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Honor Thy Father and Mother -  
Ethical Responsibility in Jewish  
Law and Ethics

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# I The Significance of Filial Responsibility

The fifth statement of the Decalogue commands, "Honor thy father and mother, that thy days be long upon the land which the Lord thy God gives thee." The responsibility of children to parents has ever been central to the Jewish ethos: its very inclusion in the Revelation at Sinai testifies to its significance, as does its strategic place in the Ten Commandments—it is the first of the commands directed to man as social being. And since that crucial defining moment, the thread of filial piety has been woven firmly into the tapestry of Jewish life.

Why is it assigned so central a role, and why has Jewish tradition consistently stressed its virtue and preciousness? Alternately: what are the sources of parental authority? What compels the filial response? It is of course true that filial responsibility, the duty of the younger generation to esteem and care for the older, meets a real social need—the physical preservation of the older generation and the transmission of its values. But Judaism does not stress the instrumental role of filial responsibility in conserving society, seeing in *kibbud av* rather a shaping, directing value that contributes to the meaning of life in society.

Jewish reflection upon filial responsibility focused on these dimensions of significance: (a) parents are creators, and the recognition of human creators forms a continuum with the recognition of God the creator; (b) the ethical value of gratitude is first encountered in filial thankfulness towards those who gave one being and sustenance; (c) the structures of authority essential to human life are dependent upon the model of filial piety; (d) filial piety is a "natural" component of the humanity of man and his culture.

## I.

### Parents and God—Creators and Creator

The common biblical metaphor describes God as father, a loving and responsible father who demands and deserves the filial honor and reverence of both the individual and the people. God is father to Israel, whom he creates and redeems; he is father to the widow and orphan.

whom he protects and defends.<sup>1</sup> And when Israel betrays God or ignores Him, He is portrayed as a father despised by his children: "If then I be a father, where is my honor?" demanded Malachi in the name of the Lord.<sup>2</sup> Throughout, God reveals himself in the human image of paternity, an image that carries with it resonances of care and love, and expectations of reverence and service; but the Bible does not suggest that the parent shares in the divine work of creation or that honor rendered a parent implies honor of the ultimate Creator, too.

The first hint at this idea in a Hebrew source may be contained in an ambiguous phrase of Ben-Sira (c. 250 B.C.E.):

He who honors his father will be long of days,  
He who honors his mother bestows it upon God. (3:5)

This may be identical with the later rabbinic teaching that he who honors parents, honors God. But another translation of the Hebrew is possible: "He who honors his mother will be repaid by God"—an interpretation that would constitute an apt parallel to the first half of the sentence. And the statement, moreover, may refer, not to the common creative quality of God and parent, but to the assertion that opens the chapter: "God set the honor of the father upon children, and the law of the mother he strengthened upon children."<sup>3</sup> One acknowledges the authority and imperative of God, then, by honoring parents, as He required. In any case, the structure of these opening chapters of *Ben-Sira* is significant and characteristic: Chapters 1 and 2 interweave the virtues of wisdom and the fear of God, and Chapter 3 follows immediately with its claim for the honor and reverence of parents, apparently second only to the fear of God itself.<sup>4</sup> The Jewish Sibyl, too, described the ideal righteous man as one who "honors the ruler of the world alone, . . . and after him, his parents."<sup>5</sup> This same evaluation is found in Josephus (*fl.* 70 C.E.) as well, while Philo (*fl.* 30 C.E.) says, "Honor . . . next to God thy father and thy mother. . . ."<sup>6</sup>

In talmudic tradition parents share with God the labor of producing life and the grandeur and honor of that achievement. The rabbis call parents "partners" with God in the creation of a man. "There are three partners in a man: God, his father, and his mother."<sup>7</sup> The "partnership" of God and the parent does not point to a dualistic vision of man, with God the creator and possessor of the spiritual soul and parents the creators of the earthly body. Rather, both God and parents work hand-in-hand in the intricate achievement of creating life. God is involved not with the creation of Adam alone but with the creation of each human being—each man is wondrously formed in the womb by God.

This idea is basically biblical, of course:

Your hands have framed me and fashioned me. . . .  
You have clothed me with skin and flesh,  
And knit me together with bones and sinews.  
You have granted me life. . . .

(Job 10:8-12)

For you have made my inward parts,  
You have knit me together in my mother's womb.  
I will give thanks to you, for  
I am fearfully and wondrously made.

(Psalms 139:13-14)

"Knowledge of biological process in the growth of the embryo did not preclude its ascription to divine activity."<sup>8</sup> The wondrous, that which caused astonishment and reflection, is the work of God; life—in any of its manifestations—must come from God: "If all the people in the world came together to create a single mosquito and give him life, they could not do it."<sup>9</sup> And a *baraita* explains the "partnership" of God and man, thus:

God gives to the child spirit and soul, beauty of features, the powers of sight and hearing and speech and walking, and intelligence. When a man dies, God takes his share and leaves the parents' share before them. The parents cry, . . . saying, "so long as your share was mixed with ours, ours was safe from the worms and maggots, but now that you have taken your share, ours is flung to the worms and maggots."<sup>10</sup>

Here the rabbis do discriminate (for good didactic purposes) between the divine share and the human contribution. God is responsible for the animation of life in all its manifestations—mobility, perception, beauty, vitality (it is interesting to note the rabbinic estimation of beauty as the work of God and as allied to life); man provides the physical basis. The thrust of the teaching of a divine-human partnership was the reflection upon the wonder of creation, in which man acted with God, and the seriousness which this reflection endowed filial responsibilities; for not only does the parent thrill to his partnership, the son must also be in awe of it.

It is stated, [a] "Honor your father and your mother" (Exodus 20:12), and it is also stated, "Honor the Lord with thy substance" (Proverbs 3:9)—Scripture equates the honoring of parents with the honoring of the Lord. It is stated, "You shall fear every man his mother and his father" (Leviticus 19:3), and it is also stated, "You shall fear the Lord" (Deuteronomy 6:13)—Scripture equates the fear of parents with the fear of the Lord. It is stated, "He who curses his father or his mother shall be put to death" (Exodus 21:17), and it is also stated, "Whoever curses his God shall bear his sin. And he who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall be put to death" (Leviticus 24:15–16)—Scripture equates cursing of parents with blasphemy against the Lord. . . . [b] All this is properly so, because the three [God, father, and mother] are partners [in the creation of] a man.

[c] The rabbis taught: There are three partners [in the creation of] a man—the Lord, his father, and his mother. [d] When a man honors his father and his mother, the Lord says, "I reckon it as though I abided with them and they honored me." . . . When a man pains his parents, the Lord says, "I have done wisely not to abide with them, for if I did, they would pain me."<sup>11</sup>

The parallel respect owed parents and God is based, in the final analysis, upon both the biblical verses marshaled so adroitly and the perception of partnership at the close; this perception sensitizes the rabbi to biblical nuances and mobilizes scriptural warrant. With this parallel firmly impressed, the honor and reverence of parents becomes a basis of the Jewish ethos, as weighty as the honor and reverence of God; indeed, God Himself, as it were, is honored or dishonored in man's relationship with his parents: honor shown them is for that reason shown God, for it acknowledges as valid and binding His claim as well.<sup>12</sup> The human relationship takes on added urgency because it is patterned on and reveals the divine; and God is brought close as He is assimilated to the warmth and immediacy of the family. The impact of this teaching on the Jewish filial ethos must not be underestimated; it vigorously animated the successful pedagogy of filial responsibility and haunted its failures. The parent was endowed with archetypal seriousness, and life within the family was charged with near-numinous significance and meaning. "When R. Joseph heard his mother's footsteps he would say, 'Let me rise before the divine presence [*Shekhina*].'"<sup>13</sup>

Though R. Joseph may have risen before his mother because he sensed her personal godliness, it was the parent's sharing the work of

creation with God that provided the thrust for the earlier teachings. Creatorhood demands certain responses of the created. Doubtless, one senses here the ethical motif of gratitude owed to all benefactors and certainly to those who grant life itself. But the response demanded by the rabbis seems to issue from a deeper, more primordial recognition, one in which the physical fact implies a world of value. Creation was the unique act of "He who spoke and the world became"; the Creator is good and great in the act of creating, and all subsequent human creativeness shares in this goodness. When man recognizes his creatureliness before his parent, he recognizes the ultimate creatureliness, and the ultimate Creator, as well.

For by acknowledging parents, man admits that he is not the source of his own being, that he owes existence itself to forces beyond his own personal reality. This can remain a most abstract, intellectual perception, to be sure; it is difficult to jar the certain sensation of self-sufficiency. But the religious consciousness demands the awareness of a greater source of reality beyond. The issue of origins, then, is paradigmatic of the choice between radical self-centeredness and acknowledgment of the Other.

It must be understood, however, that the focus of these teachings is man and not God. The fundamental instruction concerns man's responsibilities toward his parents, not toward God. And though parental worth is derived from their sharing the work of creation with God, the family is not conceived as a symbolic pointer toward the divine and its claim. Rather, parents are joined to God in a value-continuum that endows the family with abiding worth, discloses the full stature of the human situation, and calls forth the response appropriate to that recognition. In medieval thought, however, filial responsibility becomes a more purposive vehicle of the encounter of God and man.

