

The Way of the World

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I. They Say: There Is a Land

At the heart of Jewish thought lies a surprising claim, of signal importance: “The ‘way of the world’ (*derech erez*) preceded the Tora.”¹ This is to say that before the giving of the Tora, and independent of it, there existed a code of worthy behavior, a set of moral criteria innate to human beings.

To grasp the significance of this claim, one must first understand that in an earlier time, many generations ago, the seemingly simple phrase *derech erez* conveyed a meaning both rich and complex. *Derech* signifies way, path, road, journey, means, manner; *erez* means ground, earth, country, state, land—and specifically the land of Israel. The “way of the world” embraced all of these layers of meaning simultaneously. Today, however, this phrase in common Hebrew parlance has come to mean nothing more than appropriate speech, dress and demeanor, conduct that is considerate of others—in short, basic etiquette. In other words, the modern-day use of this term is only the faint echo of a great melody that once accompanied all our acts; it represents but a small, withered remnant of a broad Jewish intellectual tradition dating back thousands of years.

Rediscovering the original meaning of the “way of the world” is more than a philosophical challenge; it is a profound need of Israeli society and

Jewish culture everywhere. Such a worldview is crucial to preserving and strengthening the rules, traditions and values that form the common denominator holding a society together. Restoring the Jewish nation's common denominator requires delving into this idea's philosophical roots—the ancient Israelite view of man's essential nature and his place in the world—and reviewing how this concept has evolved. Only by uncovering the roots of this worldview will it be possible to generate renewed, sturdy and sustained growth of those fundamental values which, according to the Israelite tradition, are common to all humanity and form the conservative heritage of the Jewish people.

First, we must clarify the starting point for this ancient worldview, by grounding it in those great principles that “preceded the Tora.” As the poet Saul Tchernichovsky put it, we must ask: “Where is that land?”²

II. Mending Wall

The question of human nature and morality has long formed the battleground for two fundamentally opposed views of how best to order human affairs. This question separates thinkers, religions and cultures; it delineates the philosophical divide between “left” and “right”; and it is the first question that should be asked in any discussion of society: Is man by nature good or evil? According to one view, man naturally inclines toward evil. The task of society and its organs, therefore, is to restrain the natural tendencies of its members to the extent necessary to prevent them from harming themselves or each other. The second view holds the reverse: Man is naturally inclined to good. Consequently, the rules and restraints of society are essentially superfluous, and should be loosened as much as possible—and perhaps, one day, removed completely.

The root of the difference between these two views of human nature was summed up neatly by the Neapolitan thinker Giambattista Vico: The first view (to which Vico adheres) considers man as he is; the second, as he should be.³ From this distinction stem two complete worldviews, which have produced two streams of thinkers, generally dubbed “conservatives” and “revolutionaries.”⁴ The conservative understands the heart of man as being disposed toward evil, a predisposition that is difficult (if not impossible) to alter. To guard against man’s natural urges, the conservative seeks to maintain vigilance, using the tools society and culture have developed. The revolutionary, on the other hand—whether because he believes that man’s nature tends to the good, or that there simply are no moral absolutes and therefore all mores are “good” by definition—sees man’s innate inclination as fundamentally positive, and believes it necessary to overturn the established social order in order to liberate man’s natural urges.⁵

Many philosophers and cultural traditions—including, for the most part, the Jewish tradition—hold the conservative view of human nature. Within the Western tradition, many would agree with the pre-Socratic philosopher Bias of Priene (considered the foremost of the seven wise men of ancient Greece), who declared outright that “most men are bad.”⁶ Xenophon and Aristotle in antiquity; Aquinas and Augustine in the medieval period; Machiavelli and Vico at the beginning of the modern period; and Edmund Burke, Joseph de Maistre and those who subscribe to their positions to the present day, all expressed similar views. Nor is this idea unique to the West: It can be found among many civilizations which developed independent of Western culture, from Confucian philosophy in eastern Asia to the tradition of the Barotse nation in present-day Zambia.⁷ This is the position of most established religions, especially monotheistic ones such as Christianity and Islam. Indeed, the whole basis for these religions being institutionalized was a pessimistic assessment of man’s inclination to do right, even after hearing the word of God. Despite the considerable differences among these various traditions, they agree that the

inclination toward evil is inherent in man's nature and will lead to terrible acts if not restrained and channeled. Only by limiting these urges in the individual, and redirecting his efforts toward productive pursuits, will society be able to survive and progress.

The proponents of the revolutionary view also form a large camp, transcending periods and cultures. They agree with Plato's teaching that in a pristine, natural society, men would live in harmony and plenty, without compulsion or laws, jealousy or war. In his words: "So they will lead a peaceful and healthy life, and probably die at a ripe old age."⁸ Similar views have been expressed by, among others, Epicurus (from whose name the rabbinic term *apikoros*—heretic—is derived) and Diogenes (a founder of the philosophical school of the Cynics—a name suggesting that its followers behaved like dogs) in antiquity; in medieval times, founders of Christian sects such as Bogomil, Thomas Müntzer, and Jan Beuckelson; and in the modern period, Benedict Spinoza, Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, William Godwin, Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx, and their followers to the present. This view also is found outside Western culture. China developed a number of revolutionary philosophies, including Taoism and Legalism; others originated in southern Asia, such as the more extreme trends in Jainism and Buddhism, which teach that the material world, society and laws have no purpose at all, and that only the human spirit is good.

Most religions, even those now considered deeply conservative in outlook, actually started out under a revolutionary banner (the principal exception being, perhaps, Judaism). Almost all began as a call to correct the degeneracy prevalent in society, and to usher in an era of improved, moral behavior impelled by faith alone. Early Christianity claimed that the messianic era—when laws, property, class and death would be no more—was at hand; only after the apocalyptic fervor had waned was this expectation deferred to the end of days. Examples of dissenting sects with similar messianic beliefs appear throughout the annals of Jewish history and Islam.⁹ In other words, almost every religious or quasi-religious movement at its

outset was based on the same principle: That the institutions of society are but a degenerate shell, to be cast off in order to make way for a great leap forward to an earthly paradise.¹⁰ Despite the wide differences among the various revolutionary schools, they share the fundamental belief that man is capable of living a morally good life solely on the strength of his inherent nature. The sorry state of mankind and all its failings result not from man's inclinations, but from the shackles imposed upon him by countless mores and superstitions, the products of society and culture, which strangle the goodness of the human spirit.

The touchstone for the great conservative-revolutionary debate is to what extent *reason* can and should direct human behavior—in other words, whether most people, most of the time, are capable of making morally correct decisions based on their reason alone. The conservative view is that, despite its obvious importance, reason by itself cannot lead society to its desired goal;¹¹ the revolutionary worldview, by contrast, holds that *only* reason can lead man to correct decisions, that if society is imperfect it is because all manner of unreasonable customs, religions and institutions get in the way and cloud man's judgment.

Plato and Aristotle illustrate the different roles revolutionary and conservative thinkers assign to reason. In large measure, Plato is the father of the Western revolutionary worldview. In *The Republic* he describes the philosopher who draws solely upon his power of reason to create the laws and practices of a new society: "He will sometimes delete and draw again, of course, but will go on till he has made human nature as acceptable to God as may be."¹² And, lest one suspect the philosopher of being influenced by the special conditions of a certain land or culture, Plato avers that "the true philosopher ... whose mind is on higher realities, has no time to look at the affairs of men, or to take part in their quarrels with all the jealousy and bitterness they involve. His eyes are turned to contemplate fixed and immutable realities, a realm where there is no injustice done or suffered, but all is reason and order."¹³ Finally, to avoid the suggestion that a traditional, conservative social order might actually improve human affairs, Plato asserts

that “until society is controlled by philosophers there will be no end to the troubles of states or their citizens.”¹⁴

This revolutionary outlook was challenged sharply by Plato’s student Aristotle. Aristotle saw society as a worldly thing, which must be rooted in reality and must follow its rules and practices, not merely the “eternal truths” found in the minds of philosophers. Failing that basic understanding, the philosopher cannot hope to understand man. Aristotle formulated this view in his *Politics*: “In matters of political organization ... it is impossible for everything to be written down precisely: What is written down must be in general terms, but actions are concerned with particulars.”¹⁵ According to Aristotle, the only meaningful society for human beings is one in which real people can actually live, while “the man who is isolated, who is unable to share in the benefits of political association, or has no need to share because he is already self-sufficient, is no part of the city, and must therefore be either a beast or a god.”¹⁶

Their opposing attitudes concerning the role of reason in bringing about a proper social order have led thinkers from both camps into countless disputes over politics, society, culture and values. Two issues, however, of paramount importance to both conservatives and revolutionaries, are seen as crucial in determining the character of a given society. The first is how it relates to the past; the second is its attitude toward the traditional family.

How a society relates to the past reflects its attitude toward humanity’s accumulated experience over the course of history. For conservatives, that experience includes the development over time of social institutions and traditions, society’s principal defense against savagery and corruption. The historical experience is expressed in customs, prohibitions and traditions, as well as prejudices and taboos such as those against murder, incest or cruelty to animals—acts that might well be considered matter-of-course, were the question to depend upon rational considerations alone.

Revolutionaries take the opposite view. They see the past as a source of ignorance and confusion, something which distorts and stifles man’s

nature, and should be expunged—if only this were possible. To them, the past stands for backwardness, darkness and all manner of excess baggage which place an unconscionable burden upon human reason and freedom. Some openly seek to destroy all evidence of the past since, they argue, this is the only way to attain the “pure” human condition, one free of nations, religions and states. Others are willing to preserve the past, but only under glass, as a sort of museum piece offering a bit of ethnic flavor but no longer having any meaning for modern life. Either way, to them it is clear that starting over from scratch is the only sure way to advance humans along on their continual ascent toward reason and logic, to help them reach their goal of “enlightenment.”

Revolutionaries’ profound disgust with the past has often led them to conclude that the first and most important thing they should do is eliminate all the books, rules and laws originating in earlier times. Once again, this is vividly formulated by Plato:

The first thing our artists [referring to the philosophers charting the new society] must do ... is to wipe the slate of human society and human habits clean. For our philosophic artists differ at once from all others in being unwilling to start work on an individual or a city, or draw out laws, until they are given, or have made themselves, a clean canvas.¹⁷

In this spirit, revolutionaries throughout history have sought to burn the writings of the past, and so start with a clean slate, as did, for example, the first emperor of China, Shih Huang-Ti, and caliph Omar of early Islam; and even Voltaire proclaimed that “the only way to obtain good laws is to burn all the existing laws and start anew.”¹⁸ Over time, this view—that, in the words of Marx, “the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living”¹⁹—has led to increasingly extreme revolutionary attempts to create a society that is *tabula rasa*, culminating this century in the horrors of Communism and Nazism.²⁰ Although the open call for a clean canvas is no longer so popular, many nowadays still seek to “correct” the vernacular by removing undesirable words, devaluing

classical texts, or doing away with traditional social institutions, in the name of political correctness or post-modernism.²¹

For the conservative, on the other hand, traditions from generations past are neither burden nor nightmare, but rather cause for identification, excitement and emulation. Tradition is not a thing of the past, but a vital, living force that contributes to society now and always, through the cumulative wisdom gained from previous generations' efforts, successful and not. The conservative believes that this wisdom and the traditions that reflect it should be preserved, and that action must be taken to ensure this—action such as that described in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. Bradbury's fictional revolutionary society has banned books and nearly succeeded in destroying them and all they contain; the texts of the past live on only because individuals dedicate their lives to memorizing them and reciting them to others.

But it is not only the past that stands between revolutionaries and their brave new world. In the present they must surmount another formidable obstacle: The family. Family is the usual forum for fundamental education towards traditional values. It is the foundation of every human society, the individual's last resort when all else is lost, and the pillar which, once smashed, will bring about the collapse of all other obstacles to the revolution. Yet the intimate arena of the family proves particularly difficult for the revolutionary to penetrate.

Not surprisingly, Plato was very straightforward in formulating his opposition to the family. In *The Republic*, he sacrifices the family as we understand it on the altar of his ideal political order. In this ideal order, women and children are common property; there are no limits or barriers against homosexuality, the seduction of minors, incest, or any other sexual proclivities; and sexual relations between men and women are obligatory only to the extent necessary to produce the next generation.²² Rejection of the value of family is a salient characteristic of later revolutionary philosophers who follow Plato's lead, either explicitly or implicitly. Diogenes, Voltaire and Rousseau ignored the family or left little

place for it in their theories and social constructs, but did not formally declare war against it. Others reject the traditional family and the sexual norms it represents in principle, and even advocate abolishing it. These include Jan Beuckelson, the leader of the messianic Christian revolt in the German city of Muenster in 1543; the false messiah Jacob Frank and his devotees in eighteenth-century Poland; the more enthusiastic Marxists such as Pol Pot in Cambodia and his followers; and some post-modernist intellectuals.²³

To be consistent, the revolutionary worldview must necessarily lean toward destroying the traditional idea of the family, both because it is the pillar of all traditional values of society, and because enlightened rationalism has difficulty finding a principled basis for prohibiting any form of sexual relations between consenting adults, including adultery or even incest. In practice, however, the very power that the family wields in all societies usually ensures that overt anti-family elements in revolutionary thought are played down, or advanced only obliquely. This can be seen in the socialist argument for entrusting the raising and education of children to the collective, not the family; and in the current intellectual fashion calling for abrogation of the traditional definition of “family” in favor of an all-inclusive term which embraces homosexual couples, single parenthood, polygamous households and so forth—a definition so broad that it constitutes a formula for achieving, indirectly and gradually, the revolutionary goal of gutting the family unit of all meaning.

Because it goes to the very heart of the human condition, the polarity between the conservative and revolutionary paradigms is not limited to the political-philosophical realm but can be found in every cultural realm concerned with the situation of man in the world. One side can be seen, for example, in the writings of Edgar Rice Burroughs: His Tarzan, who grows up from infancy in the company of apes, is good, upright and moral, his sterling character attributable solely to his innate nature. The opposite viewpoint is taken in William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, telling of a group of schoolboys who are shipwrecked and find refuge on a desert island; there

they shed the behaviors expected of them in civilized society, and gradually degenerate into savagery.

