Arrogance is a disposition to believe that, and behave as if, one is superior to others. It is a vice that is often linked with collective identities—a disposition to believe that, and behave as if, one’s group is superior to other groups. One such expression of arrogance that touches all of us in the United States is the white supremacist ideology that white people are superior to other people.¹

In this essay, I consider the arrogance of white supremacy through the lens of the tradition of *musar*, the Jewish ethical tradition focused on cultivating virtues and resisting vices. White supremacy is much more than an expression of arrogance—it is also an expression of injustice and many other vices, and it is embedded within many ideas, policies, laws, institutions, and systems. For white-identified people in the United States, resisting expressions of arrogance is only one aspect of the work that is required to resist white supremacy. But I suggest that it may be an important part of that work. And for those of us who are white-identified and seek guidance from Jewish tradition, it may be valuable to reflect on *musar* traditions regarding arrogance, humility, and the ways that these dispositions shape and are shaped by ideas, policies, laws, institutions, and systems.²

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² This essay is addressed to those who are white-identified and interested in guidance from Jewish tradition, whether or not they personally identify as Jewish or see themselves as belonging to Jewish communities. For a recent essay directly addressing white Jews and racism within Jewish communities, see Sandra Lawson, “I’m a Black Rabbi. I’ve Never Been in a Jewish Space Where I Wasn’t Questioned,” June 12, 2020, https://forward.com/opinion/448654/im-a-black-jew-i-have-never-been-in-a-jewish-space-where-my-jewish.
The Commandment to the King

According to some musar traditions, arrogance is prohibited by the Torah in Deuteronomy 17:18–20. That passage appears on the surface (peshat level) to be only a warning for male, Israelite kings, but some sources see a comprehensive prohibition on arrogance for kings—and, certainly, those who are not kings as well.³ The text, from the section of the written Torah known as Parashat Shoftim, teaches that if the people of Israel decide to establish a monarchy after having taken possession of the land of Israel, their king must be bound by rules including the following:

When he is seated on his royal throne, he shall have a copy of this Teaching [Torah] written for him on a scroll by the levitical priests. Let it remain with him and let him read in it every day of his life, so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God, to observe faithfully every word of this Teaching as well as these laws. Thus he will not act arrogantly toward his fellows or deviate from the Instruction [Mitzvah] to the right or to the left.⁴

The king, it seems, should keep a Torah scroll with him and continually read it, so that he will be filled with reverence and humility. A king might regularly read, for example, the words that come at the very beginning of Parashat Shoftim: “You shall not judge unfairly: you shall show no partiality; you shall not take bribes”—rather, “justice, justice shall you pursue” (Deut. 16:19–20).⁵ Reading these and other commandments, the king may be humbled to know that he is not above the law and that he must not act arrogantly towards his fellows.

It is common among contemporary rabbis to imagine that reading the written Torah will cultivate an attitude of humble respect for all human beings, equally created in God’s image⁶—and this may indeed be the outcome of the process of Torah study. But, unfortunately, if the king is reading the words of the written Torah, a fair portion of what the king will read will not help him to see all people as created equal. If the king continues reading Parashat Shoftim, for example, he will read God’s instructions for conquering the land of Canaan and annihilating its inhabitants: “You shall not let a soul remain alive. No, you must exterminate them” (Deut. 20:16–17). Will the practice of reading such verses really bring the king to a state of greater humility? Will reading such commandments and pledging not to deviate to the right or to the left really help the king to act with less arrogance? That may well be what the editors of Deuteronomy thought—and there have certainly been readers who have insisted that, indeed, the epitome of humility may be found in submitting to commandments to slaughter enemies (and

⁴ Deuteronomy 17:18–20, translation based on the NJPS translation.
⁵ NJPS translation.
⁶ See, e.g., Matthew Berkowitz, “A Torah of Humility,” http://www.jtsa.edu/a-torah-of-humility, on study that “will cultivate and sharpen an attitude of respect for all subjects as creations in the Divine Image.”
seeing one’s own chosen, superior status). But we should be able to see how reading the Torah in this way will encourage greater arrogance, rather than lessening it. The written Torah can certainly encourage its readers to sense their own superiority—encouraging males to sense their male superiority, for example, or encouraging Israelites to sense the superiority of their own people.