The assertion that parents are creators and share in God's creating acts reveals, too, the rabbis' wonder and astonishment, their enchantment and awe at the creative act. (Similarly, the *berakhot* before sensual experiences reveal their wonder at the world of nature.) In this sense, we ought not to hurry to the theological statement; in their focus on God, the rabbis carried enchantment and awe to their logical and experienced conclusion but did not eliminate them. God was seen in the world because the world revealed Him. The act of paternity, then, was perceived in all its staggering reality. As such, it demanded the divine.

The biblical text that preeminently demonstrated the participation of parents in the divine creative act was "Honor thy father and mother . . ." itself. Clearly, the Lawgiver considered the honoring of par-

ents a most significant and necessary component of the virtuous life. But its presence in the Ten Commandments not only testified to the importance of filial responsibility but also provided a key to its meaning. This was due to the structure of Exodus 20:1-14. The first four of the ten statements (Exodus 20:1-11: the identity and claim of God; the ban on the worship of other gods; the ban on swearing in God's name vainly; the command to keep the Sabbath) all clearly establish and regulate the relation of man and the divine. The last five (Exodus 20:13-14: the bans on murder, adultery, theft, false witness, and covetousness) provide a basis for social morality.<sup>14</sup>

The fifth command, then, stands squarely between the command of the Sabbath, in which God is honored as Creator, and the sixth command, in which the created man is declared inviolate. In the fifth commandment, man is significant, not because he is the created of God (that is the burden of the sixth commandment: "You shall not murder"), but rather because he is the ever-present partner and imitator of God. Whose single cosmic creation (the Sabbath) is celebrated in the fourth commandment. The pivotal statement in the Ten Commandments, the one that moves man from contemplation of the divine to human society, is the fifth. But it is pivotal only because it dwells in both these worlds, and celebrates the transient maker as a reflection of the Creator. This characterization of the command to honor parents as being intimately related to the first four commands, in which the Divinity is directly acknowledged and honored, is reinforced by the tradition that the first five commandments were engraved on one tablet of stone and the last five on the other.<sup>15</sup> Literary structure is a physical reality; and the meaning of parenthood is ever more strongly seen as mediation of the divine creation. Nahmanides (Ramban) articulates this analysis most clearly:

[With the fourth command] God has completed the description of our obligation to the Creator Himself. . . . He now continues by commanding us concerning the created things; and he begins with the father, because the father is like a creator to his progeny, a participant [as it were] in the making, for God is our first father, while our natural father is our last father. . . .  
 . . . Of the ten statements, five deal with the honor due the Creator and five with the good of man. For "honor your father" is the honor of the Lord; it was for His honor that He commanded that one honor one's father, who participated in one's making. . . . And concerning the writing on the tablets itself, it would appear that the first five commandments were written on one tablet, for they relate to

the honor of God, and the last five on the other. . . .<sup>16</sup>

The exegeses of the 1st century Philo and the 13th century Nahmanides are remarkably similar, though Philo derived much from the Hellenic tradition. In his discussion of the Decalogue, Philo expounds the ideological underpinnings of filial piety:

This commandment [of filial piety] He placed on the border-line between the two groups of five. . . . The reason I consider is this: we see that parents by their nature stand on the border-line between the mortal and immortal sides of existence, the mortal because of their kinship with men and other animals through the perishableness of the body; the immortal because the act of generation assimilates them to God, the generator of the All. . . .

Some bolder spirits, glorifying the name of parenthood, say that a father and a mother are in fact gods revealed to sight who copy the Uncreated in His work as the Framer of life. He, they say, is the God or Maker of the world, they of those only whom they have begotten, and how can reverence be rendered to the invisible God by those who show irreverence to the gods who are near at hand and seen by the eye. Parents, in my opinion, are to their children what God is to the world, since just as He achieved existence for the non-existent, so they in imitation of His power, so far as they are capable, immortalize the race.<sup>17</sup>

The Greek origins of some of these sentiments are obvious. Plato had taught that "an ancestor . . . is . . . an image of God more marvelous than any lifeless statue";<sup>18</sup> Aristotle had written that "one should honor one's parents as one does the gods";<sup>19</sup> the idea that parents stood midway between the human and divine was a familiar Stoic idea.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the major motifs of Philo's presentation were part of his Greek heritage, and phrases like "a father and a mother are in fact gods" are totally alien to Jewish tradition. But the Philonic argument in its broader outline does dovetail neatly with the structure of the Ten Commandments, and it is consistent with the familiar talmudic teachings. The claim that "reverence [cannot] be rendered to the invisible God by those who show irreverence to the gods who are near at hand" is substantially identical with the talmudic report of God's reaction to the honoring or the dishonoring of parents: "I reckon it as though I abided with them and they honored me" or "I have done wisely not to abide with them, for if I did, they would pain me."<sup>21</sup>

Yet there still remain the marked differences in conception noted

above, and more subtle ones in stress and texture. For Philo, the attitude of a son toward his parent is a barometer of his attitude toward God, and that—in this passage—is its significance. The rabbis, too, speak of God's seeing His self-reflection in the filial encounter, but it is done in such a way that the son-parent encounter gains depth and seriousness from the father-God analogy. God enters the family circle, rather than the reverse. The rabbis could say, "If Israel neglects God's commands, it is as though they cursed their father and mother,"<sup>22</sup> assuming with the Bible the primal significance of the parental bond and integrating God into that. And this subtle difference points to a more substantive one.

For Philo, God is the creator of "life," "the generator of the All"; parents are to children as "God is to the world." For the rabbis, on the other hand, the emphasis is personalistic throughout: parents are to a man what God is to *him* in a deeper, more radical way. Though the rabbis speak of God as creator, their thought is dominated by the image of God as father; they are held by the biblical metaphor. Philo, however, uses the Greek locution (parents are called "gods") and is true to the value scheme it embodies, so that the parental stature is elevated by depersonalization, beginning with God Whose grandeur lies in His having "achieved existence for the non-existent."<sup>23</sup>

This discrimination is relevant in the inevitable discussion of the possible Greek origins of the Hebraic concept. After all, the complex of ideas we are considering makes its earliest recorded appearance in a Jewish source (Ben-Sira) about 250 B.C.E., certainly late enough for Platonic influence. But both the pervasiveness of the primal biblical metaphor (God-father) and the thoroughly personalistic development of the idea in the Jewish sources suggest that the two cultures pursued roughly parallel courses, without the one necessarily influencing the other.

## II.

### The Ethos of Gratitude

Jewish tradition has long considered gratitude a basic human virtue. One who bestows a kindness deserves thankfulness and loyalty: "Be not stolidly unappreciative, like dumb cattle that offer no word of gratitude."<sup>24</sup> While there is no biblical term for "gratitude," the concept itself undergirds the entire relationship of Israel and God. Israel is covenanted to eternal service of the God Who took her out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage: certainly, gratitude plays a major role in the decision to accept the covenant.<sup>25</sup> The Jew repeats ceaselessly his thanksgiving to the God Who redeemed him, and the Psalms never tire

of thankfully announcing God's mercies to His creation. Conversely, the *kofer* not only denies God and renounces Him but also declares and acts out his *ingratitude*.<sup>26</sup>

In their exposition of the bases of filial responsibility, Jewish thinkers teach that gratitude begins where life itself begins (assuming, of course, the unquestioned virtue of gratitude). Those who give life merit gratitude first; once this ethical impulse is successfully implanted, it will spill over into the total social situation—and will also be directed towards God. If the recognition of creatureliness moved man from awe of God to reverence of his parents, the theme of gratitude would move him contrarily, from the world of society to the divine. Or less schematically, the translation of the feeling of createdness into the language of ethics produces gratitude.

The primacy of gratitude in filial piety is a biblical concept. Deuteronomy 32, where God recounts His travails with His people and warns them of their disastrous end if they forsake Him, is textually and psychologically grounded on the parental role of God; the hurt suffered by God is understandable only when we see God as a father rejected by His sons.

Do you thus requite the Lord,  
O dull and witless people?  
Is not He the Father Who created you,  
Fashioned you and made you endure!