Literary attitudes toward human nature concern not only individuals cut off from society, but also those who throw off the chains of society and its traditions. Tellingly, the views presented in these works do not necessarily coincide with the authors' professed politics. Ayn Rand, for example, is usually classified with the philosophical "right," yet her writings consistently depict the individual struggling *against* conventions that society attempts to impose upon him (as in *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Fountainhead*); only by rejecting society's demands do Rand's heroes realize their revolutionary greatness. Rand's opposite in this regard is George Orwell. Orwell is generally considered a member of the philosophical "left," yet his *Nineteen Eighty-Four* portrays a deeply conservative view of how the systematic destruction of family, tradition, convention and, above all, the past, leads to the eventual loss of the individual spirit and personality: "We, the Party, control all records, and we control all memories. Then we control the past, do we not?"²⁴

This schism is also reflected in the words of two great American poets. The revolutionary view is epitomized in the poetry of Walt Whitman; his "Song of Myself" is a paean to the body, nature and unbridled urges. He declares his preference for dwelling among animals because, unlike humans, "They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins / They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God."²⁵ The contrary view is found in the work of Robert Frost. In his poem "Mending Wall," Frost paints a considerably more complex, diverse portrait of nature, man and custom, writing of a force in nature that is inimical to the wall a neighbor has built, continually eroding it and threatening to destroy it. The stubborn neighbor, though, mends it time and again simply because, as he was taught by his father, "Good fences make good neighbors."²⁶

Eventually every serious thinker and artist discovers the need to choose between these two basic concepts of human nature. And so must every

thinking individual, for this decision will determine one's opinion on the entire political, social and cultural order. The revolutionary concept, in the final analysis, assumes that it is possible to effect a fundamental change in the human condition. Even the liberal revolutionary, who wishes to attain his goals gradually and moderately, ultimately seeks to create a new order, different from anything society has achieved before, that will no longer prevent man from giving full expression to his good nature. This is the import of the oft-quoted statement by Jean-Jacques Rousseau—the leading revolutionary of the modern era—that “Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains.”²⁷ The revolutionary's goal is to realize, sooner or later, a society that will fulfill the vision of the “Internationale,” the most popular revolutionary song of the twentieth century: “The world shall rise on new foundations,”²⁸ a world in which all the chains—history, tradition, family—are broken.

The conservative worldview maintains that the greatest danger threatening man is his liberation from those very “chains.” This is cogently formulated by Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Burke presents a comprehensive and profound challenge to revolutionary philosophy, arguing that the human freedom so desired by Rousseau is neither the primal (“natural”) state of man nor a consequence of human reason, but rather the product of “civil society,” the traditional framework that a free people establishes in a particular place and time—not in some abstract world—in order to overcome the dangers man's nature poses. Civil society can be formed and maintained only by confronting significant obstacles, and it endures only thanks to the toil and experience of generations, including all their failings and mistakes. Still, its achievements are in constant danger of erosion and even collapse, unless the people are steadfast in their determination to prevent this.²⁹ This collapse, warns Burke, is the danger revolutionaries present: “They despise experience as the wisdom of unlettered men; and as for the rest, they have wrought underground a mine that will blow up at one grand explosion all examples of antiquity, all precedents, charters, and acts of parliament.”³⁰ These the revolutionaries

seek to replace with abstract theories about “human rights.” Their efforts endanger everyone because, in Burke’s words, “This sort of people are so taken up with their theories about the rights of man, that they have totally forgot his nature.”³¹

III. The Seven Sages

What, then, does conservatism propose?

The answer lies in the solution to another problem: How does conservative thought resolve the apparent contradiction between its belief in a universal morality and its claim that only the particular conditions of society and man—the unique history and family traditions they preserve—are capable of defending and advancing that morality? The conservative proposition is that while human nature generates the same fundamental problems for all societies, each society addresses these problems through the prism of its own unique experience, and resolves them through the development of its own unique traditions. This approach is anti-relativistic: It views “good” and “evil” as terms with basic meanings that do not vary with time, place or circumstance. At the same time it insists that reason is limited in its ability to solve moral problems. This combination—belief in absolute moral values, alongside skepticism about the ability of human reason to identify and serve them—is responsible for the decisive role that conservatism assigns to tradition, in all its diverse expressions, in developing and maintaining a moral social order. All worldviews characterized by conservative underpinnings are based on this devotion to the importance of particularist tradition.

In the early eighteenth century, Giambattista Vico wrote *The New Science*, one of the most comprehensive examinations of the social and political order based on conservative principles. In chronicling the independent

development of conservative traditions in different places of the world—what he calls “the natural law of the gentes”—Vico noted the elements inherent in the “common nature of the nations” upon which all proper societies are founded.³² To his mind, Western societies hold a special position in the annals of history, resulting from their biblical heritage. Nonetheless, Vico recognizes other “proper” societies that have come into being, independent of biblical influences, by virtue of their own insistence upon universal moral values. Any group of human beings that does not maintain these fundamental rules, he says, has lost the right to be called a “society,” and is little more than a bestial wilderness.³³ Vico stresses that a society is a community, a gathering not merely of individuals and interests, but also of values and traditions. Indeed, only values and traditions can sustain a society: Anyone who fails to understand this, or who believes that rational interests and rules can take their place, simply does not understand the nature of society. In Vico’s opinion, for example, if Benedict Spinoza “speaks of the commonwealth as if it were a society of hucksters,”³⁴ it is because he utterly fails to grasp what a society is.

Thus, “there must in the nature of human institutions be a mental language common to all nations.”³⁵ Yet, as a conservative, Vico sees this common language as the product not of reason alone, but of reason together with the experience and traditions unique to each people’s true needs and concerns. “Human choice, by its nature most uncertain, is made certain and determined by the common sense of men with respect to human needs or utilities, which are the two sources of the natural law of the gentes.”³⁶ What is this “common sense,” this mixture of reason and experience formulated independently by different peoples, and only over time recognized as common to all of humanity? Vico describes it as self-evident and accepted judgment, arrived at quickly and without reflection, as something common to an entire class, an entire people, or an entire nation. By its very nature this sort of conventional wisdom is found not necessarily among philosophers, but among the public at large.³⁷

Among the major cultures of the world, the Confucian tradition in China is perhaps the most prominent example of a civilization that developed independently of Western traditions, yet came to many of the same conclusions as Western and Islamic forms of conservatism. Confucianism had its beginnings in the early fifth century B.C.E. when China was divided into a patchwork of kingdoms, constantly warring with one another, a time when the old certainties and social orders were being destroyed. Confucius sought to contend with this existential dilemma by creating a framework of appropriate human behaviors and attitudes, known as the “proper path” (*ran*). The goal of the proper path was to raise human beings to the level of having a “righteous heart” (*jan*), through their adherence to a set of traditional moral rules and manners. Recognizing the intrinsic connection between personal and social integrity, this philosophy’s most important moral precepts are personal trustworthiness, filial obedience, observance of ritual, the maintenance of justice, and mutual respect.

The nexus between the personal and social aspects of morality is the family. In Confucianism the family both supports and mirrors all social order—and not just the current family unit, but also past and future generations. The central rite of ancestor worship, for example, instills in the individual a sense of gratitude and honor toward the past and those who went before, and creates the connection between his sense of inner morality and his conduct towards others—which in turn makes him more morally righteous.³⁸ (It is worth noting that Confucianism has faced a number of formidable revolutionary rivals, such as Legalism,³⁹ which sought to re-fashion man’s conduct and nature to accord with imperial law; and, in modern times, Communism—both philosophies that, unlike Confucianism, seem to have failed the test of time. A more significant and persistent rival has been Taoism which, in contrast to the Confucian “proper path,” believes in the “way of nature” (*tao*). A typical revolutionary philosophy, Taoism rejects institutions, traditions and societal values as worthless, and possibly even harmful, products of culture—culture itself being a mistake,

a deviation from the original path of nature. The most important Taoist work, attributed to Lao-Tzu, maintains that “without law or compulsion, men would dwell in harmony.”⁴⁰)

In its respect for the past, the central role it accords the family, and its emphasis on accepted customs, traditions and manners, Confucianism expresses the very common sense that Vico considers the backbone of any proper society. “Common sense” is appreciated in many cultures, but undoubtedly its most influential version, especially in the political and social context, is found in English-speaking countries, where it refers to conduct grounded in sound judgment based on circumstances, free of emotion and intellectual sophistry.⁴¹ The salutary effects of a strong conservative spirit helped make “common sense” basic to social and political life in the Anglo-Saxon world. One outstanding product of this was the common law—the unwritten, customary norms that evolved over the course of centuries, when a uniform system of law was lacking. Distinct from parliamentary laws, religious laws, tort laws and so forth, common law is based on tradition and practice. It expresses widely accepted rules of justice which are perceived as fixed—as a matter of common sense.⁴² A further expression of this principle is the practice of trial by jury: The belief that twelve ordinary members of the community, without legal training, are capable of judging the case before them in a more considered, correct and reasonable fashion than a professional judge.⁴³

This attachment to common sense generally enhances the ability of English-speaking nations to withstand revolutionary trends, certainly in comparison with many other cultures. In Great Britain or the United States, a politician or policy viewed by the public as lacking common sense will be rejected unequivocally; ideas and ideals, however lofty, are tested against the common-sense standard much more often than happens elsewhere. Because common sense grows out of practical experience, it excites the ire of revolutionaries and the esteem of conservatives. It is not surprising that Edmund Burke regarded common sense as a magnificent bulwark against the dangerous revolutionary atmosphere emanating from France.

In describing the qualities needed to assess the affairs and values of society, Burke settled upon those of “a man of common judgment,”⁴⁴ that is, not a philosopher or scholar or abstract idea of man, but rather one capable of judging in accordance with traditional British values.⁴⁵ Conservatives believe that in some way even the most eminent of thinkers derive their greatness from their underlying common sense. On the subject of how great men acquire wisdom, the Irish poet William Butler Yeats wrote in “The Seven Sages”:

They walked the roads
Mimicking what they heard, as children mimic;
They understood that wisdom comes of beggary.⁴⁶

Accordingly, the conservative outlook maintains that society has an intrinsic *need* for common sense. As Burke wrote: “this stock [of reason] in each man is small,” thus it is fitting to draw from “the general bank and capital [of experience] of nations and of ages.”⁴⁷ A conservative culture is careful to preserve traditional values for future generations, whose need for them will equal if not exceed that of the current generation. The commitment to leave the next generation a state of affairs no worse than what came into one’s own keeping, and the expectation that one’s descendants will be grateful for such a legacy, are pillars of the conservative consciousness.⁴⁸ If a society’s traditional cultural continuum is interrupted, it will pay dearly, risking a breakdown in moral restraint and direction with terrible consequences, as happened following the revolutions in France and Russia. Both of these new polities did exactly what Burke warned against: They replaced education based in historical and religious tradition with “civil education,” a dangerous and ultimately untenable tack that presents man as merely a collection of rational and physical needs, and, in place of morals, forwards the obscure, abstract idea of an enlightened general interest.⁴⁹

Common sense is a useful tool for preserving and advancing the moral values society is founded upon, but to serve its purpose it must be anchored

in those values. As Friedrich Hayek put it, “mere common sense proves a treacherous guide in the field.”⁵⁰ If common sense becomes a goal in its own right, a sanctification of tradition without reference to morality, the result is a kind of empty moral relativism—a philosophy diametrically opposed to the conservative belief in a universal morality. In the conservative view, society’s virtues can best be preserved by maintaining religious traditions and absolute moral values as an integral part of its heritage. The political thought of George Washington and the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville—to choose only two of many examples—emphasize how vital religion is for a proper society, especially a proper democracy.⁵¹ Burke’s thought goes further: To him, religious institutions established and supported by the state are an essential counterweight to the shortcomings of unchecked democracy. An obvious danger of a democratic political system is that citizens may come to believe that freedom of choice means absolute freedom of action, that anything sanctioned by democracy is by this fact to be considered moral. In this context, religion is a necessary restraint, providing a fixed moral beacon in a sea of change.⁵² It is this understanding, Burke continues, that has buttressed the English toleration of all manner of problematic manifestations in religion, which they prefer to the dangers posed by government’s total rejection of religion.⁵³

Just as Burke devotes special attention to the role of religion in the British form of government, his Savoyard counterpart Joseph de Maistre, probably the most important conservative thinker of the French-speaking world, argues that the best legislators in every age understood that reason is not omniscient, and that institutions based on reason alone will be short-lived. A proper society, then, must build rational political structures upon a bedrock of absolute morality, which only its religious tradition can provide. This, for de Maistre, is why legislators of note invariably base their political constructs upon a traditional morality deriving from religion, “in order that human weakness be strengthened by supernatural support.”⁵⁴

De Maistre, a fervent Catholic, finds the best proof of his theory in the history of the Jewish nation which, by faithfully maintaining its historical and religious identity, survived centuries of hardships and existential threats. This people's continued existence was made possible by an unflinching Israelite conservatism: "That nation of five or six millions perched on the bare rocks of Judea, the proudest of cities in proud Asia, resists all shocks which would have pulverized a nation ten times more numerous, braves the torrent of centuries, the sword of conquerors and the hatred of peoples, astonishes by its resistance to the masters of the world, survives finally all the conquering nations and shows still after forty centuries its deplorable remnants to the eyes of the surprised observer."⁵⁵

Not surprisingly, the principles and tools of the Israelite conservative tradition resemble those of its Western and Confucian counterparts. They include an understanding of human nature as tending toward evil, an emphasis on custom and accepted rules in maintaining appropriate interpersonal relations, fidelity to religious heritage and national history and, most of all, the axis of tradition with the family as the center of communal life.⁵⁶ Besides these shared conservative elements, however, the Israelite tradition also possesses unique qualities which set it apart from the others. First, as de Maistre noted, if conservatism supports longevity in traditions, institutions and ideas, the very fact of the Jewish nation's continuity for millennia signifies the superior strength and quality of its conservative tradition. Furthermore, the Israelite tradition has played a decisive role in fashioning the ideas and values of what today is the most influential conservative tradition in the world—Western conservatism.⁵⁷ The exceptional breadth and depth of the Jewish nation's experience, together with its uniquely rich fabric, give it a principal role in world conservatism. It follows that, to understand conservatism, one must first attempt to understand the essence of its Israelite roots.⁵⁸

IV. Paradise Lost

The foundation of Israelite thought is the biblical idea that from the time of man's expulsion from the Garden of Eden and entry into the world, the very basis of the human condition is man's ability to "know good and evil."⁵⁹ In the Israelite tradition, everything concerning man's nature, behavior and choices is based on this concept. This notion accepts as axiomatic the existence of fundamental moral distinctions in the world, definitive realms of "good" and "evil" that every human being has the ability to discern and choose between. Only the ability to know good and evil imparts significance to man's moral decisions.