Explaining “how it shall be with him,” the Mishnah teaches that the king must carry a Torah scroll with him “when he goes out to war,” and imagining this scenario may help us to see how morally dangerous the written Torah may be. We might imagine how, amidst a military campaign, the king reads from his portable Torah scroll: “you shall not let a soul remain alive, but you must exterminate them.” The king could read this and resolve to be more humble, not to inject his own personal desires into the Torah but only to do what it says, and he goes out and humbly orders the execution of the inferior peoples around him—humbly, not deviating from the Torah’s instruction to the left or to the right. Horrifying visions of humility along these lines have inspired Bible-reading supremacists of all sorts, including the white Christian supremacists who have most shaped the social and political landscape of the United States. It is easy to think that one is being humble even when one is upholding the worst forms of supremacism.

Musar and Moral Accounting

Fortunately, we need not understand the commandment addressed to the king in this way. Consider another tradition that invokes the commandment to the king, one that appears in the writings of the eleventh-century Jewish philosopher Bahya ibn Pakuda. Bahya was the author of The Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart, a book focused on how the Torah should guide one’s inner life and inspire one to continually take stock of one’s soul. Bahya’s book is often described as the foundational work of musar (“moral discipline”), the tradition of Jewish reflection and practice focused on cultivating virtues and resisting vices. Bahya played a key role in developing the Jewish idea that engaging in musar and striving towards ideals of moral character was at the heart of service to God.

Bahya was also the first Jewish thinker to introduce the phrase often translated as “moral accounting,” “soul accounting,” “taking stock of the soul,” or “self-examination”—in Hebrew, ḥeshbon ha-nefesh, a Hebrew term invented to translate the equivalent phrase that Bahya used in Arabic. Bahya taught that it is an obligation at all times to inspect and take an accounting of the condition of one’s soul, looking out for traces of arrogance and considering how one could be more humble, and mistrusting one’s impulse to think that all is fine with one’s moral and intellectual life. It is not enough to read the written Torah and follow the laws written there in

black ink on white parchment, Baḥya’s book cautions; the obligations imposed by the oral Torah go much deeper than that.  

Indeed, one has an obligation every day of one’s life to engage in a process of ḥeshbon ha-nefesh to the best of one’s ability. Bahya explains this obligation in part with reference to the verses about the king quoted above: if the king is commanded to work towards humility every day of his life, so too all of us must have an obligation to do so, continually: “self-examination is binding upon each person… at all times, with every blink of one’s eyes and with every breath one takes, if this is possible.”

Our process of examination cannot simply be a matter of reading the written Torah; it must go deeper. Otherwise, we may read the Torah in a way that only encourages our arrogance and our sense of supremacy, like the king discussed above.

Seeing supremacism within the Torah, of course, can be part of the process of ḥeshbon ha-nefesh when it helps us to see attitudes of supremacism within our own souls. The Torah’s flaws may shine a light on our own flaws. Just like the authors of the written Torah, all of us have parts of us that are chauvinistic, bigoted, and arrogant about various aspects of our identities. To engage in the kind of introspection that Bahya directs us towards, in order to be a bit more like a king who engages in serious moral accounting, it may be helpful to imagine how each of us is a bit like a king who does not engage in moral accounting but thinks that he is being humble—even as he enjoys the privilege of his male identity, for example, or even as he is motivated by his belief in the superiority of his Israelite identity. Most of us are similarly in denial about the privileges we enjoy, the biases that we hold, and the ways that we are complicit in upholding inherited systems that work to our benefit.

The king could point to the Torah and declare: “I must humbly submit to the law that I have inherited, not deviating to the right or to the left; I am a good person, and how much more can you ask of me?” We must challenge our impulses to be like that sort of king. We can learn from Bahya to instead be the sort of people who look deeply inside ourselves and who see our own biases, our own privileges, our own complicity in upholding systems of supremacism, and the capacities that we have to challenge those systems.