(Deuteronomy 32:6)

Again, God is to be honored, as is one's father, because of the nexus of created and creator. But here this relationship is spoken of as a debt for which one ought to "requite" the Lord, and the heaping up of "created," "fashioned," "made you endure"<sup>27</sup> deepens the claim of gratitude.<sup>28</sup>

This, at any rate, is the reading we find in the *Sifre*. The midrashic comment exposes both the ethical motif implied in filial piety and the all-too-human motivations that often accompany it:

It is similar to one who stands and insults his father. He was told: "Fool! Whom do you insult? Your father?! How much did he labor with you! How much work did he put into you! If you have not honored him in the past, you certainly ought to honor him now, lest he make another his heir." So did Moses say to Israel: "Do you not remember the miracles and wonders God performed for you in Egypt? Imagine the good to be yours in the world to come."<sup>29</sup>

The point of the lesson is, of course, the filial devotion owed by the entire people Israel to God. But the model for this fealty is the gratitude owed the parent for his nurture of the child.<sup>30</sup> Here, God skillfully plays upon all the keys that produce the many strained theme of obedience: the love that surfaces through gratitude, but the hope and fear as well. By telling the people of his care and concern, He subtly reminds them of the similar benefits to be theirs in the future, and suggests the price to be paid for their ingratitude.<sup>31</sup>

It is quite clear, then, that the rabbis found gratitude a normal and compelling reason for filial piety. Thus, the Mishnah taught that a son owed his father service because "he brought him into this world."<sup>32</sup> Later the amoraim noted that:

It is stated . . . [Eduyyot 2:9] in the Mishnah: "A father endows his son with the blessings of beauty, strength, riches, wisdom, and length of years. . . ." . . . and just as the father endows the son with five things, so too is the son obliged in five things: "to feed him and give him drink, to clothe him, put on his shoes for him, and lead him."<sup>33</sup>

The two talmudic teachings are so juxtaposed as to suggest that the filial responsibilities represent compensation for the blessings given by the parent.<sup>34</sup> Naturally, this parallelism is in large part a characteristic pedagogic-literary device; but it does make an ethical claim nonetheless. Occasionally, a rabbinic source will be even more explicit and speak of filial piety as a "debt." Thus we find the following amoraic discussion of the rewards to be bestowed for the faithful implementation of divine commands.

R. Abun said, *If an act which resembles the payment of a debt*<sup>35</sup> merits the promise, "that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee" (Exodus 20:12—Honor thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee), is it not clear that acts that demand financial sacrifice and the risking of one's life merit at least as much?<sup>36</sup> [My italics.]

The rabbinic sources do not, to my knowledge, speak of filial piety as a device for the inculcation of gratitude as an ethical norm. They do, however, expect that the gratitude shown parents will lead one to gratitude toward God. In this they are true to the biblical demand projected in Deuteronomy 32:6— "Do you thus requite the Lord? . . . Is he not

the Father Who created you? . . ." —and elsewhere—"If I am a father, where is the honor that is mine" (Malachi 1:16). The Midrash also speaks of God's desire to be honored as a father:

All . . . I have done for you [God says] was not done so that you should pay my price, but so that you should honor me as sons, and call me father.<sup>37</sup>

Yet here we note the rejection of the metaphor of debt and payment, and the deadly relationship it can create. God does not bestow His blessings upon the people so that they should "pay his price," and even the recognition of His Fatherhood is not to be seen as His "price." It is rather the sense that He Who cares so must be called "Father"; this is a human response, not a duty.

That parenthood compels gratitude is virtually a universal claim in ancient and medieval times, and its presence in Jewish sources need hardly be referred to as non-Jewish influence; certain ideas are the common property of humankind. But the stress placed upon this particular aspect of filial piety by Hellenistic-Jewish writers, the way they formulate the concept, may reflect both classical originals and the attempt to impress the non-Jewish reader.<sup>38</sup> Rarely, of course, is the parental claim to gratitude (or the virtue of gratitude itself, for that matter) rigorously analysed. It is a cultural assumption, similar to many others.

Ben-Sira, in an exposition of man's duties in society, wrote:

Honor your father with all your heart,  
And do not forget the mother who created you.  
Remember that you came from them—  
And what can you give  
like that which they have given you?<sup>39</sup>

And his Alexandrian near-contemporary "Aristaeas" placed the following dialogue in the mouths of Ptolemy Philadelphus and the Jewish sages:

The king asked, "To whom ought we to exhibit gratitude?"  
And he replied, "To our parents continually, for even God has given us a most important commandment with regard the honor due to parents."<sup>40</sup>

Here again, we see the general significance attached to this *mitzvah*: it is a "most important command," and "even God" does not begrudge

this honor of others but commands it. The specific ethical moment stressed by Aristaeas is, however, that of *gratitude*.

The dying Tobit instructs his son in a similar vein:

... do not despise your mother, but honor her all the days of your life; do good to her and do not sadden her. Remember my son that she experienced many dangers on your behalf while you were in her womb.<sup>41</sup>

And Josephus defended the good sense and high ideals embodied in Judaism:

Honor to parents ranks second only to honor to God, and if a son does not respond to the benefits received from them—for the slightest failure in his duty towards them—it [the Law] hands him over to be stoned.<sup>42</sup>

This summary of the law of the wilful and rebellious son (Deuteronomy 21:18–21) is more severe than the biblical original, which provides for the presentation of the son to the elders at the gate and their presumed scrutiny of the parental complaint.<sup>43</sup> The Josephan statement is quite characteristic, though, in its evaluation and understanding of filial piety as a duty second only to the honor of God, and one based upon the idea of gratitude.<sup>44</sup>

The most detailed exposition of the theme of gratitude is found in Philo. Men, it is acknowledged, owe a debt of gratitude to their benefactors, and

... who could be more truly called benefactors than parents in relation to their children? First, they have brought them out of non-existence; then, again, they have held them entitled to nurture and later to education of body and soul, so that they may have not only life, but a good life. They have benefitted the body by means of the gymnasium and the training there given . . . they have done the same for the soul by means of letters and arithmetic and geometry and music and philosophy. . . .<sup>45</sup>

The son who fails to show due respect to his parent is guilty of impiety to God because he insults "those who brought him forth from non-existence to existence and in this were imitators of God." In the "human court," too, he is convicted of "inhumanity":

For to whom else will they show kindness if they despise the closest of their kinsfolk who have bestowed upon them the greatest boons? . . .

Philo continues with a long catalogue of filial gratitude in the natural world, and concludes:

With this example before them may not human beings who take no thought for their parents deservedly hide their faces for shame and revile themselves for their neglect of those whose welfare should necessarily have been their sole or their primary care, and that not so much as givers but as repayers of a due? For children have nothing of their own which does not come from their parents, either bestowed from their own resources or acquired by means which originate from them.

[He] . . . (who) does anything to dishonor his parents, let him die. He is the common and indeed the national enemy of all. For who could find kindness from him who is not kind even to the authors of his life. . . .<sup>46</sup>

Thus Philo presumes a filial debt for both existence and nurture, and stresses the cohesive function of gratitude and its expression in human society.

These same themes were repeated in the Middle Ages. In the medieval categorization of divine imperatives as either *sikhliyyot* ("rational") or *shim'iyot* ("traditional"), filial piety is universally accounted "rational"; a key component of this "rationality" is the virtue of gratitude. Jewish philosophers and moralists identify filial piety as the root and first fruit of gratitude; gratitude itself is a basic social virtue that binds man to man and provides a rational basis for the worship of God.

Sa'adiah Gaon (10th century) mentions the ethical grounding of filial piety:

Furthermore, divine Wisdom forbade fornication in order that men might not become like the beasts with the result that no one would know his father so as to show him reverence in return for having raised him. . . .<sup>47</sup>

Curiously, Sa'adiah does not demand gratitude for the bestowal of being itself but for nurture. (Halakhically, as we shall see, the obligation to revere one's parents is not normally dependent upon their having been adequate to their parental duties.) Ibn Ezra considers both the be-

stowal of being itself and the continuous care given the child to be motives for gratitude: ". . . Reason, which God implanted in the heart of man, demands that he repay with goodness all who have been good to him; now, the child is brought into the world by his parents—and it is they who diligently raised him, and clothed and fed him."<sup>48</sup>

But it is *Sefer ha-Hinnukh* which draws the portrait of this motif in all its amplitude:

Among the bases of this *mitzvah* is the fact that it is proper that a man recognize and bestow kindness upon one who has done him good, and that he not be base, a dissimulator, and one who denies the good done him by another. For that is an evil trait, held most obnoxious both by God and man.

A man should realize that his mother and father are the cause of his being in the world, and therefore it is truly proper that he render them all the honor and do them all the service he can. For they brought him into the world, and they labored greatly on his behalf during his childhood.

Once a man has assimilated this trait, he will ascend by it to recognize the good done him by the Lord, Who is the cause of his being and the cause of the existence of all his forefathers, reaching back to Adam the first. It was He who brought him into the world and provided for his needs all his life; who structured him and perfected his body; who gave him a soul and intelligence—for without the soul with which God graced us, man would be as the brute horse and mule. So a man ought to understand well how much effort is owed the service of the Lord.<sup>49</sup>

Righteousness demands that a man feel gratitude to those who have done him good and respond in kind. Gratitude, again, is considered rational as well as ethical; thus Sa'adiah Gaon states, ". . . logic demands that whoever does something good be compensated . . . by means of thanks if he does not require any reward."<sup>50</sup> Inasmuch as parents bestow upon a man his very existence, they merit the utmost expression of gratefulness. As with Sa'adiah and Ibn Ezra, gratitude to parents is not stimulated by their being the cause of one's existence alone, but is evoked by all their efforts—their diligence and tenderness—during one's childhood. Both one's being and one's nurture and upbringing demand the honor and service of parents. Finally, if parents are seen as worthy of gratitude from their children, how obvious it becomes that God, Father of all men and author in truth of the life bestowed by parents, is worthy of honor and service.<sup>51</sup> Thus, the honor

done parents is a basic instance of a universally acknowledged ethical norm, and guides man (and Israel) to its broader application in social and religious existence.