Yet this tradition also holds that man's ability to distinguish good from evil does not mean that all or even most people naturally choose good over evil. On the contrary, the biblical stories teach that righteous characters are exceptional in a world generally dominated by bloodshed, licentiousness and other evils. Moreover, as the Bible also teaches, choosing good over evil is actually far more difficult than simply loosing the bonds of morality and descending into bestiality. This is because man's natural inclination tends toward evil. The story of the Flood in Genesis provides perhaps the most poignant expression of this: Man's incorrigible evil precipitates God's decision to obliterate his own creative work ("The Lord saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his mind was nothing but evil all the time"); yet the story ends with God recognizing that the Flood has not changed human nature—"since the devisings of man's mind are evil from his youth."⁶⁰

The Israelite belief in man's ability to choose good over evil assumes the existence of what Vico terms the "mental language common to all nations," which enables every individual to exercise basic moral judgment. In Western thought, "natural law" or "natural morality" is based on this assumption.⁶¹ Judaism, too, believes in a natural morality, an intrinsic system of fundamental values which every individual can recognize because of his

ability to discern good from evil. Again, however, because of man's natural inclinations, it is not at all clear that he will actually choose good over evil. Man's innate ability to make moral decisions—his natural morality—stands in opposition to his natural inclinations, the inevitable result being that human existence is filled with perpetual moral tension. As part of the natural world, man has unbidden inclinations, and desires, but unlike other animals, man also has knowledge of the world: That is, man has both consciousness and a conscience. While the rest of the world's creatures follow the laws of nature and behave as they must, man has to choose between alternatives because of his ability to make moral distinctions and act according to his will.⁶² In the words of John Milton in *Paradise Lost*: “We live Law to our selves, our Reason is our Law.”⁶³

This fundamental tension is the principal concern of the Bible. In its conservative spirit, the Bible addresses the general through the prism of the particular. Its concern is not so much the Israelite people and their Tora, in and of themselves, but their story as a lens to magnify and examine the human condition in general. The Bible speaks at length of virtuous characters whose behavior does not derive from the Tora, either because they lived before it was given (the Patriarchs) or because they were not Israelites (Jethro, and Ruth the Moabite). Frequently the focus is on the moral struggle of the individual in a corrupt society, in circumstances with virtually no bearing upon Israelite history or the Tora. The stories of Noah and the Flood, Lot and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and Jonah and the fate of Nineveh, for example, all underscore the importance Israelite tradition ascribes to a natural moral law, which every individual and society are subject to.

The book of Proverbs is one of the most comprehensive treatments in the Bible of the universal rules which ought to govern human society. The worldview of Proverbs is decidedly conservative, relating to basic moral values within a realistic—that is, skeptical—assessment of human nature.⁶⁴ Proverbs 8, for example, presents this view at length, praising society's achievements and stability. These are defined as “wisdom” (“For

wisdom is better than rubies”) which is attained by adherence to morality (“Accept my moral message before silver, knowledge before choice gold”), experience and decency (“Through me kings reign and rulers decree just laws; through me princes rule, great men and all the righteous judges”). This same chapter scathingly criticizes any who would undermine society with unrestrained words and ideas—who would, in other words, present a revolutionary worldview (“I loathe the overturning mouth”).⁶⁵ The conservative message is emphasized again and again: “My son, take heed and take in my words, and you will enjoy a long life. I teach you the way of wisdom; I guide you in straight paths. You will walk without breaking stride; when you run, you will not stumble. Hold fast to received discipline; do not let go, keep it—it is your life.”⁶⁶ These and other verses make clear that Proverbs’ expressed values are the result of experience and wisdom handed down from parent to child—in other words, of common sense.

Little attention is devoted in this book to religious observance, at least in the narrow sense of precise fulfillment of ritual commandments. What treatment there is stresses, for the most part, the need to preserve the social order, to conduct oneself morally and to strengthen one’s inner integrity. Thus, Proverbs extols the importance of maintaining a proper legal system and condemning false testimony;⁶⁷ respecting religion and its values;⁶⁸ being attentive to the central role of the family, and faithful in marriage;⁶⁹ preserving the sanctity of human life;⁷⁰ exemplifying righteousness and fairness;⁷¹ and being compassionate and considerate towards others, while refraining from cruelty.⁷²

This approach finds its fullest expression in the text describing the roots of evil in society, those things that are “abominations,” deserving of the strongest biblical condemnation:⁷³ “Six things the Lord hates; seven are an abomination to him: A haughty bearing, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a mind that hatches evil plots, feet quick to run to evil, a false witness testifying lies, and one who incites brothers to quarrel.”⁷⁴ All of these pertain to interpersonal relations and, as might be

expected from a conservative text, they are presented not as abstract principles but within a practical and tangible context. Thus, the book of Proverbs offers an all-encompassing order of practical values, describing a worthy lifestyle of proper social conduct and moral acts—the biblical parallel to “civil society” in the Western conservative tradition.

The Israelite exploration of natural morality, however, is by no means limited to the Bible: It accompanies the Jewish people’s intellectual thought throughout history. This is the context for the extensive interest in rabbinic writings, for example, in the concept of human dignity (*k’vod habriot*). The importance of these laws is emphasized in numerous statements in the Talmud, such as the declaration that “human dignity is so important that it supersedes an express prohibition of the Tora.”⁷⁵ The same tradition holds that those not learned in the Tora, or not even Jewish, may yet attain a high moral stature, to the extent that the scholarly and the righteous may learn from their example.⁷⁶ The rabbis believed that in every age there are individuals who, lacking any contact with God or Tora, succeed in building a moral character and maintaining an ethical life. One finds this view expressed in a variety of contexts, from the descriptions of Jewish sages sitting and exchanging views with philosophers,⁷⁷ to explicit maxims such as the statement by the talmudic sage R. Nahman about the non-Jewish wise men in the public square: “If not for the Tora, how many Nahman ben Abas would there be in the marketplace!”⁷⁸ Perhaps the most explicit of all is the following midrashic passage:

It once happened that when R. Yanai was walking on the road he saw an extremely distinguished man, to whom he said: “Sir, I would be honored if you would partake of my hospitality.” The man replied, “Certainly.” He brought him to his house and gave him food and drink. He [R. Yanai] tested him in Scripture, and found him ignorant; in Mishna, and found him ignorant; in Agada, and found him ignorant; in Talmud, and found him ignorant. He said to him, “Take the cup and recite Grace after Meals.” He replied, “Let Yanai recite Grace, in his own house.”

He [R. Yanai] asked him, “Do you understand enough to be able to repeat what I say to you?” He answered, “Yes.” He said: “Say, ‘The dog ate of Yanai’s bread.’” The guest arose and grabbed him. He said to him, “You have my inheritance, and you are withholding it from me!” R. Yanai asked him, “And what is this inheritance of yours that I have?” He replied, “Once I passed by a school, and I heard the voice of the children reciting: ‘Moses charged us with the Tora, the inheritance of the congregation of Jacob’;⁷⁹ it is not written, ‘the inheritance of the congregation of Yanai,’ but ‘the congregation of Jacob.’” R. Yanai said to him, “Why have you deserved to eat at my table?” The man answered, “Never in my life did I hear evil talk and repeat it to the person about whom it was said, nor have I ever seen two people quarreling without making peace between them.” R. Yanai said to him, “You possess so much of the way of the world, and I called you a dog!”⁸⁰

The message is unequivocal: R. Yanai, recognizing the high moral stature of his guest who is unlettered in the Tora, repents having denigrated him, because even one who has not studied the Tora may observe the precepts of natural morality, the “way of the world”—and this is an honorable achievement in its own right.

Thus, Israelite thought draws a practical distinction between the Tora in its narrow sense (the body of laws given to Israel at Mount Sinai), and the moral principles inherent in the world from the time of Creation. Although clearly deriving from the same foundation as the Tora given to the Jewish people, these moral principles are also to be understood and applied by every person, in every age. For example, Judah Halevi states in *The Kuzari* that at least a partial understanding of the existence of God, and of basic moral principles, may be attained through philosophical inquiry alone, even absent knowledge of the Tora.⁸¹ This concept is expressed succinctly in the talmudic adage: “If someone tells you that there is wisdom among the Gentiles, believe it ... that there is Tora among the Gentiles, do not believe it.”⁸²

From the belief that all people are capable of understanding natural morality, it follows that its basic principles may be easily articulated, at least in broad terms. In the Israelite tradition, the conceptual framework for this is the seven “Noahide laws,” a set of fundamental moral principles binding upon all of humanity. “The rabbis taught, seven commandments were given to the Noahides: Establishing a judicial system, and prohibition of blasphemy, idolatry, forbidden sexual relations, bloodshed, theft, and eating the limb from a live animal.”⁸³ In other words, all human beings are commanded to observe one active principle (the creation of a judicial system) and six prohibitions, three of them somewhat abstract in nature (blasphemy, idolatry and theft) and three quite tangible (forbidden sexual relations, bloodshed and the eating of a limb from a live animal). One who not only observes these rules but also acknowledges their divine source is regarded as a “righteous Gentile.” Although most of these principles may be observed by an individual, they are basically oriented to society—and only a society can observe all of the principles, especially the setting up of a judicial system. Indeed, according to Israelite tradition, these seven commandments are the minimal conditions for establishing a proper society. The consistent violation of these principles, on the other hand, makes for a society that is cruel, bestial and unworthy of existing—a society the Bible terms an “abomination.”

Of the seven Noahide commandments, three especially severe prohibitions are not to be violated under any circumstances. The formulation of these prohibitions for Jews is well known: “Nothing overrides the preservation of life except for the prohibitions of idolatry, forbidden sexual relations and bloodshed.”⁸⁴ Less well-known is the tradition that even Gentiles are required to sacrifice their lives rather than transgress these three prohibitions (in a slightly revised version): “R. Joseph said, the school of Rav stated: For three commandments a Noahide must be willing to die, for forbidden sexual relations, bloodshed and blasphemy.”⁸⁵ In other words,

Israelite tradition holds that these fundamental edicts of natural morality are obligatory for every individual and society.

The question then arises: Is the force of universal natural morality different for the people of Israel, in light of their special relationship with God and their acceptance of his Tora? Answering this question requires asking why there is a Jewish people at all, and what its meaning is, according to the Israelite tradition. As mentioned earlier, the Bible is concerned with the general human condition, but this is expressed primarily through the annals of a *people*. The significance of this should not be underestimated: It means that for the Bible, the fundamental reality of human existence is perceived in terms of a national reality. Since the Flood, humanity has been divided into nations, and so it will continue to be.⁸⁶ But this is not just the reality, it is also the ideal. The descendants of Abraham were given the Tora only after they had become a nation, and their special status—their role in world history—was always as a nation: “You shall be my treasured possession among all the peoples, for mine is all the earth.”⁸⁷

In the biblical view, the personal redemption an individual can attain is limited and, for the most part, transient. Only within a societal context is it possible to achieve a complete and enduring moral life. The term “society,” however, is an abstraction that does not exist in the Bible: In its real world one finds only circumstances and conditions, only communities and peoples identified by name. In recognizing the prodigious capability of the particularist national framework for preserving and transmitting moral values from one generation to the next, the Bible is saying, in effect, that the nation is the sole communal unit capable of advancing the interests of the individual and the public over time—and the best barrier against descent into the moral abyss. This, then, is the meaning of the promise to Abraham that his offspring, the guardians of his tradition, will eventually become a nation.⁸⁸

Like all conservative worldviews, Jewish thought holds that a proper way of life can be attained only in the context of a societal framework, not

as a purely private endeavor, and the nation is the one social framework that stands a real chance of realizing that way of life.⁸⁹ According to Judaism, the universal concept of morality is embodied through national existence in the particularist reality of actual life. This is also the source of a tension unique to the national life of the Israelites: The imperative to embrace the characteristics of a normal nation, existing in the world “like all the nations,” while remaining faithful to the Jewish people’s unique heritage of being “chosen” by God. Jewish nationalism, from its inception to the present day, is formed of this distinctive combination that has always prevented the Jews from being only a people, or only a religion.

That Israel was expected to meet the demands of both the universal and unique moral criteria is clear from the talmudic explanations for the destruction of the Temple: “Why was the First Temple destroyed? Because of three things that prevailed there: Idolatry, forbidden sexual relations and bloodshed.” That is to say, the First Temple was destroyed and Israel exiled because it failed to fulfill not the special demands made upon Israel in the Tora, but the moral rules incumbent upon all humanity—the three prohibitions which no one, Jew or Gentile, is to transgress, even if this means sacrificing one’s own life instead.⁹⁰ Going on to explain the destruction of the Second Temple, this statement relates specifically to those who, relying upon the Tora, denigrated the “way of the world”: “But the Second Temple, in which people engaged in Tora study, commandments and acts of kindness—why was it destroyed? Because of needless hatred. This teaches that needless hatred is equal to the three transgressions of idolatry, forbidden sexual relations and bloodshed.”⁹¹

Another rabbinic statement, discussing the conditions of redemption from exile, reflects a similar view: “Rabbi [Yehuda Hanasi] said to me: ‘Israel was exiled twice, from the First Temple and from the Second. In the First Temple they were given a reprieve, and in the latter one, they were not given a reprieve.’ I said to him: ‘My son, those living at the time of the First Temple, even though they were idolaters, possessed the way of the world, and they engaged in charity and acts of kindness.’” The people of

the Second Temple period, however, were well-versed in Tora but not in the way of the world, and as a result, the period of their exile was left unspecified.⁹² The implication is clear: In order to remedy the destruction of the Second Temple, it is not enough for Israel to amass knowledge of Tora. Israel must also rediscover the way of the world.

