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Anavah / Humility

Walking modestly with power

## The Song of Humility

Joey Weisenberg

Humility, as has been distilled from the Mussar tradition (a discipline of moral conduct and character development), refers to taking up just the right amount of space — not too little and not too much. In his book *Everyday Holiness: The Jewish Spiritual Path of Mussar*, Alan Morinis cites and explains traditional sources on *Mussar*. He teaches us to maintain a balance between ourselves and the world around us, in which we strive to recognize how intricately we are interdependent on everything else.

This humble balance forms the heart of all art forms and spiritual practices, including music. The best musicians may assert their own ideas, but they always leave just as much space for others, and, collectively, they all strike a symbiotic balance between their sounds and the world's sacred silence.

Initially, Moses, the “most humble” leader of our tradition, was unable even to speak, let alone sing, and yet he later went on to compose one of the greatest songs of our tradition, the Torah's “Song of the Sea.” He composed the song collaboratively: Moses (and/or his sister Miriam) would compose and sing the first half of each line, and then the entire community of Israel would spontaneously respond with the second half of each line. (Talmud Bavli Sotah 30b) In this way, Moses led and listened, negotiating the full spectrum from silence to sound. His song — which eventually expanded to include the entire Torah — grew from his humility.

In contrast, King David, who was known to be the sweetest singer in Israel, was not reputed to be particularly humble. Though he knew how to sing, he had trouble listening. When he finished composing the last of his 150 psalms, he arrogantly stood up and exclaimed, “Who in the world could possibly sing more praises than me?” Immediately, a frog jumped up and insisted, “Ribbet! Actually, I

compose more songs every minute than you've composed in your entire life, and, besides that, each song that I sing has 3,000 meanings!” (Yalkut Shimoni on Psalm 150) The king sat down, humbled by the lyricism of a croaking frog.

King Solomon took a lesson from his father David's arrogance and asked God for a “listening heart.” (1 Kings 3:9-13) Soon, he learned how to understand not only the languages of all people, but also the languages of all the birds and animals. Once, he took out his father's harp and began to play, and all of the animals gathered from around the world to listen to his heavenly music. At regular intervals, Solomon would stop playing and carefully listen to the animals just as they had listened to him; from them he heard the stories and wisdom of the entire world. (*Targum Sheni, appendix I*) In this way, Solomon merited the right to compose, eventually, “The Song of Songs.”

The prophets required music in order to make prophecy. Without music, one's consciousness could not adequately expand to hear the divine whispers of the world. According to Uziel Meisels, an eighteenth-century Hasidic writer, a prophet's job is to make oneself “like an instrument” in the hands of God. (*Tiferet Uziel*) We cannot all be prophets, but we can try to be instruments of holiness. When we, too, remove our own ambitions and arrogance, we may become like the flute in the hands of a master musician, open to the breath of the Divine.

Joey Weisenberg is the creative director of Mechon Hadar's Rising Song Institute, which aims to cultivate the musical-spiritual creativity of the Jewish people. A multi-instrumental musician, singer, and composer, he is the author of *Building Singing Communities: A Practical Guide to Unlocking the Power of Music in Jewish Prayer* and *The Torah of Music*, and his *nigunim* have been published in six albums and a songbook.

Art by Natalia Zourabova  
“Backlight”  
oil pastels on paper, 2015

Please see pages 5–7 for *Consider and Converse*, our guide to this issue

# NiSh'ma

On this page, we offer three takes on the first line of the “V’ahavta,” the line following the Sh’m’a prayer. Our commentators reflect on God’s humility — the notion that God needs our love. Our online version is interactive, and we welcome your comments. —S.B.



**Stan Levy:** When I was a boy in religious school, a superb Hasidic teacher taught us that God’s voice in Torah addresses each of us personally; every person named in Torah reveals a dimension of our own personality, and every location in Torah reveals a place in our own life. The text of Torah was a lens through which we could see the text of our own life as it was unfolding.

When the Jewish philosophers Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig translated the Torah from Hebrew to conversational German, they translated “v’ahavta et YHVH” as “Love Me.” In his remarkable book *The Star of Redemption*, Rosenzweig examined this command of God, “Love Me,” and noted that in this essential Jewish prayer, God is asking us for love.

God is not self-sufficient. God needs my love. This is how I understand God’s humility, not God’s perfection. Rosenzweig teaches that we love God by loving our neighbor, the one physically or emotionally near us (and the immigrant/refugee/estranged one), as we love ourselves. His teaching, “Love Me,” was life-changing when I read it more than 50 years ago, and it remains so now: I understand that God’s revelation, God’s need for the human love of those near and estranged, and God’s humility were ways to reveal to us how deep was our need for human love and how essential our need for humility.

Rabbi **Stan Levy** is the founding rabbi of Congregation B’nai Horin–Children of Freedom, and co-founder of a seminary, the Academy for Jewish Religion, California.