Perhaps the most provocative exploration of this theme is found in the 11th century R. Bahya. In a discussion of the motives for the service of God, the author of *Hovot ha-Levavot* writes:

. . . it is known<sup>52</sup> that we ought to acknowledge gratefully a kindness done us in proportion to the doer's intention of aiding us. . . . If some good happens to us through the act of someone who had no intention of benefitting us, we owe him no thanks. . . . It is known that the motives of a parent are purely egocentric, for the child is truly a limb of his parent. . . . Do you not see that the parent is more solicitous of the child's welfare—that he be fed and clothed—than of his own? That he tries to prevent any hurt to his child? That he will labor to exhaustion to guarantee the peace and security of his child? All this because of the instinctive feelings of parental love and mercy implanted in man. Nevertheless, both Torah and reason oblige man to serve, honor, and revere his parents . . . though the parent is forced to do his acts of kindness by nature itself; the kindness is truly God's, and the parent is His agent.<sup>53</sup>

R. Bahya is one with the other thinkers cited in this section; he too concludes that gratitude requires that a man honor and revere his parents, and that both revelation and reason so dictate. But he also subjects this obligation to rigorous scrutiny. If gratitude is properly felt in proportion to the absence of egocentric motivation on the part of the doer of the kind deed, R. Bahya asks: "What motivates parents to their many acts of dedication and self-sacrifice? Surely, natural drives and satisfactions. Does a clear understanding of this motivation affect—perhaps even completely sap—the traditional claim that gratitude requires the honor and service of parents?"<sup>54</sup>

The fundamental challenges that can be hurled at any theory of filial gratitude are fairly obvious. No man requests to be born, and life once given is a debatable good. The prospective parents join for mutual pleasure, not to do an act of kindness for their as-yet unconceived offspring; much of subsequent parental nurture and care is stimulated by instinct or compelled by societal expectations.

That man himself is no partner to his own creation was an old source of complaint. Thrust into a hostile life, Job contends (3:11–12; 10:18): "Why did I not from the womb? Why did I not perish at birth? Why did the knees receive me? And wherefore the breasts, that I should

suck? . . . Wherefore hast Thou brought me forth out of the womb?" So too Jeremiah—though for different reasons—(20:14–18): "Cursed be the day wherein I was born; . . . Wherefore came I out of the womb to see labor and sorrow? . . ." Rabbi and visionary alike meditated on the mighty fact that no man is consulted about his coming into being. R. Elazar ha-Kappar used to say, ". . . not of thine own will were you formed, and not of your will will you die. . . ." <sup>55</sup> The same phrase is found in the apocryphal IV Ezra. <sup>56</sup> Curiously, the rabbinic aggadah does not (to my knowledge) conceive of man's complaining to God about the injustice perpetrated upon him. Remember the brief filed by Milton on Adam's behalf?

Did I request thee, Maker, from my Clay  
To mould me Man, did I solicit thee  
From darkness to promote me, or here place  
In this delicious garden?

And Adam knows that his offspring, too, will ask,

Wherefore didst thou beget me? I sought it not. . . . <sup>57</sup>

But Adam does not, in rabbinic aggadah, contend with his Maker on that account. The agony of Job and the anger of Jeremiah were heard in all their anguish, but they did not become part of a world-view, and the rabbis do not labor to disarm man of claims against His maker. God is both just and good. His creation is fair to behold and man is privileged to participate. Life is good. Gratitude is in order. <sup>58</sup> The same is true of the filial relation: rabbinic literature did not raise the question of the filial "debt" having been unknowingly contracted and, in fact, constituting a claim against one's creators rather than a debt owed them!

The Greeks, though, did raise our question, in the context of filial responsibility. Socrates, in urging filial gratitude upon his son Lamprocles, takes great pains to blunt the accusation of parental egocentricity:

Whom, then, can we find receiving greater benefits from any person than children from their parents? Children whom their parents have brought from non-existence into existence, to so view so many beautiful objects, and to share in so many blessings, as the gods grant to men; . . . You do not, surely, suppose that men beget children merely to gratify their passions, since the streets are full, as well as the brothels, of means to allay desire. . . . <sup>59</sup>

Josephus is sufficiently sensitive to the point to imagine that the parents of a budding rebellious son (*ben sorer*) were instructed to tell their child "that they came together in matrimony not for pleasure's sake . . . but that they might have children who should tend their old age and who should receive from them everything that they needed." <sup>60</sup> Indeed, the Midrash is a good deal more realistic on this point: One midrashic explication of the famous verse in Psalms, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity; in sin did my mother conceive me" (51:7), reads, "Even the most pious are partly sinful here. David said—'Did father Jesse really intend to bring me into this world? Why, he had only his own pleasure in mind.' You know this is so, because as soon as they satisfy their desires, he turns away to one side and she turns away to the other side." <sup>61</sup>

R. Bahya admits the weakness of arguing from filial gratitude to filial piety. This is true even though the author of *Hovot ha-Levavot* does not base the major claim for filial gratitude upon the bestowal of existence itself, with the attendant skepticism as to the origins and worth of the gift, but upon parental nurture and concern. But this claim too is met by the more subtle rejoinder: human nature, for which no man can take credit, compels parental benevolence. A mother does not *choose* to love or to care. R. Bahya does not answer the filial question, nor is he compelled to; his purpose is to demonstrate the gratitude owed God, not parents. But he does assume that whatever the cause of parental care, even if it is largely a form of self-love, it merits gratitude.

Thus, despite the talmudic emphasis on parental "creatorhood" as a prime motive for filial piety, many medievals clearly are not impressed with the claim that the production of offspring *per se* merits gratitude. R. Israel ben Joseph Alnakawa (14th century) is explicit on this point:

A man should honor his father and mother more for the moral instruction they gave him, than for their having brought him into this world. For in bringing him into this world, their own pleasure was their motive.

And *Orhot Zaddikim* (anonymous; 15th century) instructed his reader to love his parents by reflecting how "they raised him and took pains with him so as to teach him the ways of the Lord. . . ." <sup>62</sup> Gratitude, when employed by the medievals, is often an uncomfortable bedfellow with procreation, and rests more easily with the debt owed for nurture and education. This medieval insistence, which we have seen implied in Sa'adiah and R. Bahya and explicit in R. Joseph Alnakawa, that parental nurture and care compel filial gratitude and its expression in filial

piety, would certainly displease the halakhic mind; the latter claimed that the fact of paternity alone established the nexus that compelled filial piety, and that this piety was an imperative that did not fluctuate with the merits of specific parents or the experiences encountered within specific relationships.<sup>63</sup>

But too much ought not to be made of this contrast. Though doubtless cognizant of the halakhic standard, the philosophers and moralists also knew that most parents not only bear children but also raise them with diligence, patience, and self-sacrifice. The appeal to filial gratitude was based upon the common experience of humanity, which confirms the devotion of most parents to their children. From this point of view, the ungrateful son is likely to reject not only his parents but the entire complex of sentiments and responsibilities that animate human fellowship and solidarity.

Despite a new vocabulary, the medieval philosophers have not radically reworked the motives for filial responsibility. There are new nuances, as a note of ambivalence toward physical creation *per se* can be heard; there is even a new stress. The ethical virtue of gratitude takes pride of place now and, with the crystallization of the religious and social significances of gratitude, filial responsibility is seen as instrumental in the formation of a healthy society. We shall soon have occasion to see how in their stress on the *political* implications of filial piety, medieval thinkers add a new dimension to the concept. Thus far, however, their emphasis on gratitude has fleshed out the biblical-talmudic tradition but has not radically altered it.

The relevance of gratitude to filial piety has remained a sore point. The late 18th century halakhist and moralist, R. Abraham Danzig, took up the argument again; despite the passion of his statement, he does not demonstrate the "rationality" of filial gratitude but rather its inevitability, its consistency with a world in which man owes gratitude to God, too. Behind it all, is the fear that man will one fine day declare that he owes God nothing, and that perhaps the Lord is the debtor:

May the mouths speaking untruth be stopped. For they say that no gratitude is owed parents, for their immediate motive was self-gratification, and the child was merely created incidentally; that with the child born, the Lord made the nature of parents such that they would raise him, as indeed all animals raise their young, without the young being grateful for this. . . . For men who argue in this way show themselves to be, indeed, brutes, whom God denied reason and understanding. Concerning such opinions, our sages say, "Whoever is ungrateful toward his comrade will, in time, be

ungrateful to God." For according to their thinking, they need not fear or honor God either, since we are His creations, and it is only proper that one be good and merciful to one's creatures. Doubtless those who say these things deny God in their hearts.<sup>64</sup>

### III.

#### Parents and Authority

Master Yu said: Those who in private life behave well toward their parents and elder brothers, in public life seldom show a disposition to resist the authority of their superiors. And as for such men starting a revolution, no instance of it has ever occurred.

(*Analects of Confucius*, I, 2; trans. A. Waley)

Can you deny . . . that you were our child and servant, both you and your ancestors? And if this is so, do you imagine that what is right for us is equally right for you? . . . . You did not have equality of rights with your father . . . to enable you to retaliate. . . . You were not allowed to answer back. . . . Do you expect to have such a license against your country and its laws? . . . . Do you not realize that you are even more bound to respect and placate the anger of your country than your father's anger? That if you cannot persuade your country, you must do whatever it orders. . . . ?