V. The Book of the Righteous

In the rabbinic literature, the “way of the world” refers to a system of prescriptions that are not exclusive to the Tora. Put another way, the “way of the world” is the Israelite common sense. However, as a term from the mishnaic and talmudic periods—that is, from the destruction of the Second Temple and the consequent exile—it relates mainly to the interpersonal aspect of natural morality, and is lacking in one important respect: Reference to the public sphere of the Israelite nation, to Israel as a political community.

In the time of the Bible, when the Israelite common tradition still included a crucial, political dimension, the term that was used to express the idea of the natural morality upon which the world is founded, was *hayashar*—“righteousness.” The most important use of this term was in Israelite political thought. In this context, it referred to the state as an instrument not merely for defending against enemies and attaining economic prosperity but, first and foremost, for ensuring a moral, and morally viable, social order.

The book of Judges is the starting point for examining the biblical view of “righteousness” in the political order. Judges depicts a period in Israelite history when the fledgling nation is struggling to manage its affairs without benefit of an institutionalized government. The Israelites no longer enjoy the divinely inspired leadership of Moses and Joshua, but have yet to adopt

the monarchy. It is during this period that the people's ability to stand on its own—both physically and morally—is tested most severely.

Most of the book of Judges is dedicated to episodes of backsliding by the Israelites, when they engage in what is “evil in the eyes of the Eternal” (referring mainly to idolatry or marriages with idolaters). As punishment for these evils, all or part of the nation is conquered and subjugated by its enemies.⁹³ After the people repent and seek mercy, they receive a heavenly reprieve in the form of a judge-ruler who leads them out of danger. Victory is accompanied by Israel's promising to observe the Tora, and the judge's undertaking to maintain justice and righteousness—and then “the land rested” for forty or eighty years.⁹⁴ In most instances, this appears to be an almost mechanical relationship between the people and God: When the people violate the Tora's commandments, they are punished with war and subjugation; when they mend their ways and return to the laws of the Tora, they are rewarded with peace and security.

The two concluding episodes in Judges take an entirely different shape, however. In both, the central concept of “righteousness” is mentioned in a verse commonly understood as having negative connotations. This verse reads, “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right (*yashar*) in his eyes,” and it has come to symbolize the popular perception of the entire period of Judges as a dark phase in Israel's history. But these words appear specifically, and only, in these two unusual stories which mention neither an obvious evil of which the people are accused, nor a judge who saves the day. A close examination of these two episodes raises the possibility of a very different interpretation of the verse: In both instances Israel contends with a problematic situation and, with no clear divine guidance, chooses a course of action that is neither condemned nor punished. Not only that, to a certain degree the biblical accounts seem to commend the nation for dealing with major difficulties in a tolerable fashion on their own.

The first case introduces Micah, from the hill country of Ephraim, who builds a private sanctuary where he can worship the God of Israel. Within he places graven images, statuary and priestly garments; he even

appoints a Levite to act as priest.⁹⁵ Although contrary to ritual form as prescribed in the Tora, his efforts nevertheless are directed to the God of Israel, not to other gods. The only commentary on these activities is that “in those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his eyes.” The narrative then describes members of the tribe of Dan, who stop at Micah’s sanctuary in their migration northward in search of new territory to settle. In the end, they take with them all of Micah’s ritual implements—and his priest—in order to be able to worship the God of Israel in their new territory.⁹⁶

This episode certainly has its morally problematic aspects, in the Danites’ taking the graven images and the priest against the will of the sanctuary’s owner, and establishing a ritual of dubious legitimacy for the worship of God. But a positive interpretation seems more in keeping with how the arrival of the Danite emissaries at the sanctuary is described. There, they ask of the priest: “Please, inquire of God; we would like to know if our mission will be successful.” The response is unequivocal: “Go in peace,” the priest answers, “the Eternal views favorably the mission you are going on.”⁹⁷ The priest assures them that God is with them, and in fact the expedition of the Danites is totally successful. Thus, the sequence depicts a fundamentally positive course of action under difficult conditions—how an entire tribe of Israel, after failing in the basic existential task of establishing itself in its own territory, survives and even manages to find new territory where it can worship the God of its fathers.

The second episode describes the incident of the concubine at Gibeah.⁹⁸ A man from the tribe of Levi arrives with his concubine in the town of Gibeah, in the land of Benjamin. The Benjaminite townspeople take the concubine and rape and abuse her through the night, until she dies at daybreak. The Levite then cuts her body into pieces and sends them to all the tribes of Israel, as evidence of the horrendous act committed. The response of the people is furious and resolute: “And everyone who saw it cried out, ‘Never has such a thing happened or been seen from the day the Israelites came out of the land of Egypt to this day! Put your mind to this;

take counsel and decide.”⁹⁹ The tribes of Israel gather at Gibeah and demand that its inhabitants be punished by being put to the sword, but the tribe of Benjamin sends reinforcements to the town and refuses to hand over the perpetrators. The result is a civil war, spurred by the Israelites’ profound moral outrage against Benjamin for protecting its kinfolk rather than pursuing justice.

The war continues for three days. For the first two days the Benjaminites have the upper hand, killing thousands from the other tribes. At this point the Israelites hesitate. Wondering whether they were wrong to go to war, they turn to the sanctuary at Bethel and inquire of God: “Shall we again take the field against our kinsmen the Benjaminites, or shall we not?” The answer is clear and decisive: “Go up, for tomorrow I will deliver them into your hands.”¹⁰⁰ And indeed, on the third day, the Israelites rout Benjamin. The great majority of the recalcitrant tribe are killed, and their cities put to the torch. “Thereupon the Israelites dispersed, each to his own tribe and clan; everyone departed for his own territory. In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his eyes.”¹⁰¹

This episode is clearer than the earlier one: The people make a basic moral commitment, without king or judge to guide them, and act upon it. The alternative would have been to let the atrocity of Gibeah go unanswered—in other words, to allow a breach of the most fundamental moral standard for any society. The people also exhibit a profound sense of national responsibility when, afterward, they take steps to keep the tribe of Benjamin from being wiped out completely: Despite the tribe’s great sin, its few hundred refugees are allowed to marry women from the other tribes, thereby perpetuating their line. Here again, the people of Israel take independent action, guided solely by “what was right in their eyes.”

In both episodes the Israelites make independent moral decisions based on values inscribed in their consciousness by shared tradition and accepted values—a combination of natural morality and common sense on the national level. Both decisions receive an unequivocal, if indirect, seal of approval from on high: The Danites’ query to the priest in Micah’s sanctuary,

and the Israelites' question at Bethel, are answered with divine assurance of success, which is in fact realized.¹⁰²

These two instances in Judges, describing situations in which "everyone did what was right in his eyes," are connected to the fact that "there was no king in Israel," nor any judge or prophet—in other words, no institutionalized national leadership capable of showing the people the proper way. Consequently, the entire people had to take responsibility for its actions and act as best it could to the extent of its moral judgment—doing what was right in its eyes.

"Righteousness" in Judges, therefore, refers to the nation's ability to maintain a minimal moral standard even in the absence of moral leadership. Yet it cannot be overlooked that this book's conclusion also demonstrates just how far some segments of Israelite civilization had fallen, just how difficult a time the nation had in fulfilling the most elementary moral principles, to say nothing of maintaining an exemplary society. As the nation's story continues into the book of Samuel, the people conclude that if they continue under this kind of informal, improvised self-rule—benefiting in times of crisis from the leadership of judges, but lacking any permanent political system—they will have no chance of establishing a normal life for themselves in this land. Even their experience with Samuel, the greatest of the judges, does not change the people's decision. After some decades of successfully leading the nation, Samuel discovers that the people reject the ambiguous, unstable type of political regime that has held sway for centuries. They ask him to impose a new type of regime on Israel, "a king to govern us, like all the nations."¹⁰³ The Israelites want a permanent political order, as is common to all peoples: Central rule, an executive arm, tax collection, a standing army, binding legislation and the authority to impose it upon the public at large. To replace the voluntary, personal and limited leadership of judges and prophets, they seek a fixed type of regime with coercive powers—in short, they want a state.

From its first day, the new state is forced to contend with that unique Israelite tension between two frames of reference: Normative political life

according to the criteria applicable to every nation—national defense, economic prosperity, and the maintenance of law and order—together with the need to honor the higher moral criteria demanded by Israel’s special heritage. The ceremony to invest the monarchy reflects this tension, when Samuel turns to the entire people in assembly and asks them to testify that his leadership has been fair and free of injustice:

Then Samuel said to all Israel, “I have heeded your call in all you have asked of me, and have set a king over you. And now, the king will go before you. As for me, I have grown old and gray, but my sons are still with you, and I have led you from my youth until this day. Here I am—testify against me *before the Eternal and before his anointed*: Whose ox have I taken, whose ass have I taken? Whom have I defrauded, whom have I robbed? From whom have I taken a bribe to look the other way? I will return it to you.” They responded, “You have not defrauded us, you have not robbed us, you have not taken anything from anyone.” He said to them, “The Eternal is witness, and his anointed is witness against you this day that you have found nothing in my possession.” They responded, “Witness!”¹⁰⁴

The dual testimony that Samuel seeks, before God and king, refers to the two sets of criteria to which the Israelites must relate, the moral and the practical. But the matter does not end there. At the outset, Israel was granted a singular existential status—a direct link to God—but at a singular price: If Israel as a collective conducted its affairs in accordance with the laws of God, it would succeed; if it strayed from this path, in due course it would meet with failure. When the people now declare themselves no longer capable of meeting these conditions, they are granted the concession they seek—but this also carries a price.

With the establishment of the monarchy, a new relational status is created in which the state, represented by the king, takes on the primary responsibility for the people’s material and moral well-being. In the biblical conception, the political community’s central purpose is to fulfill

the obligations of “righteousness.” This new political-moral order introduces a fundamental change in the Jewish nation’s relationship with God: The people are no longer constantly required to meet the ideal moral level defined by the Tora; now their efforts focus on satisfying the minimal principles consistent with the basics of natural morality. This is not to say that Israel is abandoning its noble ideal of aspiring to fulfill the demands of divine law. It is, rather, an acknowledgment that this ideal is extremely difficult to realize, something that Israel can approach only at certain times, under special conditions and with great effort. As they look back over the period of judges, the Israelites realize that when given the freedom to choose the moral ideal without the “aid” of a coercive state, time and again they failed. With the creation of the monarchy, the possibility of reaching the minimal standard of “righteousness” increases because of the existence of coercive central power, but this power also makes the ideal of voluntary virtue all the harder to attain.

This ambiguous easing of moral demands exacts its price in that under monarchy, the Israelites are no longer to be judged directly before God, but through the public virtues of their king—that is, through their state. The people’s inability to maintain the high level of freedom and responsibility that it enjoyed in the period of the judges, under the direct sovereignty of God, is shown in Samuel’s plea to God: “Samuel was displeased that they said, ‘Give us a king to govern us.’ Samuel prayed to the Eternal, and the Eternal replied to Samuel, ‘Heed the demand of the people in everything they say to you. For it is not you whom they have reviled; it is me they have reviled, as their king.’”¹⁰⁵

From this point on the king and his deeds will decide the fate of Israel, both in relation to worldly affairs (whether within Israel or with other nations) and in relation to the divine. This is the essence of Samuel’s warning to the people about the cost of establishing the monarchy: “The day will come when you cry out because of the king whom you yourselves have chosen; and the Eternal will not answer you on that day.” But Israel’s response is that they have tried the more difficult road, and it has proved

too much for them: “But the people would not listen to Samuel’s warning. ‘No,’ they said. ‘We must have a king over us, that we may be like all the nations: Let our king rule over us and go out at our head and fight our battles.’”¹⁰⁶

Yet Israel is not “like all the nations.” Even with its monarchy, Israel, unlike any other people, must maintain a moral society combining its commitment to the ideal presented in the Tora with the sociopolitical realities common to every polity. This combination gives rise to the concept, unique to the political construct presented in the Bible, of the “righteous” community, a political community which acts in conformity with the criteria of universal natural morality. Placed within the tradition of the Tora, however, this is seen as merely the basis for more exalted moral aspirations.

From the time the monarchy is established to the destruction of the Temple, the state—through the king—is the barometer of Israel’s moral condition. The Israelites’ success or failure in meeting the necessary moral criteria of “righteousness” is judged according to the stature of the political community as a whole, as now embodied by the king. The people must bear the consequences of the monarchy they so desired, whether or not they agree with their rulers’ deeds. The sins of the wicked kings and the failures of the incompetent ones are visited upon the people, collectively, because these by definition are not private matters but failings of the state: The king is the heart of authority of the political commonwealth, and his sins, like his punishment, are matters of state. So long as the king does not transgress a small number of especially stringent moral prohibitions, God will not intervene, even if the people suffer greatly under the rule of an ineffectual or cruel king. From now on, the people and their king are judged as one.¹⁰⁷

The new criteria for judging the nation are evident in Samuel’s warning to the people at the coronation of the new king: “I will continue to instruct you in the good and right path. Above all, you must revere the Eternal and serve him faithfully with all your heart; and consider how grandly he has dealt with you. For if you persist in your wrongdoing, both you and your king will be swept away.”¹⁰⁸ Samuel enumerates three stages for the

proper conduct of affairs in the nascent state: Israel is commanded to walk in the “good and right path”; this way is depicted as leading them to serve God “with all their heart”; and they are enjoined not to engage in wrongdoing. What this “wrongdoing” is appears to be quite clear, as does the idea of serving God “with all your heart” as an ideal to which the people must aspire. But what is the “good and right path” for Israel to follow, that it may enjoy divine favor? Are these two words, “good” and “right,” merely poetic repetition, or do they refer to different things? Is the biblical “right” the same as the biblical “good”—or is it something else?