**Tali Anisfeld:** To be humble means to know that we are needed and we are in need of others. As Rabbi Stan Levy comments, the *Sh’m’a* calls us into this awareness, reminding us that no one, not even the Creator of the world, is self-sufficient.

As a child, I learned the teaching attributed to Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peshischa that we should each carry two notes in our pockets: One tells us that we are but dust and ashes, the other that the world was created for our sake.

I have come to wonder about the wisdom of this teaching. The world can so easily send us swinging from one pocket to the other, convinced of our own importance in one moment and our inadequacy in the next.

When will we learn that “*I am everything*” and “*I am a worthless piece of garbage*” are not, in fact, opposites? They are two sides of the same coin, both tinged with some kind of hubris. Both miss the subtle strength of being able to say, at the same time, in some constant swirl of give and take: I am needed *and* I am in need. How we hold each other in a balance of mutual need is mysterious — as is the sense of uncertainty that opens us up to the sweet surprises of the ever-unfolding.

**Tali Anisfeld** is a sophomore at Princeton University, where she plans to study environmental humanities. Originally from Newton, Mass., she is an alumna of The Bronfman Fellowship.



**Becky Voorwinde:** How awesome to understand that asking to be loved is a form of humility, as Rabbi Levy so poignantly writes. How can we teach our children humility while avoiding insecurity in today’s achievement-oriented culture? When our children pursue acceptance into an elite university or enroll in a competition, how do we bolster their self-esteem *and* temper their ego?

In the *V’ahavta*, it says, “*b’chol levavcha*” — “with all your heart.” The Mishnah teaches that “all” refers to “*b’chol midah u’midah*.” (Berakhot 9:5) In other words, we are to love God with every one of our attributes — those we are proud of and those we find embarrassing.

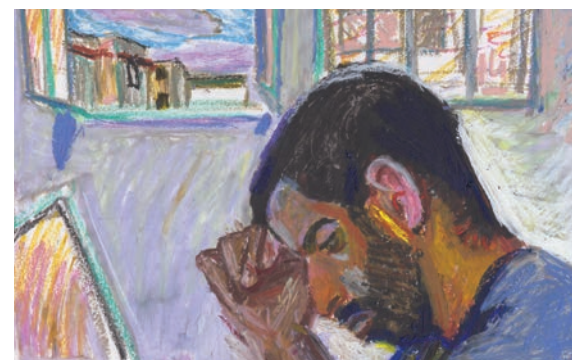
We are multidimensional beings. What is being praised when we “win” or dismissed when we “lose” is but one dimension of ourselves seen through the eyes of someone else. Teaching our children this builds resilience in moments of rejection and increases humility in moments of success. All too often, we teach our children this lesson only when they face rejection, but children need to be reminded of this precisely at moments of success in order to really believe it to be true.

That God wants us to love God with all facets of ourselves, our strongest attributes and our weakest attributes, is a reminder of the way we should also love ourselves and love others; it is a reminder not to judge too harshly or too favorably.

**Becky Voorwinde** is executive director of The Bronfman Fellowship. She lives in Brooklyn with her husband and two young daughters.

וְאַהֲבַתְּ אֶת יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ  
בְּכָל לְבָבְךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ  
וּבְכָל מְאֹדְךָ

*“And you shall love your God, with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”*



“Back Light,” by Natalia Zourabova



This issue of *Sh'ma Now*, which explores the Jewish sensibility of humility, is dedicated to the memory of **Jonathan Woocher, z"l**, who effortlessly embodied this trait. Throughout his long and distinguished career, Jon continually elevated new voices — including (at times) those at odds with his own. **Jewish sensibilities** are values and behaviors emanating from Jewish history, stories, and sources that provide inspiration and guidance to help us to respond creatively and thoughtfully to life's challenges and opportunities.

## In Search of the Humble Leader

Yonatan Gordis

Humility isn't proclaimed; it is recognized. But, all too often, humility feels like an endangered trait. It is virtually a mantra, a ubiquitous call for leaders to be both powerful and humble. Despite the nearly oxymoronic nature of the phrase "humble leader," we still believe that such humility is possible. And in the search for humble leaders — or for humility itself — one must wonder: Is humility an innate phenomenon that one carries all of one's days? Or can it be taught and learned?

Perhaps the challenge lies in the paradigm of leadership. Those who want to lead will generally believe that they have something to give, and that their voice matters, often more than other voices. Why else would they step forward? Placing themselves somewhere on the spectrum between pure altruism and pure ego, leaders need motivation and incentive to step up. How then, can they do so without leaving everyone else behind?