(Plato, *Crito*, 50e-51c)

The family is the building-block of the state, and the habits of docility in the face of authority and veneration of the traditional order and values may be implanted at its hearth. It is true that authoritarian systems, whether politically or religiously totalitarian, educate their charges to reject parental authority in the interests of the higher authority represented by the state or the particular religious values in question. Nonetheless, the claim of the ancients may be profoundly true; the habits of docility in the face of authority, once inculcated at the parental hearth, can be transferred or redirected to their new object—the political or cultural system. Or as Leo Strauss put it, "The first man who uttered a word like 'father' . . . was the first political philosopher."<sup>65a</sup>

Some Jewish exegetes and moralists of the later Middle Ages are not too far from depicting a similar psychology, and applauding it. Maimonides, some centuries before, had spoken in more genial terms of social stability as based upon filial piety. But rabbinic literature does not note

this result of filial piety at all. This, I believe, is due to its halakhic orientation. For despite the seemingly sweeping self-abnegation expected of the child, the claims of parental authority are judiciously winnowed and placed in relation to other aspects of the Jewish value structure. Indeed, filial responsibility replaces parental authority. Some of the medieval thinkers to be cited, then, do not extrapolate the authority function of filial piety from a close reading of the halakhic sources, rather they operate with a more general notion of filial submission.

The claim that social or familial or even personal well-being is advanced by a devotion to filial piety may be made by reference to the Decalogue itself:

Honor your father and your mother, *that you may long endure on the land* which the Lord your God is giving you. [My italics]

"Long endure on the land" clearly suggests social vitality and durability,<sup>65b</sup> and filial piety functions pragmatically in the social context. Nor is it to the point to deny this functional effect by claiming that the verse describes the reward—and implies the punishment—to be bestowed by God; in the Bible, and certainly in a verse such as the one cited, the divine reward is often mediated through natural or historical processes. Morality and history do coincide in biblical theory, much as this may raise questions for both historian and philosopher.

The Mishnah—and Maimonides in his comment upon it—makes a similar claim (in its own idiom, of course):

These are the deeds whose fruits are enjoyed in this world while the principle remains for their doer in the world to come: honoring one's father and mother. . . .<sup>66</sup>

To which Maimonides comments:

. . . all the *mitzvot* fall, at the outset, into one of two categories: some *mitzvot* center on the individual and on his relation with God, such as the commands to wear *zizit* and *t'fillin*, to observe the Sabbath, and to avoid idolatry. Other *mitzvot* have as their aim the establishment of proper relations between men, such as the bans on robbery, fraud, hatred, vengeance, the command to love one another and . . . to honor one's parents and one's teachers, for they are the authors of all that is. . . . If a man has fulfilled those *mitzvot* that aid in the establishment of stable social relationships, he is re-

warded in the world to come for his fulfilling a *mitzvah*, and benefits in this world for his proper behavior with his fellow men, since if he pursues this path and his neighbor behaves similarly, he too will share in the (common) good.

Broadly speaking, then, Maimonides finds in the Mishnah the idea that proper observance of the fifth commandment is essential to the stabilization of society. He similarly designates as *mishpatim* those "*mitzvot* whose reason is apparent, and the worldly benefits of whose fulfillment is known, such as the bans on robbery and murder, and the command to honor one's father and mother."<sup>67</sup>

Specifically, Maimonides considers the family unit the essential basis of social organization. If the fabric of the family is worn and weak (and respect for parents is, for Maimonides, a key component in the healthy family), the cloth of which society—and especially the state—is woven, will disintegrate. Thus he writes, "He who strikes his father or whose mother is killed on account of his great audacity, and because he undermines the constitution of the family, which is the foundation of the state."<sup>68</sup> The dependence of the state upon general acceptance of its authority was uppermost in Maimonides' mind (he is, on the whole, a realist about the importance of authority in human affairs), and authority is first respected or rejected within the family. Plato had written long before that, ". . . when the right regulation of private households within a society is neglected, it is idle to expect the foundations of public law to be secure."<sup>69</sup> And Aristotle understood the guidance of the family by the father to be a form of government,<sup>70</sup> just as Maimonides himself does in his *Treatise on Logic*, where the "government of the household" is treated as a branch of political science.<sup>71</sup>

Later thinkers agree with Maimonides in finding pragmatic implications in the fifth commandment and also discover these implications in the area of "authority." But they focus on the religious tradition as the chief beneficiary rather than on the political structure. Both R. Levi ben Gershom (14th century) and R. Isaac Abarbanel (15th century) stress the significance of filial piety in the preservation of the tradition, a purpose more central to the Jewish experience (certainly the exilic experience) than the preservation of the state.

Thus, R. Levi ben Gershom (Ralbag) states:

. . . this [respect for parents] will ensure that succeeding generations will accept the teachings of their elders, generation after generation, and they will all, therefore, be strong in their observance of the Torah of the Lord. . . . Also, this will bring the home to its pro-

per perfection, which is the first step toward the perfection of the state. And this perfection of the state encourages the agreement among men, so that the young accept the teachings of their masters; this will be a factor in the continued loyalty of Israel to the Torah of the Lord, generation after generation.<sup>72</sup>

So too, though perhaps more directly, with Abarbanel:

The purpose of this *mitzvah* is to raise the importance of the traditions possessed by parents in men's eyes, so that they believe in them and rely upon them. And since the thrust of this command is to create belief in the tradition of earlier generations, . . . without which the Torah could not exist, therefore this command is found among the five divine commands on the first tablet, rather than among the five commands concerned with human relations that are on the second tablet.<sup>73</sup>

Both Ralbag and Abarbanel utilize motifs with which we are already familiar; Ralbag posits the dependence of social stability upon the stability of the home; Abarbanel works with the distinction between the first and last halves of the Decalogue. Their main point, though, is new. Respect for parents is likely to strengthen respect for, and then acceptance of, the tradition they represent; ultimately it will generate an atmosphere of commitment to the authority of the tradition generally. R. Joseph Albo (15th century) summed it up:

The fifth commandment was given to urge respect for the tradition, that is to say, that a person should be drawn after the traditions of the fathers, for this is a main principle of all religions, the existence of which is inconceivable if men do not accept the traditions of the fathers and of the sages of that religion.<sup>74</sup>

And the parable Albo prefixed to this declaration emphasized the crucial nature of tradition for the religions of the West, based as they are on historical claims.

*Kibbud av ve'aim*, as seen by these thinkers, is a conservative force. As the effects of filial piety spill over into the political and ideological spheres, it becomes a force for the perpetuation of structures and traditions rather than their change; for stability rather than for ferment; for acquiescence rather than challenge. It is, of course, quite true that the biblical and rabbinic sources do not project the imperative of filial piety or its details with loyalty to the tradition as its goal. This is a medie-

val formulation. The more basic and less scholastic question is, however, whether filial piety as a phenomenon does not function in this way, and whether *kibbud av* is not a necessary condition for the perpetuation and appropriation of a tradition by new generations. It seems certain that it is. The son is expected to "ask your father—he will inform you" (Deuteronomy 32:7), and the father is expected to "impress these words upon your children" (Deuteronomy 6:7). The filial loyalty of the Rehabites insures the continuity of their heritage (Jeremiah 35); Proverbs constantly uses filial regard and even affection as fulcra by which the younger generation is turned toward the traditional culture, its patterns and values. The rabbis urge faithfulness to custom as "the *minhag* of your fathers," and Josephus speaks in countless places of the entire Oral Law as the "laws of the fathers" (an expression often found in Hellenistic documents). Indeed, it is a truism that for a culture to endure it must be transmitted, and this can occur only between generations bonded by respect. If this is true of culture generally, it is certainly true of Judaism, which invested the tradition borne by the community with unusual potency, and relied, on the whole, on internal rather than external sanctions to insure loyalty to that tradition.

The Midrash makes a related point in its own suggestive way. Joseph, it tells, was about to succumb to the blandishments of his master's wife when "he saw the image of his father and his blood cooled."<sup>75</sup> The midrashic teaching is clear: Joseph rebuffs the first attempt at his seduction by reliance upon the normative structure: "How then could I do this most wicked thing and sin before God?" But conviction waned while ardor waxed, so that the second attempt of Potiphar's wife (and one tradition tells of Joseph's initiating this attempt) does not meet with the normative rebuff. Rather, at the last minute, it is only "the image of his father" that rises before a speechless Joseph and impels him to reject the woman. Centuries later, Nahmanides wrote to his son Solomon, a courtier at the royal court at Castile, urging him to be faithful to Judaism and in particular to avoid sexual relations with non-Jewish women. The father concluded his appeal thus: "My son, at all times remember me, and may my image be before your eyes—let it never depart from you. Do not do anything that you know I hate. Be with me always; observe the *mitzvot* and live."<sup>76</sup> In all this, the paradigmatic role of the father and its ability both to inspire the son and evoke shame in him are stressed.