The answer lies in the description of another coronation ceremony, two generations later. As his reign draws to a close, King David speaks to his people, reviewing the path he has taken and summing up his career, before transferring the scepter to his son Solomon. Like the close of Samuel’s tenure, this too is occasion for taking stock, but of a far more tempestuous reign full of upheavals and complexities on both the personal and political levels. David states:

I know, God, that you search the heart and desire righteousness. I, *of righteous heart*, freely offered all these things; now your people, who are present here—I saw them joyously making voluntary offerings. O Eternal, God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, our fathers, remember this forever to the thoughts of your people’s hearts, and turn their hearts toward you. As for my son Solomon, give him a *perfect heart* to observe your commandments, your admonitions and your laws, and to fulfill them all, and to build this Temple which I have prepared.¹⁰⁹

David uses different terms to distinguish his reign from what he wishes for his son, and the difference has great significance. Of himself, David says that he acted “of righteous heart,” but he asks God to grant his son a “perfect heart.” A comparison of David’s summary with the earlier speech by Samuel indicates the significance of these two wordings. While stating that he acted with righteousness, David hints that perhaps he did not act with a perfect

heart; for this is what he desires of his son. What was lacking in David's reign that he could not describe himself as having acted with a "perfect heart"? His use of the word "righteous" while avoiding the word "good" may explain Samuel's equation of decades before: The ideal that David wishes for Solomon is the perfect heart, composed of two elements, the "right" and the "good"—but David himself succeeded only in the first.¹¹⁰

This biblical distinction between "right" and "good" in relation to the deeds of kings emerges time and again, in the summary of each king's reign, a sort of moral scorecard provided by the biblical narrative. Of Jehu, the king of Israel who eliminated the cult of Ba'al and restored the rites of the God of Israel that had been accepted in the northern kingdom,¹¹¹ it is said: "The Eternal said to Jehu 'Because you have succeeded in doing what was right in my eyes, having carried out all that I desired upon the house of Ahab, four generations of your descendants shall occupy the throne of Israel.' But Jehu was not careful to follow the Tora of the Eternal, the God of Israel, with all his heart; he did not turn away from the sins that Jeroboam had caused Israel to commit."¹¹² Jehu took care to do what was "right," but not what was "good": The text plainly states that he did not "follow the Tora of the Eternal ... with all his heart." In other words, his eliminating what was evil—destroying the cult of Ba'al and deposing the house of Ahab—demonstrated his "righteousness," and the merit of this would endow the line of Jehu with long years in power. Still, these acts were not what was "good"—the full observance of the laws and ideals of the Tora.

This classification system marks the biblical verdicts on other kings, as well. Jehoshaphat's reign, for example, was generally considered positive; still, he did not correct the worship of other gods in the land. Accordingly, the Bible avers that "he followed all the ways of his father Asa and did not turn aside from doing what was right in the eyes of the Eternal."¹¹³ Similar statements are made about Amaziah, Azariah, Jotham and others.¹¹⁴ The summary description of Amaziah is particularly explicit: "He did what was right in the eyes of the Eternal, but not with a perfect heart."¹¹⁵

As against all these—as well as, obviously, the many kings who were simply evil—there were two kings, Hezekiah and Asa, who are said to have done both right and good, and only they are described as having served God “with all his heart” or “with a perfect heart,” as monarchs who not only were politically successful, but also instituted religious reforms to eradicate idolatry. Of Hezekiah, the Bible relates: “Hezekiah did this throughout Judah. He acted in a way that was good, right and true before the Eternal his God. Every work he undertook in the service of the house of God or in the Tora and the commandments, to worship his God, he did with all his heart; and he succeeded”;¹¹⁶ and of Asa it is written: “Asa did what was good and right in the eyes of the Eternal his God.”¹¹⁷ Although Asa’s efforts to eliminate idolatry meet with only partial success, they won him the epithet “good,” which also made it possible to describe his heart as perfect: “The shrines, indeed, were not abolished in Israel; however, Asa was of perfect heart all his life.”¹¹⁸

Thus, the kings the Bible describes as “righteous” are those who meet the criteria of natural morality: They directed the affairs of state while observing the basic social and moral standards, and refraining from unambiguously evil sins. But only those righteous kings who also sought to realize the *ideal* of Tora observance are described as being of “perfect heart,” as combining what is good with what is right—even if, like Asa, they were less than perfectly successful.

With this in mind, the full significance of the biblical “righteousness” comes to light: It refers to the observance of those moral principles common to all humanity and demanded of every person, including those unfamiliar with the Tora.¹¹⁹ The book of Proverbs emphasizes such conduct in the personal realm, and Judges, Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, among others, relate to “what is right” mainly in the public and national spheres. Thus, biblical “righteousness” expresses a political vision that embraces the minimal moral criteria that Israel is expected to meet, including both the private and public dimensions.

The most exhaustive treatment of the biblical idea of righteousness is given in the context of the first Israelite king, Saul. His story is important because it offers a clear picture of the royal conflict between fulfilling God's ideal moral commands, and meeting the demands of one's constituency, the people.¹²⁰ The source of the schism goes back to God's charging Saul with the duty to attack the Amalekites and destroy them totally, together with all that belongs to them. Instead, at the moment of victory, "Saul and the troops spared Agag [king of Amalek] and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the second born, the lambs, and all else that was of value. They would not proscribe them; they proscribed only what was cheap and worthless."¹²¹ Contrary to God's order, Saul and the people spare the choice spoils and the king Agag, who is described as someone whose "sword bereaved women."¹²² This blatant disregard of God's command leads the judge Samuel to challenge Saul directly: "Why did you disobey the Eternal and fly upon the spoil, and do what was evil in the eyes of the Eternal?"¹²³ Saul's instinct is to try to extricate himself, by declaring: "I have fulfilled the Eternal's command!"¹²⁴ He then explains that the spoils are meant for the altar of the Eternal. Finally, Saul is forced to admit, "I did wrong to transgress the Eternal's command and your instructions; but I was afraid of the people and I yielded to them."¹²⁵ The cause of the debacle, in other words, is the conflict between the two sources of royal legitimacy: The will of the people who established the monarchy, and the command of God who confirmed the institution. Saul's sin was that instead of attempting to integrate the two demands upon him, he chose the "easy" route of surrendering to the will of the people.

Because of this episode, and despite entreaties from both Saul and Samuel, God strips Saul's reign of divine sanction.¹²⁶ Still, Israel's first king is not removed from the throne, nor is there any demand that he abdicate. Saul continues to rule for another generation, but without the benefit of God's help: A loss of divine legitimacy does not by itself justify deposing the king, as long as he fulfills his basic obligations in accordance with natural morality. From this time forward, however, Saul's reign lacks heavenly mandate, and is based solely on the public's consent.¹²⁷

Even David, who is anointed the successor king by divine command, never challenges Saul's right to rule—not even when Saul tries to kill him. Here the Bible delivers a very clear message. David is the newly anointed, divinely ordained king, and his own life is in danger at the hands of the king from whom divine favor had been withdrawn decades earlier. It would seem that, more than anyone else, he would be entitled to take Saul's life. Yet both times David is presented with an opportunity to kill Saul, he declares he will not raise his hand against an Israelite king. David's position underscores the biblical understanding of political authority: Even when the monarch no longer enjoys divine grace, by virtue of his public mandate to seek the path of righteousness for his people the king remains the embodiment of the public sphere. As such, he must not be harmed, even under the most extreme provocation.¹²⁸

Saul's demise comes only by his own misdeeds, when his poor judgment relating to the Philistines allows them to launch an attack at a most unpropitious time, during a period of discord within Israel. Saul marches into a hopeless battle at Gilboa, and the Philistine army crushes the Israelites. But even here Saul faithfully fulfills his role as monarch: He battles valiantly and is not afraid to die; his only fear is that the kingdom's honor and the people's morale will suffer. And rather than face disgrace at the hands of the Philistines, he chooses to fall on his own sword, thereby fulfilling what natural morality demands of a worthy king: Despite his many mistakes, to the end he acts courageously and with boundless devotion to his nation.

During the First Temple period, descriptions of the deeds performed in pursuit of righteousness—what the rabbis describe as “honor to him who adopts it”¹²⁹—were collected in *The Book of the Righteous*, a record of the honorable and heroic acts of Israel, most likely written in the style of ancient Hebrew poetry. This book has not survived, other than a single significant passage that is quoted in the book of Samuel.¹³⁰ This is David's lament over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, arguably the most sublime expression of biblical righteousness. Among biblical texts, this poem is

exceptional in that it contains no address to the Creator, nor reference to the Tora: It is an entirely human lament over the courageous deeds of Saul and Jonathan for their people. A sort of three-thousand-year-old precursor to the “Song of Comradeship” of modern Israel’s Palmach fighters, its purpose is simply stated: “And David intoned this dirge over Saul and his son Jonathan. He ordered that the Judeans be taught the bow—it is recorded in *The Book of Righteousness*.”¹³¹

David bewails a flesh-and-blood king whose deeds do not merit God’s blessing because of his sins against heaven. Still, he is worthy of being extolled for his contribution to the nation, as one who brought the state into being and devoted most of his life to strengthening and defending it. This lament teaches both of Saul’s heroism on behalf of Israel, and of his errors, to serve as a lesson in political leadership for the future—“that the Judeans be taught the bow”:

Your glory, O Israel, lies slain on your heights;
How have the mighty fallen!
Tell it not in Gath, do not proclaim it in the streets of Ashkelon,
Lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice, lest the daughters
 of the uncircumcised exult.
O hills of Gilboa—
Let there be no dew or rain on you, or bountiful fields,
For there the shield of warriors lay rejected, the shield of Saul,
 polished with oil no more.
From the blood of slain, from the fat of warriors—
The bow of Jonathan never turned back;
The sword of Saul never withdrew empty.
Saul and Jonathan, beloved and cherished,
Never parted in life or in death!
They were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions!
Daughters of Israel, weep over Saul,
Who clothed you in crimson and finery, who decked your robes
 with jewels of gold.
How have the mighty fallen in the thick of battle—

Jonathan, slain on your heights!
I grieve for you, my brother Jonathan,
You were most dear to me.
Your love was more wonderful to me than the love of women.
How have the mighty fallen, the weapons of war perished!¹³²

VI. A Land without Soil

The biblical idea of “righteousness” denoted more than a standard of moral behavior. It assumed an entire cultural, social and national reality in which the Israelites lived as a sovereign nation in the land of their forefathers. As this reality weakened following the destruction of the First Temple, the term became increasingly irrelevant. During the Second Temple period, the land of Israel was still the center of Jewish life, yet this was already an attenuated national existence, characterized by a growing diaspora and significant limitations upon political and cultural independence. Even the autonomy under the Hasmoneans was limited and problematic. And after the fall of the Second Temple, the experience of exile came to dominate Jewish culture and society. In the words of R. Abraham Ibn Ezra, in his enigmatic poem “A Land without Soil”: “If the king is desolate, no soul shall live.”¹³³

At the time of the Mishna, the term “righteousness” was still employed with its biblical meaning, at least by some rabbis. For example, “Rabbi says: What is the righteous course that a man should choose for himself? That which brings honor to him who adopts it, and brings him honor from men.”¹³⁴ This dictum preserves the term’s original sense of that which springs from man without explicit external guidance, and meets the moral criteria on which the world is based—and is therefore something which brings honor to the Creator as well. Such a statement could easily have been made about a number of the Israelite kings, such as Saul and Jehu.

Still, during this period “righteousness” was already fading out of use. The old Israelite conservatism increasingly lacked any sovereign-national application, and the Jewish people no longer shared the common experience of living in one land, under self-rule. This era saw the gradual rise of the phrase “the way of the world,” which to a large degree symbolized the new reality and would supplant the biblical “righteousness.” As mentioned above, this term was employed by the Sages in reference to the exile and the return after the destruction of the First Temple. At that time, according to the tradition, the people possessed the “way of the world,” something which was no longer true by the time of the Second Temple’s destruction.¹³⁵ This usage reflects a post-biblical perspective, because it relates to the people’s separation from the land of Israel. The rabbinic concept of the “way of the world” describes the complex of values and deeds originating in that land which, by the time the statements were made, was no more.¹³⁶

Although “righteousness” was still mentioned in the mishnaic period, by then the term clearly belonged to the past. It would be replaced by the “way of the world” in statements like that of R. Nehunya ben Hakana: “Whoever casts off the yoke of the Tora, upon him are placed the yoke of government and the yoke of the way of the world.”¹³⁷ This dictum already assumes a dichotomy between political leadership (“the yoke of government”) and a proper way of life (“the yoke of the way of the world”), since apparently no single term now encompassed both concepts—as had the biblical “righteousness.”¹³⁸

The disassociation of the “way of the world” from political concerns paralleled the loss of the common political and geographical experience that the Jewish people had enjoyed. The effect was to transform the Tora from being the shared but specifically spiritual heritage of Israel, into being the people’s *only* shared existential realm. The Tora and its study became, to an increasing extent, the only experience common to Jews living in communities dispersed across the diaspora, in such distant places as Yemen, Persia, Italy and Spain. The result was a strong, steady erosion of the ancient Israelite conservative tradition.