After 30 years of working with leaders in the Jewish community, I have learned that two practices are necessary for humility to take root and be sustained. These are not theories or precepts, but rather behaviors that necessitate daily engagement:

1. *Be wowed by this wondrous world.* As part of a training, we often take emerging leaders outdoors and ask them to write a blessing about something they have never noticed so clearly before. We are inviting them to wondrously see the world. Can they soften their gaze enough and can they use their peripheral vision enough to notice the majesty?

2. *Know that it's not about you.* We teach this to every leader and facilitator we train. What is happening in the room, the progress made

— personal and communal — is not about you, despite your powerful position. Though you may have catalyzed powerful developments in the room, you are not the subject. If you stop making the experience self-referential, you can "right-size" yourself.

As they embrace these two practices, people readjust their perspective and become better leaders (and people). If you don't practice these behaviors daily — even occasionally — humility will remain out of reach. While leaders without humility manage to achieve a significant transformation, their deeper impulses ultimately diminish their role and leave many of us feeling small and alone in their wake.

The greatest leaders I have known acknowledge those around them (including their students) as masters and wondrous beings, rather than as people who have come to imbibe ideas from a teacher. Rather than positioning their role as transactional — here is what I do for you and here is what you do for me — they are relational: Here is who we are to each other.

Can humility be taught? Can one teach others so that their voice, wisdom, vision, and passion are valued, while also teaching that their ideas, perspectives, and experiences are no more important than those of others? Can one teach a person to regard the world with wonder?

I do not think we can teach this to everyone. Even those with humble propensities must remember humility as a daily spiritual and practical endeavor. In addition, as one rises on the leadership ladder, the more challenging humility becomes: The leader should recede more to make room for others, and yet that self-knowledge and practice become more difficult when power separates the leader from others. Some people, even with the best of intentions, will never get it.

Before my children came into the world, I would add a fast to my Yom Kippur observance — a speech fast. By refraining from speaking for 25 hours, I always found myself at the end of the day to be more right-sized, more appreciative, and more in awe of my privilege.

We need leaders who know not only how to speak from the mountaintop, but also how to watch and to keep silent from within the crowd. As Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook taught, there is a reason why the first prayer of the day — (*"Modeh/Modah ani"*) — "Grateful am I" — begins with gratitude before the "I" enters the picture.

First "Grateful," then "I." In our search for humble leaders, we should be looking for a shared journey more wondrous than the journey of the individual.

**Yonatan Gordis** is a partner at ChangeCraft, a consulting firm specializing in change processes in the philanthropic and nonprofit fields. A member of the *Sh'ma Now* Board of Directors, he offers his deep appreciation to Rabbi Haim Casas, Rabbi Tamar Elad-Appelbaum, and Anne Gorsuch for their humble reflections on humility.

## The Right Amount of Space

Chai Levy

Early in my rabbinic career, I heard Alan Morinis — a teacher of *Mussar*, a system of Jewish character development — explain *anavah*, humility, not as meekness, but rather as "taking up the right amount of space." Taking up too much space is arrogance, but taking up too little space is shrinking from our responsibilities and from the gifts we can offer. This notion of humility has profoundly influenced the way I approach leadership as a rabbi: How do I leave enough room for others in my congregation, while, at the same time, fully inhabit my role and responsibilities as a leader?

At first, I thought about approaching my rabbinate as a "guide on the side" rather than the more didactic and rabbi-centric "sage on the stage." Shunning the frontal lecture format for classes and prayer services, I opted for the more facilitative styles of *chevruta* study and group discussions, setting up chairs in circles or around tables, where people could face each other, rather than orient themselves toward me. Instead of spouting knowledge and authority in a booming voice, I sought to empower others in their own Jewish learning and ritual skills.

With time and experience, however, I found that there were moments that called for me to have a bigger presence than I had imagined for myself. These included a synagogue crisis or a lifecycle event, when people needed to feel that the rabbi was strong, visible, in front, and holding them. As a petite woman, I realized that my congregation needed me to take up more space and be more of a "sage on the stage."

I learned that taking up the right amount of space is situational. I also came to know that humility depends on the particular traits and personality of the individual;

some of us need to learn to take up less space and some of us, more space. We don't want to be so big that at a *shiva* house, people are talking about the rabbi who delivered the eulogy instead of talking about the deceased. But we also want our presence to be big enough to inspire others and to create a sacred space. Rabbis need to be self-aware and attentive to what a situation requires of us: Do we offer a powerful, memorable sermon that everyone will talk about or one that is careful to not overshadow the *drash* delivered by the bar/bat mitzvah child?

I have found over time that humility — taking up the right amount of space — is less a question of frontal vs. facilitative leadership and more an expression of our *kavannah*, our intention, in how we serve. My intention is to serve the needs of the particular moment, rather than to have the moment be about me. Whether it's in prayer, in teaching, or at a lifecycle event, my goal is to help open up the hearts and minds of those around me, not to focus their attention on me. Being self-aware of our temperaments and predilections, we can learn to curb our own ego and to facilitate others' connecting with the Divine and with each other.