Biblical and talmudic reality contain a sphere of filial regard whose outer periphery is both wide and blurred. Biblical verses counsel allegiance to paternal commands; rabbinic masters transmit paternal teachings with special loyalty; communities remain bound by "customs of

the fathers," and so on. All these, in varying measure, draw upon echoes of the father-son relationship and its normative timbre. But filial responsibility itself is not mobilized in these instances in any specific and definable way. We do not read that loyalty to custom (*minhag*) or to tradition is an aspect of the fifth commandment. By and large, the community transcends the family; it may draw upon filial metaphors, but these remain peripheral to its claim. Indeed, the identical filial metaphor can sometimes point to the stultification of tradition; the religious performances of some men, we read, are mere "loyalty to the traditions of their fathers"—and are not to be taken with full seriousness!<sup>77</sup>

Thus despite the classic recognitions of the centrality of the filial connection in the survival of a tradition, the medieval stress is new. For the first time we find an explicit focus on the pedagogic role of the parent and a purposive instrumental role assigned filial responsibility. The talmudic rabbis did not discuss *kibbud av* as a factor in the preservation of the tradition, though they were obviously aware, as is the Bible, of the pedagogic and paradigmatic role of parents. Rather, *kibbud av* isolated and stressed the responsibilities inhering in the personal relationship. The articulation of a purposive orientation toward filial piety is a distinctly medieval phenomenon. Maimonides, Albo, Rabbag, and Abarbanel all formulate in a distinctly new way this value of filial piety for a society buffeted by internal stresses and external challenges, all of which press upon the traditionalist the knowledge of the tenuousness of historical survival. Filial reverence is not only reverence for the parent; it is now become reverence for and faith in his values. Filial piety is now the vehicle through which one generation affirms the heritage of its predecessor. Noble as this may sound, it is actually a sign of weakness and insecurity. It is unnecessary in an age of classic faith, and insufficient when that faith declines.

The medieval focus betrays the inner atomization and insecurity—both political and religious—of the Jewish Middle Ages. But it also expresses suggestive insights. Reverence of young for old can exist only when the values of one generation are respected by the other, however subtly and even selectively. Filial reverence and responsibility reflect, in broad social dimensions, a sharing of meaning, though they cannot of themselves create that sharing of meaning. Moreover, if we take these medieval comments in balanced perspective as merely pointing to one of the many factors that are necessary for a tradition to be perpetuated, it is clear that they are accurate: a society in which parents are held in genuine regard is apt to create a similar aura around the tradition to which they testify.

## IV.

## Filial Responsibility and Human Nature

The term "natural" is notoriously difficult to define or even to use intelligently. Biblical and rabbinic Hebrew, for example, do not possess such a word at all.<sup>78</sup> Nonetheless, I think it is fair to state that for both the Bible and the rabbis some form of filial piety, respect, and honor were part of the normal, natural make-up of man. Corresponding to this assertion would be the acknowledgment that filial piety is not a distinctively Jewish trait, or one that without its source in the Sinaitic revelation would be alien to humanity.

The Bible assumes throughout that men naturally revere and honor their fathers. God demands, over and over again, that He be granted the honor of a father, that His will be decisive as a father's ought to be. Biblical imagery draws upon the human situation and demands from man and Israel the wealth of feeling he naturally bestows upon his father:

Children unworthy of Him,  
That crooked and twisted generation—  
Their baseness has played Him false.  
Do you thus requite the Lord,  
O dull and witless people?  
Is not He the father who created you,  
Fashioned you and made you endure?

\* \* \* \*

You neglected the Rock that begot you,  
Forgot the God who brought you forth.  
The Lord saw and was vexed  
And spurned His sons and His daughters.

(Deuteronomy 32:5-6, 18-19)

A son honors his father, and a servant his master;  
If then I be a father, where is my honor?  
And if I be a master, where is my fear?

(Malachi 1:6)

The integration of filial piety into the biblical *humanitas* is seen from

another, different perspective as well. In the following descriptions of man's betrayal of God and himself, filial impiety and dishonor not only violate the will of God as objective Lawgiver and author of "Honor your father and your mother"; filial impiety is denounced as a betrayal of natural decency and a violation of the *humanitas* with which God endowed man.

The godly man is perished out of the earth,  
And the upright man is no more;  
They all lie in wait for blood;  
They hunt every man his brother with a net. . . .

Trust ye not in a friend,  
Put yet not confidence in a familiar friend. . . .  
For the son dishonors the father,  
The daughter rises up against her mother,  
The daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law;  
A man's enemies are the men of his own house.

(Micah 7:2, 5-6)

There is a generation that curse their father,  
And do not bless their mother.  
There is a generation that are pure in their own eyes,  
And yet are not washed from their filthiness. . . .  
There is a generation whose teeth are as swords,  
and their great teeth as knives,  
To devour the poor from off the earth, and the needy  
from among men. . . .

The eye that mocks at his father,  
And despises to obey his mother,  
The ravens of the valley shall pick it out,  
And the young vultures shall eat it.

(Proverbs 30:11-14, 17)

\* \* \* \* \*

The concept of "natural law" is one of the most elusive bequeathed modern man by the ancients. Most scholars claim that "natural" in this phrase is identical with "rational," and it is questionable whether the rabbis ever developed an equivalent concept.<sup>79</sup> Certain biblical commands are designated by the rabbis, however, as *mishpatim* and de-

finied as "commands which, had they not been written in the Torah, would have been worthy [or, would have had] to be written." The element compelling adoption of these *mishpatim* is nowhere spelled out, but some have loosely applied the term "natural law" to this rabbinic structure.<sup>80</sup> Do the rabbis include filial piety as a component of man's "natural" equipment? The material here is much more varied than was the case with the biblical sources, but by and large we must answer our question with a cautious affirmative.

The rabbis do not overpopulate nature with moral instincts. In a rare excursion into animal morality, R. Hiyya and R. Yohanan do state:

" . . . God . . . who teaches us by the beasts of the earth, and through the fowl of heaven makes us wise" (Job 35:10-11). R. Hiyya said: "'by the beasts of the earth'—this is the mule, which kneels [modestly] to urinate; 'through the fowl of heaven makes us wise'—this is the cock, which woos before it mates."

R. Yohanan said, "Had the Torah not been given, we could learn decorousness from the cat [which does not defecate before men, and covers her excrement with earth—Rashi]; respect for the property of others from the ants [ants do not steal from each other—Rashi]; faithfulness from the dove [which is faithful to its mate—Rashi]; and sexual decency from the cock [which woos before it mates]."<sup>81</sup>

"Go to the ant, thou sluggard; Consider her ways and be wise" (Proverbs 6:6) is traditional folk wisdom; R. Yohanan is more cautious: the Torah, he carefully writes, is man's proper pedagogue, not the ant—but the ant, too, possesses exemplary moral traits, as do cocks and cats and doves. Let us praise famous animals. R. Hiyya is more enthusiastic: Man can, and ought indeed to, learn from the animals.

The rabbis do not say, here or elsewhere (an argument from silence, of course), that animals display filial piety; there is no claim for a pattern of filial honor or concern binding all of nature's progeny. The rabbis will say—for hortatory purposes, at least—that both man and animal possess in common the trait of *paternal* concern and care:

When parents who refused to support their children were brought before R. Hisda, he would say: "Make a public announcement, and say, 'The raven cares for its young, but this man does not care for his young.'"<sup>82</sup>

But the Talmud knows that parents display more concern for their chil-

dren than children do for their parents, and it expresses this fact in both anecdote and law:

R. Hunna once found a juicy date which he took and wrapped in his mantle. His son, Rabbah, came and said to him, "I smell the fragrance of a juicy date." He said to him, "My son, there is purity in thee," and gave him the date.

Meanwhile, Rabbah's son, Abbah, came; Rabbah took it and gave it to him. R. Hunna said to Rabbah: "My son, you have gladdened my heart [with your purity] and blunted my teeth [by loving your son more than you love me]." That is what the popular proverb says: "A father's love is for his children; the children's love is for their own children."<sup>83</sup>

In a legal context, the Talmud assumes<sup>84</sup> that a father burglarizing his son would not kill him, while in the reverse situation the son is not expected to behave any differently toward his father than toward a stranger.<sup>85</sup> Whatever human drive toward filial piety does exist, then, is not predicated on a "moral" instinct held in common with other animal life.

The talmudic statement which comes closest to utilizing or drawing upon these natural sentiments is the following tannaitic sermon:

R. Simeon ben Yohai said: "Just as the reward of the honoring of parents and the dispatch of the mother from a nest before the fledglings are taken (Deuteronomy 22:6-7) are equal [both are rewarded with length of days], so is the punishment for their violation similar. As it is written, 'The eye that mocks his father, and despises to heed his mother/ The ravens of the valley shall pick it out, and the young vultures shall eat it' (Proverbs 30:17). The eye which mocks at the honor due parents, and despises the command to dispatch the mother from the nest, should be picked out by the ravens. Let the raven which is cruel pick it out and be denied its enjoyment, for the eagle which is merciful will eat it and enjoy it."<sup>86</sup>

The cruel or merciful son finds his counterpart, it would seem, in the cruel raven or the merciful eagle; these should then serve as models. But the raven and eagle are chosen, not because of their behavior toward their parents, but because of the merciful (or cruel) way *they treat their children*.<sup>87</sup> Once again, the rabbis found no natural model for filial piety. Indeed, a measure of caution is in order even with regard to those rabbinic expressions of an animal-human continuum that we

have noted, expressions which are often taken as evidence of rabbinic "natural law." These statements are uncommon and isolated, more aptly described as occasional sermons than aspects of a philosophy of law. Sermons can disclose much that is serious and basic, of course, but they can also utilize any and every argument likely to improve the listener.

