs. Can we agree with the way it is stated? Nahmanides says that once we train ourselves to *act* humble, we will realize our humble place, we will *feel* humble. Wouldn’t we be likely to say it the other way around? What method of training ourselves in humility does Nahmanides recommend later on? Does it begin with realizing our humble place, or does it begin with action? Obviously, with action: “. . .all your words should be spoken gently.” Why? What’s the reasoning behind connecting action and feeling in this fashion, rather than *vice versa*, as we would probably say it?

Does Nahmanides share this reasoning with Maimonides, judging by the prescriptions Maimonides gives in the previous selection? What notion of human behavior lies behind this reasoning? Behind the reasoning that *we* would probably use? Which is more optimistic? What is easier to change, action or feeling? Have members of the class propose examples from their own experience, if possible.

4. Toward the beginning, Nahmanides says that if you become humble “you will reflect upon whence you came and whither you are going, and that even in your lifetime you are a worm and

a maggot, how much more so after your death.” Yet, shortly after that: “When you conduct yourself in humility, being shy before men, in awe of God and fearful of sin, the Divine Presence and its glory will rest upon you and you will live a life of heavenly bliss even on earth.” How can these two statements be reconciled? Are they talking about the same thing? This is a very difficult question to answer, a difficult point to understand, but well worth at least proposing and trying to discuss. Are we meant to have two different attitudes toward ourselves? In different contexts, or in the same context? Is each overstated, or is one overstated, and does the truth lie somewhere between the two, on a common ground, or can we actually hold both at once?

A closely related question, and one perhaps easier to discuss, is: how can we act with dignity, which all men are supposed to have (if only to honor the fact that they are made in the image of God), and at the same time act with humility? Can we be joyful and repentant, another question might run, at the same time?

## On charity

*Some of the limits to giving charity.*

### SUMMARY OF CHAPTER

Whoever gives charity, that is, gives some pleasure or something of value to one who is in need, ensures for himself a rich reward in Paradise. But the charity (and its reward) is measured according to the means of the giver, and not by absolute standards. By presenting various examples, Judah He-Hasid shows that there must be limits both to giving and to receiving charity. Moreover, as he illustrates with the case of the dinner guest, charity must be wed to consideration: it is inconsiderate and uncharitable to impose what one considers a pleasure on someone who does not so consider it.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Not only, implies Judah, is it unnecessary to give charity beyond one's means: it is positively wrong either to do so or to compel another to do so. The first part is perhaps easy to understand; the second deserves illustration.

Suppose one of your friends is a big spender, not on himself, but on others. Whenever a group of you has a coke and a hamburger together, he always wants to, and does, pick up the tab for everyone else. He always has a pocket full of change, and is the kind of fellow who, when someone asks to borrow a dime, always gives a quarter and later refuses to be repaid. He occasionally goes on gift-buying sprees, distributing books and records to all his friends. Whatever money happens to fall his way he immediately and beneficently distributes, and thus rarely has enough actually to meet his own needs. As part of his allowance, his parents give him money for clothes, but he almost never has enough left over for his own lunches at school, much less a new pair of pants.

Moreover, so saintly is this fellow that his charity is not limited to money alone: he is always willing to do a good turn, whether he can spare the time or not. He is fairly bright, so he spends many hours helping others with their schoolwork, consequently lacking the time to do as well as he could in his own studies.

Most of your friends appreciate his favors and gifts, but some are suspicious and try to avoid them if they can. Why? True, he may be doing himself some injury, but it is for the good of others, is it not? Are we not commanded to be exceedingly generous, and is he not precisely so? It is

not as if he had a family to support, and was begging them by giving his money away: the only one he's hurting is himself.

Why should we question his actions? Should we question his motives? Can you describe him more fully and more deeply than he has been described, on the basis of what has been said about the way he acts? What sort of feelings does he have about himself and his place in your group? Why does he act as he does?

Judah He-Hasid says that the giving of charity ensures a reward in Paradise; what sort of reward is this fellow after? Is there a connection, then, between exceeding reasonable limits in giving charity, and exceeding the proper motives for giving? How concerned is our fellow with giving pleasure to his friends?

2. Can you relate this example to the case of the guest who refused, despite his host's constant urgings, to clean his plate? What notion of proper behavior, of the way to honor his host, to give him pleasure, does the guest have? Giving the host pleasure is, after all (as Judah reminds us in the last paragraph of this selection), a kind of charity, perhaps a return for the charity of the meal. How considerate is the guest of his host in this form of charity? Is he really trying to give his host pleasure, or rather to satisfy his own standard of how to give pleasure, whether it is reasonable or not to apply this standard to the case at hand, whether his host is given pleasure by his behavior or not? What sort of limit is he exceeding?

Another parallel is to the case of Reuven, Simeon, and Levi. We know that Reuven acts properly in refusing to support both men, but doesn't Simeon act properly in at least trying to persuade Reuven to support both him and Levi? Isn't he merely trying indirectly to give Levi charity himself? Why does Judah quote against him ". . .it shall be counted a curse to him"? What can the quote, as a whole, mean?

What are Simeon's motives in trying to secure charity for Levi? As things work out, can he afford to secure that charity? Does he have anything in common with the subject of our first example, the spendthrift friend?

3. On a more abstract level, all of what Judah says exemplifies a difficulty which is constant in the endeavor to live rightly, the difficulty of balance. We are commanded to be generous, but we are also commanded to preserve our families and ourselves. We are commanded to be polite, but we are also commanded not to waste food unnecessarily. We are commanded to be truthful, but we are also commanded not to shame others, so that, in Judah's first example, if the guests would be ashamed to accept money spent on them from the community's charity fund, it would be better not to tell them the truth. The Law tells us whether an action is wrong or right, but daily life is not simple: more than one commandment usually bears on any one decision. We need ethics, among other reasons, to help us think how best to resolve what seem like conflicts between choices which separately might present no problems to us.

Your students have lived long enough to know, perhaps without ever having stated it explicitly to themselves, that life is full of such conflicts, and that doing the right thing is rarely a simple matter, even when not complicated by the additional conflict between what one desires and what one knows is right. It is frequently difficult to know what is right.

Suppose that one's school operates under an honor system. One sees an acquaintance cheating on an exam. Honesty, and one's obligation under the honor system, compels that the acquaintance's behavior be reported. Kindness demands that he be spared, or merely warned. What is right to do? Is it easy to decide? Does it depend on the circumstances? What other things have to be taken into account? Under what circumstances would it be easier to make the choice?

A clear-cut answer may be impossible, even if all the circumstances are known. Sometimes one must acknowledge that it is *impossible* to be sure of what is right. Moral decisions are rarely simple; that is why we bother to talk about them.

4. Judah says that the charity we give is judged in relation to our means. He even goes so far as to say: "If a poor man gives a small coin to another poor man it is better than when a rich man gives many coins." Better in whose terms? Which gift is more useful to the receiver? He might certainly appreciate the poor man's gift more, but which gift will do him more good? By what standards, by whose standards, is charity to be judged? What assumptions about charity lie behind the criterion that Judah sets up?

Suppose that there was no reward in Paradise promised for the giving of charity: would giving charity still be an obligation? Would it still be good? For whom? Why?