White Supremacy and the Work of Musar

All of us have biases and conceptions of our own superiority that are often unconscious but that nonetheless affect our actions. In the United States, we live in a society pervaded by racial biases, especially anti-Black and anti-indigenous biases. Due to the long and enduring history of white supremacy in our country, these biases pervade our institutions and norms. White-identified people in the United States are socialized to believe that being white is ideal and to view Black people, indigenous people, and other people of color as inferior. White people are also socialized not to notice the systems that grant us privilege and power and that devalue others. Seeking to preserve our sense of our own goodness, we insist that we are not complicit in upholding white supremacy. But we often are. We accept and participate in unjust systems that

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10 See Bahya, Duties of the Heart, 85–107.
11 Translation adapted from Bahya, Duties of the Heart, 399.
privilege white people and that devalue and deny justice to Black, indigenous, and other racialized people.\textsuperscript{12}

In the language of Deuteronomy, we “judge unfairly,” and we fail to “pursue justice.” Those of us who are white have heshbon ha-nefesh work to do as we examine our complicity with white supremacy and pursue greater justice. Those of us who are white Jews may see such work as an essential part of our Jewish practice, one that fits within the musar tradition—the tradition of Jewish learning, meditation and practice that goes back to Bahya. And this tradition of musar can, I think, offer resources to those seeking Jewish traditions that may inform antiracist commitments.

Reading the Torah, even “every day of one’s life,” will never be enough. Jews writing in the musar tradition have often acknowledged that Torah study itself is insufficient unless it is coupled with continual and deep inner work. Reading the written Torah does not easily lead to treating all human beings as created in God’s image; having correct beliefs does not easily lead to correct behavior. The work of musar, of cultivating moral discipline, must involve daily attention to the patterns and prejudices to which we have been habituated, often since childhood. As one musar teacher, the nineteenth century Musar movement leader Rabbi Simḥah Zissel Ziv put it, “every day of a person’s life, a person needs to suspect oneself of the brutality implanted [within oneself] from one’s youth.”\textsuperscript{13} We should be suspicious of our own claims to have transcended our most harmful prejudices and habits; even when one is certain that one is a good person, there is still more work to do, because of how deeply these habits are implanted within us and embedded within the systems that shape our lives. At the heart of the work of musar, from this perspective, at the heart of the cultivation of moral virtue, is the commitment to mistrusting our impulse to think that all is fine with our souls and our world. We need constant musar—more moral discipline, more self-awareness, more openness to self-criticism—because we are not as good as we think we are.

Working on Oneself can Lead to Self-Satisfaction or Distraction

Awareness that we are not as good as we think we are is also essential for keeping our efforts in perspective. This is especially important given the tendency of those devoted to the work of moral introspection to view themselves as morally superior to those who do not engage in such work. As one research study recently concluded, “spiritual practices that are supposed to

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shrink the ego are more likely to inflate it.” Those who train to reduce attachment to the ego “may feel superior to others who lack the spiritual wisdom they ascribe to themselves.”

This phenomenon has been widely observed over the centuries. For example, critics of the nineteenth century Musar movement, the Jewish movement historically most devoted to practices of musar, perceived that the students of Rabbi Simhah Zissel Ziv viewed themselves as superior because of their dedication to self-examination. For all that they claimed to focus on humility and to be exposing their own transgressions, these students allegedly saw themselves on a higher level than those who did not engage in constant moral introspection.

Introspective practices focused on antiracism, though they may aim to counter arrogance, may have this same effect, leaving practitioners with a sense of superiority. Scholar John McWhorter, for example, has pointed to ways that some contemporary antiracist literature may serve above all to “make certain educated white readers feel better about themselves” and how some devotees of that literature may above all cherish “displaying virtue.” Certainly, when we are (however unconsciously) seeking to feel better about ourselves, or when we seek to display how we humbly accept our guilt, we are not humbling ourselves at all. But those who develop feelings of self-satisfaction and seek to display their superior virtues are precisely those who are most in need of the self-examination and self-criticism that musar work can facilitate.