We turn from an examination of rabbinic comment on the animal world and its "morality" to survey the attitude of the rabbis toward "natural" or "universal" human morality and to learn whether filial piety is ever seen as an expression of this "natural" morality.

The rabbis never lose sight of the fact that it is only the reality of a Lawgiver and His Law that constitutes an imperative. But they are free both to affirm the ultimate authority of the Lawgiver and yet speculate about the pragmatic roots of law in human conscience and society. Thus we find the following reflection, one that would later serve the medieval philosophers well:

"My judgments shall ye do, and my statutes shall ye keep to walk therein: I am the Lord your God" (Leviticus 18:4). "My judgments"—these are things which, if they had not been written, would have had to be written, such as idolatry, unchastity, bloodshed, robbery, blasphemy.

"My statutes"—these are things to which Satan and the Gentiles raise objections, such as not eating pig, not wearing linen and woolen together, the law of *halizah* (Deuteronomy 25:5-10), the scapegoat. Should you say, "These are empty things," the Scripture adds, "I am the Lord, I have made decrees; you are not at liberty to criticize them."

(Yoma 67b)

Two categories are set up here, *mishpatim* ("judgments") and *hukkim* ("statutes"); the latter are particularist, they defy reason, or at least utility, and merit obedience by virtue of their divine origin, while the former are "rationally" acceptable and recognizably purposeful. This catalogue resembles the "Seven Commandments of the Sons of Noah," the universal code of morals and religion found in rabbinic literature (which adds to the five *mishpatim* listed above a command to establish law and a ban on eating a limb torn from a living creature), and is also related to the three cardinal sins of talmudic law: idolatry, unchastity, and bloodshed.

The rabbis knew full well that the *mishpatim* were not yet universally observed, nor even universally acknowledged; Roman idolatry alone

testified to that. But in stating that "the Gentiles" could raise no objection to these imperatives and, even more, by affirming that had these imperatives not been written in the Torah they "would have had to be written," they were declaring the reasonableness and necessity of these imperatives and the ability of humanity guided by innate conscience to discover them.<sup>88</sup> It is interesting, then (again, the argument from silence), that filial piety is not listed among these *mishpatim*.<sup>89</sup> Nor is it considered one of the Seven Noahide Commands<sup>90</sup> nor included among those imperatives that some tannaim would add to that list.<sup>91</sup>

But while filial piety is absent from the list of *mishpatim* of which our source says that "were they not written they would have had to be written," one tannaitic comment does declare this imperative to be a command of *mishpat*, as contrasted with *hok*.<sup>92</sup>

"There He made for them a statute and a judgment"—'A statute' [hok], this is the Sabbath; 'a judgment' [*mishpat*], this is filial piety": so said R. Joshua.<sup>93</sup>

It is quite fair to read the *mishpat* of this rabbinic comment as informed by the same "rational" character as the *mishpatim* of the *baraita* cited above; here too there is a contrast with *hok*. For R. Joshua, then, filial piety is a universal, "natural" aspect of human society.

Furthermore, there is at least one tannaitic source that directly treats the Sinaitic pattern of filial piety as an extension of a natural human phenomenon. Rabbi Judah the Prince explains why "father" precedes "mother" in Exodus 20:12 ("Honor your father and your mother . . ."), while the reverse is true in Leviticus 19:3 ("You shall each revere his mother and his father . . ."):

The Creator knew that a son honors his mother more than his father, because she sways him by persuasive words—therefore, the Torah gave precedence to the honor of one's father. . . . The Creator knew that a son fears his father more than his mother, because he teaches him Torah—therefore, the Torah gave precedence to the reverence due one's mother. . . . Where a deficiency exists—He filled it.<sup>94</sup>

Where a deficiency exists, He filled it. The Torah relies on the natural inclination of a son to honor (or serve) his mother and to stand in reverence of his father. This reliance is not total—after all, the honoring of mothers and the reverencing of fathers is commanded! But the existence of the natural inclination in these areas allows the Torah to stress

the honor of fathers and the reverence of mothers, or to draw these out more fully. Certainly, the legislated norm to, say, honor one's mother now possesses a new and different sanction, but there is no indication that the natural posture is rejected or even transcended—quite the contrary. "Where a deficiency exists, He filled it": this is the language of continuum, not of a break. Filial piety is rabbinic *humanitas*, though the rabbis did feel that Judaism deepened and strengthened the normal human ethos.

#### *Are All Parents Equal?*

This passage merits consideration from other points of view as well. The biblical family ethos is generally described as "patriarchal," and this description may have much truth to it.<sup>95</sup> It is crucial, however, that the Bible never commands honor or reverence of the father alone, but always commands filial respect and service of both parents.<sup>96</sup> Indeed, it will sometimes give precedence to the duty owed the mother, as it does in Leviticus 19:3. The Septuagint, however, departs from the Masoretic text at this point, translating, "You shall each revere his father and his mother . . ." (adding extra urgency to the tannaitic exegesis cited above), and Philo, who follows this version, stresses the patriarchal role in instances where the Bible clearly involves both parents.<sup>97</sup> The rabbis, though, did not neglect to stress parental equality.

Other rabbinic teachings reinforce this posture, even where a superficial reading seems to disclose a contradiction:

Everywhere Scripture speaks of the father before the mother. Does the honor due to the father exceed that honor due to his mother? Scripture says, "You shall each revere his mother and his father," to teach that both are equal. But the sages have said: "Everywhere Scripture speaks of the father before the mother because both a man and his mother are bound to honor his father."<sup>98</sup>

The Sages are saying that, practically speaking, the honor and reverence of the father take precedence, and they justify this assertion by the fact that the wife is bidden to honor and revere her husband. (It is revealing that later students of the Talmud found this judgment difficult to maintain; does the Talmud itself not declare that a husband must "honor his wife more than himself"?<sup>99</sup>) But the essential affirmation is the same as that made by R. Judah the Prince: inherently, both father and mother "are equal"; the honor due the father from the son "does not exceed that due the mother." Thus, R. Joshua implies that if the par-

ents were divorced, freeing the wife of all obligations toward her former husband, the son in fact would be left in a quandary as to which of his parents he ought to give preference.<sup>100</sup>

If it would be overly speculative to elicit from the sources cited conflicting tannaitic postures on the issue of the quality of parents, it does seem that different exegeses of the two contrasting verses were given, and that the varying stresses may have had practical correlates. The fact that one verse speaks first of father and the other speaks first of mother means for R. Judah the Prince that each verse speaks of specific aspects of the relationship, and that there is a deliberate correlation between this specificity and the literary structure. The second view (perhaps that of R. Simeon b. Yohai, against which Rabbi Judah the Prince would then be reacting)<sup>101</sup> is that the variation is deliberately arbitrary, and indicates that "both are equal."<sup>102</sup> A third view notes that Scripture generally mentions the father before the mother, and reads this consistent precedence as testimony to the priority of the father—but this is predicated not on the inherent superiority of his claim as a parent but on the dynamics of the marital ethos.

This rejection of patriarchal priority in filial piety, a posture that is in fact biblical, may have had significant impact upon Western mores and civilization generally. It has long been noted that the later Roman Empire significantly humanized its concept of filial piety; in addition to the weakening of the law of *patria potestas* (which gave the father great powers over the person of his son), Roman law elevated the status of the mother and expected the son to give her much the same loyalty proffered his father. This has generally been explained to have been a result of the influence of Christian ethics on Roman law.<sup>103</sup> Inasmuch as the rabbinic discussions represent no revision of the biblical perspective but rather its faithful exposition, it is quite likely that the "newer" laws reflect a much older Jewish ethos. This ethos could well have influenced Roman mores through both the extensive Jewish settlements in the Roman Empire and the Jewish presence in Rome itself, and indirectly through the absorption of Jewish ideals into Christianity. Needless to say, the influence of other cultural spheres, such as the Hellenistic and the Greco-Egyptian, and the possibility of concurrent internal development ought not to be ignored. But if historians do point to the impact of the Christian ethic, it is not unreasonable to pursue the matter on native ground.

Returning to our passage once again, we also note with interest the reason for the son's partiality in the reverence of his father, "because he teaches him Torah." It is not the physical presence of the father that transmits filial awe, nor his familial role in punishment, nor his social

role; rather, it is as the source of normative teaching and value that he is the object of filial reverence. The father evokes this attitude in his son to the degree that he is identified with the transcendent source of values.

We have seen that rabbinic sources sometimes do identify *kibbud av* with the natural patterns of filial piety, and that sometimes they ignore this identification. There is certainly no overwhelming thrust in the former direction; neither is there any overt, positive rejection of it. On balance, though, the idea of "natural patterns" seems to be cautiously and indirectly affirmed.