Cognizant of the danger, the rabbis struggled against this erosion to the best of their ability. They repeatedly issued clear calls, which were surprisingly forceful at times, reminding the people of the vital importance of the “way of the world” to maintaining a proper way of life, no less vital than the Tora itself.¹³⁹ In rabbinic teaching, the “way of the world” is generally represented as a discrete topic, separate from the Tora and its study, but nevertheless a part—and even an essential element—of the proper way of life, which is needed for Tora study as well. A prime example of this is the well-known dictum of R. El’azar ben Azaria: “Where there is no Tora, there is no way of the world; where there is no way of the world, there is no Tora.”¹⁴⁰

Certainly the rabbis always viewed the Tora as the source of ideal morality and good. They were also aware, however, that exclusive occupation with Tora at the expense of other things—something which the circumstances of exile encouraged—was liable to lead to attacks on natural morality and common sense, under the justification of a presumed adherence to the Tora. In the rabbis’ opinion, it was just this phenomenon that had led to the destruction of the Second Temple. This understanding is concisely summarized in the statement: “One who is well-versed in Bible, Mishna and the way of the world will not be quick to sin, as it is said, ‘A threefold cord is not easily broken.’¹⁴¹ But one who lacks Bible, Mishna and the way of the world does not belong to civilization.”¹⁴² In accordance with this precept, the “way of the world” recurs in the Mishna, the Talmud and the commentaries on them, and is even the subject of two entire tractates of tannaitic statements, *Derech Eretz Raba* and *Derech Eretz Zuta*.¹⁴³

But the reality of the Jews in exile was not static. As time passed, the difficulties of exile intensified, from the division and isolation of communities to religious persecutions and restrictions on Jewish occupations and residence areas. Despite the rabbis’ efforts, as more of the Jewish people’s existence was limited to the realm of the individual and the small community, the entire “way of the world” idea was gradually stripped of weight and depth, and increasingly narrowed in application.¹⁴⁴ Thus, its use in the

sense of “manners”—the most well known and widely accepted meaning of the term today—can be found in such dicta as: “R. Yehoshua knocked on the door [at that time an uncommon courtesy], and the philosopher thought to himself and said, ‘This can only be the way of the world of a rabbi.’”¹⁴⁵ It was also used in related contexts, such as hygiene and appearance (“The Tora taught the way of the world: In the garments in which one cooked a dish for his master, one should not pour a cup for his master”¹⁴⁶), and modesty in public (“He said to them, ‘Whoever drinks from the hand of a bride is regarded as if he drinks from the hand of a harlot.’ They said to him, ‘But all Israelite maidens possess the way of the world’”¹⁴⁷). Another principal use of the term in the Talmud is to describe a balanced and worthwhile way of life (“It is the way of the world that a man should first build a house, plant a vineyard, and then take a wife”¹⁴⁸), and in other contexts the term is synonymous with labor, occupation and livelihood.¹⁴⁹ This is how, for example, the earlier mentioned teaching of R. Nehunya ben Hakana (“Whoever casts off the yoke of the Tora, upon him are placed the yoke of government and the yoke of the way of the world”) had come to be interpreted by the time of R. Ovadia of Bertinoro in the sixteenth century: “*The yoke of government*—the burden of a king and government ministers; *the way of the world*—the labor and trouble of livelihood, so that one’s labor will be blessed.”¹⁵⁰ In later generations, the term frequently appears with the limited meaning of a person’s profession, as in Rashi’s commentary on the Talmud: “*The way of the world*—if he is an artisan, this refers to his craft; if he is a merchant, to his goods; if he is a warrior, to his war”¹⁵¹—to which may be added other uses, reflecting various shades of meaning for the term.¹⁵²

Other Tora scholars, such as R. Menahem ben Shlomo Meiri in the late thirteenth century, still understood the “way of the world” in a sense close to its original meaning, as related to the biblical idea of “righteousness.” Meiri writes in his commentary on the Mishna:

It is known that the “way of the world” is the term for attributes and morals a man requires for his political behavior. The Tora clearly states

on this matter: The commandment of the Tora that is meant to lead a person on the righteous path in his behaviors. It must be stated at the outset that if it were not for the commandment of the Tora and man's subjugation to it, he would not be perfect in the "way of the world" that comes to him by himself and by natural means, even if he were perfectly prepared, because he cannot reach the completion attained by Tora methods for those who uphold them. Similarly, if a person has no natural preparation for this, the commandments of the Tora will not suffice for him to attain this perfection, because the commandments cause a person to be upright generally, and they cannot take notice of the small details that are constantly renewed, and which require ethics and the "way of the world."¹⁵³

At the time this was written, however, the reference to "attributes and morals a man requires for his political behavior" had already become the exception that proved the rule. Over time the exilic experience continued to drain more and more meaning from the "way of the world," leaving in use only those few aspects known today. These were inherited from the reality of the Jews' living in communities scattered in foreign societies, and having only restricted ties with the broader social and political orders of the countries where they dwelled.

The limitation of its original meaning has made the "way of the world" today mainly a synonym for manners (in Hebrew, *nimus*)—a synonym, however, that may contain the beginnings of the road toward renewing the original sense of this term. In modern Hebrew, *nimus*, like the "way of the world," refers primarily to accepted conduct towards others, but initially it, too, had a much broader import. It came into Hebrew from the Greek *nomos*, meaning law or set custom. In Greek philosophy, this term was understood as the opposite of *logos*, meaning "word" or "rational wisdom," from which "logic" is derived. In other words, these terms present the same fundamental distinction concerning how human affairs can be conducted most properly: The "logical," revolutionary way of pure intellect, or the conservative approach of custom and common sense—of the "way of the

world.” Thus, in the spirit of Meiri’s statement that “the other nations do not have Tora, only *nimus*,”¹⁵⁴ the Jewish nation may learn from other peoples which have successfully maintained a worthwhile national way of life over time, by keeping faith with the roots of their *nomos*—their conservative tradition. In order to construct a lasting, proper society, the Jewish people as well must once again connect with the roots of their “way of the world.”

VII. The Song of Moses

The “way of the world,” then, is the ancient root of what could be a revived Jewish conservatism. Deeply embedded in the cultural traditions of our people, it defines the Jewish people’s common sense, and the basic moral truths without which they could not have survived. Although it is now but a faint echo of what was once a great and venerated melody, it still lives within us, half-hidden, yet guiding the instincts of our nation. Without our noticing, it makes itself felt in our daily lives, in a thousand minor customs, sayings and connections—even as we remain ignorant of its identity.

Today there is particular need for reinvigorating the ancient Israelite conservative spirit. This is a time of perpetual revolution, of the constant emergence of new, conflicting movements which, again and again, seek to remake the world on new foundations. In such an era, an articulation of the greatest and oldest conservative idea—one whose contributions to the world and to the Jewish national ethos are without parallel—can stand in the breach against the onslaught of revolutionary forces, and in defense of what is eternal. The “way of the world” lives on today in many traditions, intuitions and concepts. But these must be brought to light, that they may coalesce into a common worldview that can speak to the variegated communities of the Jewish people of today, in Israel and in the diaspora. And because the desire for such

a common vocabulary transcends the need to share in a common past, it must also seek to understand the problems of the present, and offer a vision of a great future.

This is an enormous task. After so many generations of exile, we suffer from a severe warping of the national consciousness, which is likely to continue for many years to come. We may draw encouragement, however, from the great successes of Zionism. These reflect upon the fundamentally conservative instincts of Israel, mature instincts that seek only the opportunity to reassert themselves. The revival of the Hebrew language, the return of a large number of the people to a considerable part of its land, the reestablishment of the Jewish state—these are among the colossal achievements of a conservative worldview that sought to renew itself by building upon its great past, that preferred the practical to the abstract, and that saw itself as carrying forward the flame of the Jewish people's history. The very idea of Zionism, of the need for the Jewish nation to take responsibility for its own future within a political context, is an expression of a conservative view of human nature, a recognition of the dangers awaiting a people that entrusts its fate to others. And a renewed "way of the world" can constitute the foundation upon which the Zionist enterprise may reach fulfillment: The consolidation of an enduring national experience that will enable Israel to extricate itself from the confusion it experiences today, and adopt a clear direction.

Renewing the original "way of the world," and restoring it to the dimensions of a national-political "righteousness," will require a broad cultural awakening, a reassertion of the Jewish conservative tradition in society, art, culture and politics. This conservatism must speak on behalf of the nation's collective memory, which at present is consistently undermined; on behalf of rediscovering the past as a living tradition; and on behalf of the truth of a moral present which can be learned only from the lessons of the past—what Burke called a "partnership between present and past" for a meaningful future.¹⁵⁵

Today we may be realizing the message of the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy, which calls Israel by its poetic name “Jeshurun”—a cognate of *yashar*, or “righteous.” This text predicts that after returning to the land of Israel and eating and drinking of its bounty, “Jeshurun grew fat, and kicked,”¹⁵⁶ basking in its windfall while losing sight of its original mission. Today, too, the Jewish people find themselves having traversed the terrible desert of exile and arrived in their promised land, only to lose sight of their original vision, their guiding principles. Yet the Song of Moses also proposes a remedy, one we ignore at our peril: A common denominator which will also be a movement embracing the disparate elements of the Jewish people while restoring a righteous political order: “Then there will be a King in Jeshurun, when the heads of the people assemble, the tribes of Israel together.”¹⁵⁷

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Notes

1. Leviticus Raba 9:3.
2. From “They Say: There Is a Land (*Omrin: Yeshna Eretz*),” in Saul Tchernichovsky, *Selected Poems* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1965), p. 210. [Hebrew]
3. Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell, 1984), p. 62. See also Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley: University of California, 1993), pp. 131-132.
4. These terms relate only in the broadest sense to the worldviews represented by conservatism and revolutionary thought, and it would be incorrect to reduce their meaning to ordinary political identity. Admittedly, they constitute the foundation for today’s distinction between the political “Right” and “Left,” but no great effort is required to discover inconsistencies between the views and deeds of a political camp, and the philosophical principles on which it is presumably based.

To understand the conservative or revolutionary nature of a political act requires exploring not how it is termed in public rhetoric, but its significance to the preservation or overturning of social and political dispositions, traditions and institutions. British conservatives extol an event in English history known as “the Glorious Revolution,” as conservatives in the United States do the American Revolution: In the conservative view, both of these episodes preserved or restored the basics of the traditional sociopolitical order in the face of existential threats. The French and Bolshevik Revolutions are viewed by conservatives as catastrophes, however, because they constituted open breaks with the past and the creation *ex nihilo* of a new sociopolitical order.

Those holding revolutionary beliefs, on the other hand, *want* to dismantle the foundations of the old order. The more moderate among them champion the steady erosion of the conservative order and the creation of a revolutionary society through gradual reform, whereas their more impatient comrades attempt to effect a complete change through revolutionary deeds more extreme than any that have gone before. Each revolutionary “failure” to establish the model society—in France, Russia, Germany, China, Cambodia—teaches them the same lesson: The sought-after new era did not reach the light of day because the revolutionary rampage was insufficiently intense, cruel and unbridled. Next time, they promise themselves, they will try harder.

5. The first revolutionary trend can be called the “natural” approach since it connects moral good with man’s natural tendencies, on an intrinsic, almost biological level. The second revolutionary trend can be called the “utilitarian” approach: If there are no absolute values, perforce anything that people or societies decide is useful—decisions they are capable of arriving at rationally—is right or “good” for them. (And it is impossible, from the standpoint of values, to censure a society that has decided, for example, to purge itself of those it considers useless.) Thus the utilitarian and the natural schools reach the identical conclusion, that human actions deriving from man’s natural inclinations are desirable.

6. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, on Bias, 88a.

7. See the verdict delivered by the Barotse elders in a trial concerning a family dispute: “We have the power to make you divide the crops, for this is our law, and we will see this is done. But we have not the power to make you behave like an upright man.” Cited in Patrick Devlin, *The Enforcement of Morals* (London: Oxford, 1965), p. 20.

8. Plato, *The Republic*, 372d.

9. Among the Christian sects of this type were the extreme Anabaptists of the Middle Ages, and the Taiping in China during the second half of the nineteenth century; in Jewish history, the Sabbateans and Frankists of the seventeenth and

eighteenth centuries; and in the history of Islam, the messianic uprising in 1164 by the extremist Isma'elite sect known as the "Hash'shashin."

10. It has also been common for modern revolutionary movements to garb themselves in quasi-religious form and fervor, from the French Revolution—which attempted to establish state rites for the "religion of reason"—to Communism and Nazism, which argued that the old rules, religion and even structure of society should be cast aside in light of the inevitable progress of absolute, "scientific" truth leading man to his natural state (for the former, this being the era of Communist world order; for the latter, a racist utopia).

11. "It is plain that human reason unassisted failed men in its great and proper business of morality. It never from unquestionable principles, by clear deductions, made out an entire body of the 'law of nature.'" John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1997), p. 140.

12. Plato, *The Republic*, 501b-c.

13. Plato, *The Republic*, 500b-c.

14. Plato, *The Republic*, 501e.

15. Aristotle, *Politics*, Book 8, 1268b.

16. Aristotle, *Politics*, Book 1, 1253a. See also in the same passage his widely known definition of man as a "political animal."

17. Plato, *The Republic*, 501a.

18. In 213 B.C.E. Shih Huang-Ti, the first emperor to unify China, burned all "unnecessary" books—that is, all books that lacked the Emperor's imprimatur, or did not relate to technical subjects such as agriculture, medicine or astrology—in order to shape the character of his subjects in the best image, as he saw it. And it is said that after the conquest of Alexandria in 641 C.E., the caliph Omar was asked what to do with the city's great library, the most important repository of written works in the ancient world. Omar replied, "Burn the libraries, because all their worth is to be found in the Koran." Later, after the end of the revolutionary phase of Islam, this religion also fell under the sway of conservative thought, which valued the preservation and study of ancient texts and is credited with saving many of them from oblivion. The Voltaire citation is from Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics* (London: Methuen, 1962), p. 5.

19. Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 595.

20. The most comprehensive attempt to realize a new revolutionary society in which the goodness of human nature would find its full expression was the

Communist regime founded by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia in 1975, under the leadership of Pol Pot. The Khmer Rouge declared the beginning of their rule to be “Year Zero,” when everything in Cambodia would start over: Cities were evacuated, the professions and all signs of education, even the wearing of eye-glasses, were abolished, money and private property were done away with, and all evidence of the traditional culture, including the old books, was obliterated, as was even the family. Those who did not properly adapt to the new situation were diagnosed as incurable carriers of the “virus” of the hated past, who should therefore be liquidated. Within three years the Khmer Rouge succeeded in killing almost two million of Cambodia’s people (nearly one-third the total population) before the country was rescued from this madness by the invasion of the Vietnamese army. David Chandler, *Brother Number One* (Oxford: Westview, 1992), pp. 120-137.