Even more significantly, focusing on the virtues of personal antiracist work may distract us from working for political changes that will better alleviate human suffering. Scholar Charisse Burden-Stelly’s critique of how contemporary antiracist literature fails to challenge exploitative systems of racial capitalism is instructive here. When we “emphasize white peoples’ emotions and behaviors as the source of inequality,” Burden-Stelly writes, we avoid “fundamental issues such as resource allocation, labor exploitation, and economic dispossession. This re-centering of dominant voices and desires comes at the expense of those whose marginalization is, quite literally, a matter of life and death. If… the eradication of exploitation and oppression in the United States is contingent upon the dominant white ‘caste’ demonstrating more empathy, abandoning their privilege, and adopting a better attitude, then the suffering of the overwhelming majority will undoubtedly continue unabated.” A focus on reducing white racial arrogance can lead white people to take up far too much space, centering our inner work and distracting from

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15 Vonk and Visser, “An Exploration of Spiritual Superiority,” 152.
18 Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Racism without Racists, 243, writes: “Being an antiracist has its pitfalls. One is that you can easily become arrogant and believe you are a better person than those you will now regard as ‘racist’…. The moment you begin believing you are better than others is the moment you need to begin doing some serious introspection.”
systemic changes. White people focused on reducing arrogance may end up in the arrogant position of placing the spotlight on ourselves rather than on the needs of those who are most oppressed.

As such, those engaged in inner work can be like the Israelite king who is dedicated to cultivating humility and even (as Bahya would have it) engaging in self-examination every day of his life—but whose self-examination does not sufficiently account for the suffering of the oppressed and who becomes known more for his piety than for ensuring just systems. It is easy to imagine the king who is concerned to show proper reverence and humility but whose reverence and humility do not allow him to question the institutions and systems that he has inherited; he is, after all, dedicated to “observing faithfully every word” of the Torah’s laws and is careful not to “deviate from the Instruction to the right or to the left.” His reverential dedication to the written Torah leaves him in a position of arrogance—unable to hear the voices of those who are most marginalized under the existing system, such that unjust suffering continues unabated.

Certain forms of self-examination can lead to arrogant self-satisfaction, and they can also lead to an arrogant failure to listen to others in need. But these are not reasons for those in privileged positions to avoid self-examination; these are reasons to be better at self-examination. The best practices of musar are precisely those that teach us to avoid self-satisfaction and self-centeredness and that help us to challenge and dismantle unjust systems. The best practices of antiracist musar for white Americans should help us to respond to the needs of those who are most marginalized and oppressed, attentive to unjust systems and the distribution of power. And refusing arrogance certainly requires refusing to value one’s own inner work above the political work of dismantling structures that perpetuate oppression and exploitation.

Politics is Shaped by Character, and Character is Shaped by Politics

There are some models of musar that detach character formation from politics. From these perspectives, the work of musar involves focusing on one’s private, inner life and not on matters of public affairs.

But we see from the model of the king that character is inseparable from politics. The king’s cultivation of humility matters in part because it will shape the ideas, laws, policies, institutions and systems that he upholds; and these will ultimately shape his character as much as his character will shape them. Equitable laws that ensure, for example, that “you shall not judge unfairly” will cultivate greater humility. Laws that require the killing of Canaanites will distort the king’s soul, cultivating a greater sense of superiority and greater arrogance.

So too, the cultivation of humility by white Americans matters in part because of how it will shape ideas, laws, policies, and systems. Will we have the humility to see our own complicity with white supremacy? Will we overcome our comfort with unjust systems? In challenging those systems, will we have the humility to follow the lead of those who are racialized and most oppressed by our current systems? Will we work for systems that ensure greater equity?
But laws, policies and systems ultimately shape our character as much as character can shape laws, policies, and systems. Just laws that counter inequity are conducive to greater humility. Unjust laws that further inequity are conducive to greater arrogance and to damaging our souls. As Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in his 1963 “Letter from Birmingham Jail” regarding laws enforcing racial segregation:

All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. Segregation, to use the terminology of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, substitutes an “I-it” relationship for an “I-thou” relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things.20

So too with unjust laws promulgated by Israelite kings: unjust laws will distort the souls and damage the personalities of kings and the others who will not deviate from their unjust instructions. Statutes that dehumanize the Canaanites will provide a false sense of superiority, relegating persons to the status of things. The same is true of racist systems today. Halting the arrogance that leads to dehumanization, exploitation, and oppressive systems is important musar work; and so is combatting unjust systems that distort souls, damage personalities, create false senses of superiority, and relegate persons to the status of things. We require musar that will help to turn our attention away from ourselves and towards ensuring greater equity.