One may speculate that the reserve of the rabbis in this regard is due to their awareness that feelings toward parents, far from being homogeneous or placid, are indeed complex, ranging from love to hostility and usually embracing some measure of both. Furthermore, the halakhic crystallization of filial piety stressed a pattern of behavior governing the relations of one generation of adults to another generation of adults, and not the duties of minors to their adult parents. This complicates the matter of "feelings" considerably. On both accounts, then, the rabbis preferred to keep their silence—with some exceptions—on the natural roots of *kibbud av*.

#### Philo

The Hellenistic-Jewish writers, Philo preeminent among them, do not display the reserve characteristic of the rabbis. We have already seen the Hellenists' general agreement that gratitude requires that children honor their parents, and their general assumption that gratitude is a natural and rational act. The participation of filial piety in the "law of nature" and, at times, its identification with love of parents are also found in this outlook.

The Fourth Book of Maccabees was written in Alexandria, most probably in the century preceding the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E.<sup>104</sup> In demonstrating the rule of reason (Torah) over nature, the author argues that ". . . we see that wisdom rules over the instincts. Does not the Torah rule over the love of parents, forbidding us to abandon virtue for their sake?"<sup>105</sup> I believe that this refers not to "love of parents" in general but to the fifth commandment, which, the tannaim state, is overridden if the parent commands his child to violate a law of the Torah.<sup>106</sup> If our author does indeed refer to this tannaitic teaching, we can conclude that he considers *kibbud av* a natural (indeed, instinctive!) pattern. Furthermore, the instinct is called "love." Love of par-

ents is also stressed by the author of IV Maccabees in his telling of the epic martyrdom of Hannah and her seven sons. The sons, we are told, "loved their mother so that they obeyed her till their death, and observed the *mitzvot*." So significant is this element that the author hymns it: "O sublime quality, love of parents and fondness of parents. . . ."107 Love of parents here seems to replace the biblical honor of parents, and explicitly functions to stimulate an abiding loyalty to the tradition.

Philo himself touches on our problem in two places; the first bears on the integration of filial piety into the "morality" found in nature, while the second discusses the role of filial love in filial piety.

We have already cited part of Philo's discussion of filial gratitude. A fuller citation is now in place:

. . . let us turn for a lesson in right conduct to the winged tribe that ranges the air. Among the storks, the old birds stay in the nests when they are unable to fly while the children fly, I might almost say, over sea and land, gathering from every quarter provision for the needs of their parents . . . [so the children,] moved by piety and the expectation that the same treatment will be meted to them by their offspring, repay the debt which they may not refuse. . . . And thus, without any teacher but their natural instinct, they gladly give to age the nurture which fostered their youth.

With this example before them, may not human beings, who take no thought for their parents, deservedly hide their faces for shame? . . .108

This selection contains many themes we have noted before: gratitude, the repayment of a debt, and the expectation of children that they, in turn, will be honored. What is new is the assertion that filial piety is so natural as even to be found in the community of beasts. Philo does not say that men possess the same "natural instinct" as do storks; indeed, men are asked to learn—a decidedly "unnatural" activity—from the bird. Yet the overriding fact for Philo is that the conduct of the stork reflects upon human conduct in this area and, if he takes his analogy seriously, must mean that there is a moral community of bird and man.

In a second passage, Philo directly confronts the role of instinct and nature in filial piety. Commenting on the fact that Scripture nowhere commands filial affection, he writes:

. . . it would not be suitable to include in the enactments of a lawgiver an instruction on the duty of filial affection, for nature has

implanted this as an imperative instinct from the very cradle in the souls of those who are thus united by kinship. And therefore he omitted any mention of love for parents because it is learned and taught by instinct and requires no injunction, but did enjoin fear for the sake of those who are in the habit of neglecting their duty. . . .

Filial *affection* is instinctive, and there is no need to command it. Filial *reverence*, on the other hand, is indeed part of the divine instruction to man. This does not mean that filial reverence has no basis in human nature. On the contrary, Philo generally affirms the total agreement of the Torah and nature, maintaining that it is only Torah, whose author is the Creator of nature, that contains a Law consonant with the Law of Nature (reason).109 Furthermore, we have just seen that filial gratitude is found even in the animal world, and Philo argues that it would be most unnatural of man not to learn this lesson from the beasts. Filial reverence, our passage even implies, is found in all men who are not "in the habit of neglecting their duty," the divine command being addressed to those who are forgetful of this standard of *humanitas*.

Thus Philo distinguishes two levels of filial piety: the one is instinctive, and need not be commanded; the second must be learned, either by observation of nature and attention to the dictates of reason or by fealty to the divine imperative. The filial piety commanded by the Torah does not in fact include the love of parents, Philo notes accurately, but this ought not to imply that there is no expectation of such love. On the other hand, the Torah's command of filial reverence and honor does not signify that these imperatives derive from a standard otherwise closed to the human conscience. For Philo, then (as for many classical thinkers), filial piety is an integral part of a natural, universal *humanitas*.

#### *Sons and Gentiles*

One final aspect of rabbinic thought seems relevant to our discussion of filial piety and *humanitas*. The rabbis teach that the exemplars of *kibbud av* are to be found in the gentile rather than the Jewish world. (They do, of course, cite numerous instances of exemplary filial piety among Jews also.) The point is not whether we can establish that a universal pattern of filial piety exists in human cultures; it is, rather, that the rabbis thought gentiles, specifically representatives of Roman culture, who were "not commanded" the norms of filial piety,110 to be the paragons of this virtue.111 The purposes of this teaching may have been varied: to chastise Jews for their neglect of this command, to explain

the otherwise inexplicable dominion of "wicked" Rome in a world ruled by a just God; perhaps other motivations were at work as well. What is of significance for our inquiry, though, is the fact that filial piety is almost *the* gentile virtue. This certainly testifies to its roots in the soil of human culture as the rabbis understood it.

The great talmudic examples of filial piety are drawn from the life of Dama ben Netinah, "a non-Jew from Ashkelon."<sup>112</sup> In this he followed in the footsteps of Esau, of whom R. Simeon ben Gamliel said, "I served my father all my life, but I never served him a hundredth as well as Esau served his father."<sup>113</sup> So highly valued was this filial devotion that God granted Rome (Esau) all "this glory" (or, dominion) as reward.<sup>114</sup>

What induced the rabbis to find in Esau and his descendants models whom Jews might well emulate? The biblical suggestion that Esau was ever ready to fulfill his father's command (Genesis 27:3-4) hardly warrants, in itself, such fulsome exposition; furthermore, the Bible has already presented Esau as paining his father greatly through his marriage (Genesis 26:34-5) and will show him cynically expectant of his father's death (Genesis 27:41).<sup>115</sup> A reasonable suggestion is that the rabbis were, in fact, impressed with the gravity and importance of filial piety among the Romans. They were certainly aware of both *patria potestas* and the concern for filial piety evinced by moralists and thinkers. *Patria potestas* and, in fact, the entire "legal" conception of the family were in an irreversible decline during the rabbinic period, it is true, but as part of the history of Rome, they provided a good justification for the origins of Rome's greatness. Furthermore, the ethic expressed in *patria potestas* was imbued, in more humane fashion, throughout the Roman world in this period. In Hellenistic Alexandria, "the honor of parents was a popular theme of pedagogic moralizing,"<sup>116</sup> and it was a staple of Stoic thought. *Patria potestas* was doubtless considered savage and inhumane in allowing parents to expose an unwanted child and to deny all property rights to the son. But the rabbis found the Romans exemplary even when measured by the Jewish standard of filial ethics. The behavior singled out for rabbinic praise—Esau's eagerness to satisfy his father's wish and the royal clothes he wore while serving him; Dama's refusal to disturb his father even at the price of financial loss and his patient and passive endurance of his mother's rage and blows—is not that described by *patria potestas* but rather by *pietas* and *reverentia*, the kind of filial respect and honor deemed exemplary in Jewish ethics. Clearly, then, this ethic was considered part of the heritage of all mankind.

## II The Scope of Responsibility

### I.

#### Filial Responsibility

How does one honor his parents? How does one fear them? These questions, directed as they are to the individual, require intimate and individual answers that emerge from the singularity of persons and their relationship in the creative play of the unique situation. Judaism, though, does not reject the answers to be found in patterns of behavior objectively imposed upon persons and situations rather than spontaneously and subjectively growing from them. Man's response draws upon both his individual resources and a universal heritage; it moves in a context that is both unique and common.

A number of pentateuchal verses define the relationship we call "filial responsibility." Some are specific and punitive:

He who strikes his father or his mother shall be put to death.  
(Exodus 21:15)

He who curses his father or his mother shall be put to death.  
(Exodus 21:17)

Cursed be he that dishonors his father or his mother.  
(Deuteronomy 27:16)<sup>1</sup>

The law of the "wayward and defiant" son, who "does not heed his father or mother and does not obey them" (Deuteronomy 21:18-21) may also belong to this pattern.<sup>2</sup> But the overriding foci of Jewish filial piety are stated in the two general and positive imperatives of the Torah, taken in rabbinic thought as typological categories:

- (1) Honor your father and your mother. . . . (Exodus 20:12)
- (2) You shall each revere his mother and his father . . . . (Leviticus 19:3)

"Honor" would seem to demand behavioral concretization, while