21. See, for example, David Gurevitz, *Post-modernism* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1997), pp. 24-28. [Hebrew]

22. Another revolutionary, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, approvingly christened this platonic society “civil promiscuity.” Allan Bloom, *Love and Friendship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), p. 440.

23. See, for example, Hillel Halkin, “Feminizing Jewish Studies,” *Commentary*, February 1998, pp. 39-45.

24. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Penguin, 1954), p. 197.

25. Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” in *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), p. 51.

26. Robert Frost, “Mending Wall,” in *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1973), pp. 43-44.

27. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (New York: Penguin, 1968), p. 49.

28. Eugene Pottier, “The Internationale,” traditional translation of Charles Kerr.

29. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Oxford: Oxford, 1993), p. 19. See also Niccolo Machiavelli, *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Livy*, Book 1, chapter 3.

30. Burke, *Reflections*, p. 58.

31. Burke, *Reflections*, p. 64.

32. Vico, *New Science*, p. 60.

33. Vico, *New Science*, pp. 97-98. It is interesting to note the similarity to the rabbinical “die rather than transgress” prohibitions.

34. Vico, *New Science*, p. 98.

35. Vico, *New Science*, p. 67. The conservative attitude regarding the existence of absolute human values, which Vico shares, has always, and especially in recent times, been under attack by the relativists among the revolutionaries. They cannot tolerate the conservative concept of there being universal absolute moral concepts that every individual and society are capable of acknowledging—and if not, should remove themselves from the society of others. Revolutionaries, who subscribe to the approach that human morality is subject to transient human agreement, without absolute good or evil, point to presumably cultured and developed societies in which the eating of human sacrifices was accepted practice, to substantiate their claim that even such a horrendous act cannot be condemned by universal moral criteria. Conservatives rejected this approach. An example is the highly influential address delivered by the prominent Spanish Catholic theologian (and priest-confessor to Emperor Charles V), Domingo de Soto, who explained his condemnation of cannibalism and other transgressions by the natives of the American continent not in terms of Christian morality, of which the natives had no knowledge, but rather on the basis of the moral and natural order of all humanity. Friedrich Heer, *The Holy Roman Empire* (New York: Praeger, 1968), pp. 171-172. In support of this position, it should be noted that even among developed cultures which engaged in human sacrifice and cannibalism as normative practices, a feeling of their problematic nature in principle bubbled to the surface, spontaneously, as it were, and they oftentimes expected divine retribution for these acts as offending the natural moral order.

Two examples suffice to demonstrate this. The first is state rites of human sacrifice by the ancient Romans over the course of centuries, engaged in by Julius Caesar, Trajan, Aurelian, Commodus and others. Many Roman citizens experienced a growing sense of unease with what Pliny termed these “monstrous rites.” The Romans often tried to conceal this practice, and several times attempted to outlaw it, during the Republic as well as during the reigns of Augustus and Hadrian. The recurring legislation, however, demonstrates that the rite continued until the rise of Christianity in the fourth century c.e. Lord Acton, “Human Sacrifice,” in *Essays in Religion, Politics and Morality* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1988), pp. 395-442. While it may be argued that the shame the Romans experienced over this practice was influenced by Greek and Jewish criticism, a second example may be cited from a culture where this shame developed with no external influence. The Aztecs, who at the beginning of the sixteenth century were masters of a flourishing empire extending over a substantial portion of Central America, established a regime which gave a central role to mass rites of human sacrifice and cannibalism, symbolizing the might and success of the empire. But significant

circles within the Aztec elite felt that their cult of human sacrifice was contrary to some basic existential justice, which would eventually take its revenge and bring disaster upon them. Aztec narratives relate that one of their idols, Quetzalcoatl, condemned human sacrifice; when they did not heed him, he left and journeyed westward to the sea, promising that one day he would return and punish them for the evil they had done. When the first small band of Spanish conquistadors arrived, many Aztecs, led by their king Montezuma, regarded them as the agents of heavenly retribution for the detestable practice. Their anticipation of disaster and sense of guilt are considered significant factors in the Aztec empire's rapid and complete collapse. See Hugh Thomas, *Conquest* (New York: Touchstone, 1993).

36. Vico, *New Science*, p. 63.

37. Vico, *New Science*, pp. 63-65.

38. Within Confucianism is a debate over the basic question of whether human nature is good, as was claimed by Meng-Tzu, or evil, as maintained by the stream headed by Hsun-Tzu. In practice, however, all Confucianists agree that the way to achieve proper and upright behavior is to uphold traditional moral and social principles—the conservative understanding of the need for restraining the destructive potential in human nature. It is worth noting the similarities between the spirit and framework of Confucianism and those of the Noahide laws in the Israelite tradition. See also Arthur Cotterell, *China: A History* (London: Pimlico, 1990), pp. 68-76.

39. Legalism rose to prominence during a period when the whole of China was united under the rule of its first emperor, Shih Huang-Ti. He sought to establish a new order and maintain precise and detailed supervision of all human activity, on a utilitarian basis, through complete subordination of everyone to the imperial will. To this end, all books were burned (among them the Confucianist texts) that were of no benefit to imperial rule, or were likely to lead to challenges to the emperor's commands. This experiment did not last more than a few years after the first emperor's death, and with the fall of his dynasty Legalism also came to an end.

Even in the modern age, Communism in China made tremendous efforts to erase the Confucianist tradition, which it considered the symbol of backwardness and of the past, but to no avail. Today Communist ideas are dying out, and one finds a growing willingness in mainland China to accept Confucianism as a positive social force which contributes to public life a dimension of "accepted wisdom," and whose power and influence are constantly on the rise. Cotterell, *China*, pp. 68-76.

40. Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, verse 19; and note, for example, verse 32. See also Cotterell, *China*, pp. 68-76.

41. Here the term is used according to its meaning in ordinary speech. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (Springfield: Merriam, 1970), vol. III, p. 2588. The term is used with varying meanings in different philosophical traditions, from ancient times through the Middle Ages and into the development of Cartesian philosophy. See the discussion on this point in Funkenstein, *Perceptions*, p. 235. In Italian the parallel term is *buonsenso* (literally, "good sense").

42. This view was particularly powerful in England, where even the constitution was never formulated in a single document, but rather through the gradual accumulation of customs and legislation. One might term this the constitution of received law.

43. Devlin, *Enforcement*, p. 15.

44. Burke, *Reflections*, p. 5.

45. The reader should be warned against misunderstandings likely to arise from the fact that in our time many revolutionary thinkers have tried to change the significance of the term by associating it with schools of thought in which it is synonymous with a form of rationalism (in the philosophy of John Dewey, or in Thomas Reid's term "common sense realism").

46. William Butler Yeats, "The Seven Sages," in *The Works of W.B. Yeats* (Ware: Wordsworth, 1994), p. 204.

47. Burke, *Reflections*, p. 87. It should be noted, however, that according to the conservative view, recognition of and respect for the past are not sufficient to reap its benefits; it is also necessary to prevent the heritage of the past from becoming an empty conglomeration of old customs or a historical past disconnected from the present. A view which sanctifies a prevalent custom or opinion for its own sake expresses a morally relativistic philosophy—the opposite of conservatism. The conservative philosophy seeks to create an improved society by implanting abstract moral principles within frameworks of accepted custom and wisdom, thus constraining them from becoming extreme. In this way it also constrains the accepted wisdom, preventing it from transforming practical virtues and customs into principle for their own sake because they are continually tested against the moral principles that form the basis of society. In other words it maintains checks and balances which, according to conservatives, are the high road to an improved society.

48. Burke, *Reflections*, pp. 31-33.

49. Burke, *Reflections*, p. 149.

50. Friedrich Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994), p. 47.

51. George Washington's Farewell Address, September 19, 1796; Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, first published in 1835. This work deals extensively with the vital role of religion in upholding the political system in the United States.

52. Burke, *Reflections*, pp. 93-94.

53. Burke, *Reflections*, pp. 90-92.

54. Joseph de Maistre, cited in Jacob Talmon, *Political Messianism* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1960), p. 314. On religion as the basis of civil order and cultural existence, see also Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chapter 26.

55. Talmon, *Political Messianism*, p. 314.

56. A few examples (from among many) will suffice: In the biblical period, the book of Proverbs repeatedly emphasizes the fundamental importance of maintaining tradition and transmitting it through the family (for example, Proverbs 6:20; and Proverbs 4:1, 7:1); and the Sages express these ideas in sayings such as "The general principle is that one should not deviate from the prevailing custom." *Derech Eretz Zuta* 1; *Baba Metzia* 86b. Cf. *Avoda Zara* 5b, and Yigael Yadin, *Bar Kochba* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971), p. 134. Also consider the popular celebration of Lag Ba'omer, a tradition with distinctively nationalistic overtones and expressing the popular view regarding Bar Kochba and his struggle, which the Jewish people preserved in custom throughout the period of exile, even though this holiday is not mentioned in the Bible, Mishna, Talmud or any of the sayings of the Sages—and, in fact, it is not known what exactly is being celebrated.

57. Thus, for example, one of England's great statesmen, Benjamin Disraeli (himself of Jewish origin), held that the Western conservative worldview represented the modern expression of ancient Israelite moral principles. See Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind* (Washington: Regnery, 1995), p. 261.

58. The main problem in trying to understand the Jewish conservative tradition may be that it does not often explicitly identify itself as such. This is because the vast majority of the Jewish people's thought and tradition from biblical times until today have been conservative, so that the use of the term in this context has lost all significance. The unique synthesis of the political with the religious in the history of the Jewish people meant that revolutionary thinkers or groups quickly found themselves beyond the pale, unless they recanted. This is not to imply that there never were (and are not now) revolutionary thinkers and movements in Jewish culture; rather, that in general the characteristic structure of this culture has forced them to the margins in the wake of the central stream of thought and life, which is clearly conservative.

59. Genesis 3:22. Translations from the Bible are based (often loosely) on the new JPS translation. *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988).

60. Genesis 6:5, 8:21; also Ecclesiastes 7:29 and Psalms 25:21.

61. The subject and ramifications of the notion of “natural morality” are too vast to treat in any depth here, but it is important to at least clarify what is meant by the word “natural.” “Nature,” in the sense of the living, growing natural world, of course lacks any ethical dimension in the human sense of the word; ethics is the human quality which works against “nature” in general, and the “nature” of man in particular. It is thus important to grasp that the term “natural morality” is opposed to “nature” and “human nature.”

62. See Maimonides, *Mishneh Tora*, Laws of Repentance 5:1-3.

63. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, chapter 8, lines 653-654.

64. See Michael Grant, *The History of Ancient Israel* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1996).

65. Proverbs 8:11, 8:10, 8:15-16, 8:13. The best example of that sharp opposition to revolutionism is “It will save you from the way of evil men, from men of overturning [in Hebrew, *tabapuchot*, the same root as that of *revolution*] mouth; who leave the paths of rectitude to follow the ways of darkness; who rejoice in doing evil and exult in the duplicity of evil men.” Proverbs 2:12-16.

66. Proverbs 4:10-13.

67. On the perversion of justice: Proverbs 17:15, 18:5, 24:23-25; on false witness: Proverbs 19:5, 25:18.

68. On respecting Tora principles: Proverbs 21:27, 29:28; on idolatry: Proverbs 28:9.

69. Proverbs 2:16-17, 6:26-29, and of course chapter 31, which contains the well-known passage, “Woman of Valor.”

70. Proverbs 24:11-12, 6:16.

71. Proverbs 20:10, 20:23.

72. On decency, compassion and consideration: Proverbs 6:30-31, 21:13, 25:17, 25:21, 25:28. It is no accident that the verses of Proverbs and the words of the Sages concerning the “way of the world” are markedly similar; for example, compare Proverbs 25:17 with Yoma 75b.

73. *To’eva* in its various versions is perhaps the strongest condemnation of a human act to be found in the Bible; the word appears principally in relation to

violations of the Noahide laws, and particularly the “die rather than transgress” prohibitions. For a completely different context, see Genesis 43:32.

74. Proverbs 6:16-19.

75. Shabat 81b. See also Megila 3b and Brachot 19b; compare with the saying of Shamai: “Receive each man with a pleasant countenance.” Mishna Avot 1:16.

76. Cf. Eruvin 100b.

77. Derech Eretz Raba 5; also Kala 7, Genesis Raba 11:6.

78. Kidushin 33a.

79. Deuteronomy 33:4.

80. Leviticus Raba 9:3.

81. Judah Halevi, *The Kuzari*, chapter 4, verse 13.

82. Lamentations Raba 2:13.

83. Sanhedrin 56a. This fundamental group of laws has many secondary ramifications: One tradition lists thirty commandments derived from these seven. Hulin 92a.

84. Yoma 82a.

85. Sanhedrin 57a. In my opinion, blasphemy here replaces idolatry, because idolatry gradually becomes less serious; the idolatry of the First Temple period not infrequently involved human sacrifice or unrestricted orgies (and occasionally both). As time went on these rites vanished, due among other things to the influence of Christianity and Islam, and idolatry became more a spiritual than a physical sin. This explains why the Jewish sages disagree on the question of whether Christianity is idolatry, and why virtually all agree that Islam is not.

86. Thus it has been from the time of the nations’ dispersal among the sons of Noah, and even more so from the Tower of Babel, and until the description of God, judge of mankind, as “Judge of Nations.” For example, Psalms 96:13, 96:19, 98:9, 67:4-6.

87. Exodus 19:5. See also Leviticus 20:24-26 and Deuteronomy 26:19.

88. The history of the Patriarchs and the promise to Abraham can only be understood properly against this background.

89. Both Vico and Burke saw the nation as a highly important framework for developing and establishing accepted wisdom, since the nation, more than any other human group, is born and exists on the conceptual basis of the importance of historical continuity.