Striving to Be Antiracist

Scholar Ibram X. Kendi has argued that “racist” and “antiracist” are not “permanent tattoos” that forever adhere to individuals. Rather, we always have choices to support racist ideas (that “one racial group is inferior or superior to another racial group in any way”) or antiracist ideas (that “racial groups are equals in all their apparent differences”) and policies that may further equity or inequity. There are no permanent racists or antiracists, but we can “strive to be one or the other…. Like fighting an addiction, being an antiracist requires persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination.”21 In language drawn from Jewish tradition, engaging in that self-examination is a form of musar, a path fulfilling Bahya’s call to engage in “self-examination at all times.”

And gaining self-awareness requires awareness of our need to learn more. The commandment in Deuteronomy to study so as to “not act arrogantly toward one’s fellows” may be relevant here. Especially when we are in positions of privilege or power, humility requires us not to be satisfied with what we think we know, a requirement that Martin Luther King, Jr. saw as incumbent upon white people in the United States. White people, King wrote, have not put in a sufficient “mass effort to reeducate themselves out of their racial ignorance. It is an aspect of

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their sense of superiority that the white people of America believe they have so little to learn.”

Today, this refusal to learn persists. We still need learning that combats our ignorance and our false ideas of superiority, and that teaches us to dismantle unjust systems that reflect white supremacy.

Our learning must be precisely the kind of learning that will help us “not act arrogantly toward our fellows.” It should not consist of simply reading words printed in a written Torah scroll with its seemingly fixed laws and systems, but should engage with the ever-developing oral Torah that has always changed over time, that is shaped by ongoing dialogue, and that can always become more equitable. To make that possible, we have an obligation to follow the instruction that Bahya saw within the oral Torah to engage in musar, to engage in heshbon ha-nefesh, to engage in self-examination. That instruction must continue to be passed through generations as part of the oral Torah (even when it is written down), so that it may be re-envisioned in every generation, in every society, in every community, and by every individual.

In the United States today, we can see areas for self-examination that Bahya could not have imagined in eleventh-century Spain. In a society stamped by white supremacy, the work of musar must involve dismantling white supremacy. In a society shaped by the arrogant assumption that one racial group is superior to others, to “not act arrogantly toward one’s fellows” requires ensuring equity among groups. If we hear this instruction and carry it with us at all times, we can extend the model envisioned by Bahya of a king who is humbly committed to self-awareness, self-criticism, self-examination, and creating equitable systems.

But as part of this work, we may also keep in mind the model of the king who humbly submits to God and studies Torah but whose reading only reinforces his own sense of superiority. Imagining that king reminds us that we may not be so different from that king, and reminds us that we, too, may tend to think of one group as superior to other groups. For the king described in the text of the written Torah, it would seem easy to govern without examining his conceptions of the goodness of Israelite men and the evils of the Canaanites. It would seem easy to faithfully observe the words and laws of the Torah that place the king’s group above other groups, not deviating to the right or to the left. It would seem easy to consider oneself humble when one is following what appear to be God’s explicit commandments. And in the face of established norms, it would seem difficult to engage in the kind of life-long self-examination that continually strives for greater equity.

The same is true for us, living in a society with its own models of supremacy that those of us who are white too easily accept. It is easy for us to study in ways that reinforce a false sense of superiority. It is easy for us to support policies and systems that benefit us. It is easy for us to adhere to established norms and laws. It is difficult to engage in life-long self-examination that continually pursues greater justice and equity—and to do that work humbly, focused not on our own inner lives but on ensuring just systems for others. That is the difficult work of musar in which I hope we will engage: humble self-examination that supports systemic change.

22 King, Where Do We Go from Here, 10.