90. Biblical support for the idea that the destruction resulted from general moral transgressions—not non-observance of the Tora—can be found in Jeremiah 34:9-18.

91. Yoma 9b. However, there are other interpretations of the destruction, according to which non-observance of the Tora played a central role in bringing about exile. See, for example, Mishna Avot 5:9 and Shabat 33a.

92. *Tana D'bei Eliyahu Raba*, chapter 14.

93. Judges 2:11, 3:6-8, 3:12, 4:1-2, 6:1, 8:33-35, 10:6-7, 13:1.

94. Judges 3:11, 3:30, 5:31, 8:28.

95. Judges 17-18.

96. Judges 17-18.

97. Judges 18:5-6.

98. Judges 19-21.

99. Judges 19:30.

100. Judges 20:28.

101. Judges 21:24-25.

102. A similar use of “right” and “righteous” can be found in I Chronicles 13:1-4, in the description of the transfer of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. This positive act is described as the initiative and decision of the populace with no divine intervention, and is justified only in the phrase: “The entire assembly agreed to do so, for the proposal was *right* in the eyes of all the people.” I Chronicles 13:4.

103. I Samuel 8:5.

104. I Samuel 12:1-5. Concerning this balance being maintained throughout Samuel’s career, and not just at its end: “Young Samuel, meanwhile, grew in esteem and favor both with God and with men.” I Samuel 2:26.

105. I Samuel 8:6-7.

106. I Samuel 8:18-20. In all biblical references the institution of the monarchy is given a negative appraisal, or at best is seen as a necessary evil. The book of Judges stands out for its negative view of monarchy as opposing the covenant of Israel with God, and in particular in its description of the acts of the judge Gideon and his family. Judges 8:23, 9:8-15, 9:22. Furthermore, in I Samuel 8 are objections in principle, as well as a particularly negative attitude to the establishment of the monarchy. Also Deuteronomy 17:14-20 states explicitly that the monarchy at

its core is not a command of God but a desire of the people, who are seeking to adopt the regime of their neighbors; and even though God acquiesces in their request he also establishes a list of restrictions: The king must be a Jew and not a Gentile, he is forbidden to accumulate too much wealth and power, and he must learn Tora. These restrictions are stated explicitly so that power and pride will not lead the king to dubious policies, which is taken to be an inherent danger in the institution of monarchy. On this subject, see also Ephraim Urbach, "Between Rulers and Ruled: Some Aspects of the Jewish Tradition" in *Totalitarian Democracy and After* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1984), pp. 401-403.

107. See I Samuel 12:14-15. An example of this is the census taken by King David—without divine permission and in opposition to God's command—which resulted in many Israelites dying in a plague. Although the people's role in the census was passive, they still suffered for David's transgression because it was governmental, not personal. II Samuel 24.

108. I Samuel 12:23-25.

109. I Chronicles 29:17-19.

110. I believe there is a relationship between "perfect heart" and "with all his heart," but it is not clear if they are synonymous. The term "perfect heart," meaning good and righteous, stands in apparent contradiction to what is said of Jeroboam: "I tore away the kingdom from the House of David and gave it to you. But you have not been like my servant David, who kept my commandments and followed me with all his heart, doing only what was right in my sight." I Kings 14:8. David is described here as somebody who did what was upright "with all his heart." Perhaps the distinction is between performance with proper intention ("with all his heart") and successfully maintaining a proper way of life ("a perfect heart"). It is interesting to note the biblical description of Solomon's inability to fulfill his father's blessing, even in the realm of righteousness. I Kings 3:11.

111. Distorted rites practiced in Bethel and Dan, which involved golden calves yet were directed to the God of Israel and not to foreign deities.

112. II Kings 10:30-31.

113. I Kings 22:43.

114. Amaziah in II Kings 14:3; Azariah in II Kings 15:3; Jotham in II Chronicles 27:2.

115. II Chronicles 25:2.

116. II Chronicles 31:20-21.

117. II Chronicles 14:1.

118. II Chronicles 16:7. The expression “with all his heart” is also used regarding Josiah, but in unique circumstances, with no mention of goodness or righteousness. II Kings 23:25.

119. For this reason, the Israelite political tradition does not brook the possibility of a total or totalitarian state. God is the ethical sovereign, yet the Bible contains no theocratic regime. The period of the Judges is decentralized and individualistic to the extreme: Even the monarchical framework is established as a *limited* regime, regarded from its inception as lacking and therefore not total. Kingship is limited, and the place of religion is defined in the roles of the prophets and the priests, and later in the Sages. There is integration of religion and state, but in this integration the prophets (and sometimes the priests as well), and after them the Sages, interfere in the acts of the executive authority only by virtue of their high moral standing: They have no formal authority or practical ability to *enforce* their opinions whatsoever. The public and the king are free to accept the exhortations of prophet or sage, or to refuse them—and suffer the consequences. The only case in which an Israelite regime approached a theocracy was during the reign of the Hasmoneans, whose rulers united the priesthood with the kingship. This state of affairs actually undermined the legitimacy of their regime, and the primary opponents of this union were the *perushim*, the men of religion.

120. I Samuel 15.

121. I Samuel 15:9.

122. I Samuel 15:33.

123. I Samuel 15:19.

124. I Samuel 15:13.

125. I Samuel 15:24.

126. This can be compared with David’s sin concerning Bathsheba, for which he is punished personally, by the death of his son; however, since the transgression was personal and not governmental it had no public ramifications. This is in contrast to Saul’s seemingly minor transgression, which was done in the governmental domain, and was punished accordingly.

127. The continuation of Saul’s rule is entirely dominated by his desperate, and unsuccessful, attempts to retrieve the heavenly mandate. It is even possible that at a certain point he tries to find healing among other gods—the Bible does not expand on the subject but perhaps this is the source of the names of his later children, Eshba’al and Mephiba’al (names which contain reference to the god

Ba'al) as opposed to the name of his older son Jonathan ("God has given"). Yet at the moment of his greatest distress he chooses, in one last desperate attempt, to connect with the deceased prophet of the God of Israel, through the sorceress at Ein Dor. I Samuel 28.

128. David continues to describe Saul as the "anointed of God." I Samuel 24:6, 26:9, and II Samuel 1:14. Yet was not David himself the "anointed of God" in Saul's place? The intention is apparently different; here Saul represents the government, the people—the Israelite state. See also I Samuel 1:12.

129. Mishna Avot 2:1.

130. Another small passage from *The Book of the Righteous* appears in Joshua 10:13. On other lost books mentioned in the Bible, see Robert Graves, *Hebrew Myths* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), p. 11.

131. II Samuel 1:17-18.

132. II Samuel 1:19-27.

133. In Abraham Ibn Ezra, *Kovetz Hochmat Hara'ava*, vol. 1, poem 71.

134. Mishna Avot 2:1.

135. *Tana D'bei Eliyahu Raba*, chapter 14.

136. The "way of the world" very rarely appears in the Bible in its widest meaning, as a synonym for the natural order of the world. It refers for the most part to a man about to die in old age (Joshua 23:14; see also the similarity to the commentary of Tosafot on Baba Metzia 107b), and in one verse it refers to the violation of the natural order in intimate relations, when Lot's daughters lie with him, since there is no one left to come to them "in the way of all the world." Genesis 19:31. That is to say, the act of incest is described as opposing the way of the world. Cf. also an interesting phrasing which includes a slightly different take on the concept, in I Kings 8:48.

137. Mishna Avot 3:5.

138. See also *Avot D'rabi Natan* 28:1, which implicitly connects the wisdom of the "way of the world" with actual inhabitation of the land.

139. In the Mishna are sayings to the effect that one who lacks the "way of the world" is incomplete, even if his whole life is the study of Tora; for example: "Raban Gamliel the son of R. Yehuda Hanasi says, Tora study with the way of the world is beautiful, because the labor in both of them dispels sinfulness. And any study of Tora that does not have with it labor is destined to be nullified and drag with it sin." Mishna Avot 2:2. In the talmudic period the same attitude was preserved in sayings such as "R. Huna said that all who deal in Tora alone are like one

who has no god, for it is said, ‘and Israel passed many days without a true God...’ (II Chronicles 16:3) What is meant by ‘without a true God?’ That whoever occupies himself in Tora alone is like one who has no God and has not engaged in acts of kindness.” Avoda Zara 17b.

140. Mishna Avot 3:17. See also the continuation of R. El’azar’s pointed statements favoring the superiority of action over Tora study, particularly the view that one whose actions are greater than his wisdom is “compared to a tree whose branches are few and whose roots are many, that even if all the winds of the world should come and blow on it, they would not move it from its place.”

141. Ecclesiastes 4:12.

142. Kidushin 40b. Here it is clear that according to the Mishna, the study of the Bible is no less important than the study of Mishna, a view which today apparently has its opponents, if one can judge by their preferences and curricula.

143. These are part of what is known as the “Minor Tractates” (*Masechtot K’tanot*), whose redaction was substantially later than other collections of tannaitic material.

144. It is interesting to note the changes through the generations in the attitudes of Tora scholars to labor and to matters of the world. The strongest reservations concerning rabbinic studies without deeds, and emphasizing the necessity of an occupation, are from the earliest periods, the days of the Amoraim and Tannaim and even before. To the words quoted from Raban Gamliel and R. Huna in favor of the “way of the world” and labor can be added the dictum of Shemaya, who says: “Love work and despise rabbinics” (Mishna Avot 1:10), and R. Akiva’s admonition to his son: “Do not dwell in a city whose leaders are scholars.” Psahim 112a. On the subject of R. Akiva’s political understanding, see Urbach, “Between Rulers and Ruled,” p. 403.

Later generations still justified involvement with worldly affairs, yet in an apologetic tone. R. Ovadia of Bertinoro interprets Shemaya’s sharp remark on this subject as opposing one who disdains labor out of hubris, but not as an explicit criticism of rabbinical office unaccompanied by labor (R. Ovadia’s commentary on Mishna Avot 1:10), and the Tosfot Yom Tov attempts to moderate the words of the Tannaim on the Tora study’s dependence upon the “way of the world.” See the discussion of this topic in Tosfot Yom Tov on Mishna Avot 3:17.

In the medieval period, the rabbis still heeded the advice of Shemaya and Gamliel: Rashi owned a winery; R. Shmuel ben Meir (Rashbam) owned flocks and a winery; Shmuel Hanagid achieved the post of vizier of the Muslim state of Granada; Ya’akov ben Asher, the author of the *Arba’a Turim*, was a money-changer; R. Levi ben Gershom (Ralbag) invented and developed an instrument called a “staff of Jacob” for measuring the angles between two stars, which greatly

benefited navigation; and Judah Halevi and Maimonides were both physicians. In later generations, however, the opinion spread among many adherents of Tora that to be one “whose Tora is his craft” was most fitting, and they denigrated the value of anything that was not Tora study.

What are the causes of this process of reversal regarding the “way of the world” and Tora study from the time of the Mishna until today? Certainly the extended disconnection from the land and the long stay in exile had a great influence, in that the purpose of action became more limited and no longer contributed to the general pattern of national life. In such circumstances the desire to disengage from one’s subjugation to foreign interests and goals is understandable, and perhaps even justified at times. Yet another influence may have been the model of religious priesthood as accepted in Christianity and Islam, in which the image of the scholar and man of God is of one who is somewhat detached from earthly matters; particularly in Christianity, this image also included representing a living ideal of complete detachment from the world of action, as among monks and academics. Whatever the source of this trend in Judaism, it is clear that the attitude it has created towards earthly matters is the opposite of the attitude of the Sages.

145. *Derech Eretz Raba* 5. See also further in *Derech Eretz Raba* 5, in *Derech Eretz Raba* 7 and in *Kala* 7.

146. *Shabat* 114a. See also R. Menahem Meiri, *Beit Habehira* on *Tamid* 2a.

147. *Kala* 1. Also, Meiri, *Beit Habehira* on *Moed Katan* 22b.

148. *Sota* 44a. The “way of the world” in the sense of proper interpersonal relations can be found in *Tosafot* on *Nedarim* 91a.

149. See also *Genesis Raba* 86.

150. The commentary of R. Ovadia of Bertinoro on *Mishna Avot* 3:5. He even states this explicitly in his commentary on *Avot* 2:2: “*The way of the world*—profession or trade.”

151. Rashi on *Brachot* 32b.

152. Other uses are found as well in various fields, such as one’s relationship with the environment, as presented in the following midrashic statement: “God taught the way of the world to the generations, that if a man seeks to build his house from a fruit-bearing tree, tell him, ‘Just like the King of Kings who owns everything, when he commanded the building of a tabernacle, he said: Bring only from a tree that does not bear fruit—all the more so does this apply to you’” (*Exodus Raba* 35:2); considerations of respect and the preservation of esthetics, such as Rashi’s statement that “the Tora taught us the way of the world, that man should be protective of that which is beautiful” (Rashi on *Exodus* 26:13); and

one's relations with the governing authorities and the unique respect reserved for them, as in Rashi on Esther 4:2 and in Sanhedrin 82a.

153. Meiri, *Beit Habehira* on Mishna Avot 3:20.

154. Meiri, *Beit Habehira* on Nedarim 25a. In this context see Burke on the connection of courtesy and morals with proper government. *Reflections*, pp. 77-78. In this spirit one can understand the Sages' traditional esteem for the stabilizing social and moral influences of the monotheistic religions which, despite being the subject of deep disputes over matters of faith, nonetheless transform the nations which abide by them into "nations of religion and courtesy." See Meiri, *Beit Habehira* on Baba Kama 37b. Perhaps this will enable an understanding of rabbis such as Maimonides and Meiri having designated the monotheistic religions as "clearing a path for the messiah." Funkenstein, *Perceptions*, p. 149.

155. Quoted in Oakeshott, *Rationalism*, p. 23.

156. Deuteronomy 32:15.

157. Deuteronomy 33:5.