Depending on the circumstance, rabbis may need to take up a lot of space or a little space. Either way, humility requires those of us in roles of spiritual leadership to have the *kavannah* that the direction of attention points not toward us but from us toward those we serve and toward the One we serve.

Rabbi **Chai Levy** serves Congregation Kol Shofar in Marin County, California, and its Center for Jewish Spirituality, which offers learning and growth through meditation, music, and practices that connect mind, body, and spirit.

## Cultivating Humility in America

Geoffrey Claussen

Humility requires that we see ourselves accurately, neither overestimating nor underestimating our worth. To be appropriately humble, we should not hold ourselves above others, but neither should we degrade ourselves. Often, humility requires that we emphasize our dignity and self-worth, especially when we have been degraded by others. It also requires us to challenge the forces that encourage us to consider ourselves superior to others.

For example, powerful cultural currents exist in contemporary America that

encourage Americans to consider our country “exceptional” or superior to other nations. Most of us insist that, when we claim any such exceptionalism, we do not mean to disregard others. But cultivating humility, as Americans, requires us to overcome our defensiveness and to search our souls for harmful, internalized notions of American superiority.

Are there ways that, however unconsciously, we consider our country to be uniquely “chosen” and entitled? Are there ways in which our national pride causes us to overestimate our worth and to turn a blind eye to suffering elsewhere in the world, including suffering to which we, as Americans, may have contributed? Focusing on the trait of humility can alert us to how such pride may bring us to defend our own righteousness and to hold ourselves above others. Such was the warning of Rabbi Aharon Shmuel Tamaret who, a century ago in Eastern Europe, urged his fellow Jews to consider the violence produced by nationalistic pride and, instead, to cultivate communities that reflect greater humility.

Jews may also rightly ask related questions about our own Jewish discourse of exceptionalism. When we American Jews speak of Jews as “chosen,” we often vociferously deny that we mean to imply any notion of Jewish superiority. But our defensiveness may blind us and prevent us from thinking critically about how we, as Jews, internalize conceptions of Jewish preeminence. Members of other communities have similar patterns of thinking, and thus Christians are obligated to confront their sense of Christian superiority, Muslims their sense of Muslim superiority, and so on. But, as the American theologian Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan argued, we Jews should do our part to consider and moderate our own communal pride.

Today's American climate may bring us to hold ourselves above others in many other ways. For example:

- The vast majority of American Jews are seen as white, and those of us in that majority are invariably shaped by the white supremacism that has so deeply influenced American culture. It is our obligation to investigate the ways in which we may be complicit in this form of racism — however unconsciously. Jewish traditions regarding the equal dignity of all human beings, who are created in the image of God, may help us in this task.
- The majority of us live free from poverty, and we may hold ourselves above those who

are impoverished. Current empirical research suggests that people with greater wealth tend to be more self-centered; humility asks us to challenge this dynamic within ourselves. Jewish traditions that link arrogance and abundance, often connected to the Torah's warning that “your heart will become proud” upon gaining wealth (Deuteronomy 8:14), may help us to do so.

- Living in a country where we cause unprecedented levels of suffering to other sentient beings through our systems of animal agriculture, we might question how we overestimate our sense of worth as human beings in relation to the animal world. We need not equate human beings with non-human animals to recognize that the levels of cruelty that we support reflect a lack of humble regard for the dignity of animals. Meditating on the story of Moses, a shepherd who was distinguished by his humble regard for animals, may help us to cultivate greater humility in this respect.

These are just some of the many ways in which we may overestimate our own worth and be complicit in systems that fail to regard the dignity of others. The value of humility may inspire us to take note of our thoughts, words, and deeds; to question often-unconscious patterns; and to engage as deeply as we can in the difficult work of thinking, speaking, and acting with greater humility. None of us should underestimate our own worth, but neither should we refrain from considering and challenging the cultural forces that may encourage us to hold ourselves too high above others.

Rabbi **Geoffrey Claussen** is an associate professor of religious studies and the Lori and Eric Sklut Emerging Scholar in Jewish Studies at Elon University in North Carolina. He is a past president of the Society of Jewish Ethics and author of *Sharing the Burden: Rabbi Simhah Zissel Ziv and the Path of Musar*.

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# Consider & Converse

## A Guide to 'Anavah' — 'Humility'

This issue of *Sh'ma Now*, focused on the Jewish sensibility of humility, is dedicated to the memory of **Jonathan Woocher, z"l**, who effortlessly embodied that trait.

## Introduction

*Sh'ma Now* curates conversations on a single theme rooted in Jewish tradition and the contemporary moment. At the heart of this issue of *Sh'ma Now* is the theme of "anavah"— "humility." As Joey Weisenberg writes in his opening essay, humility "refers to taking up just the right amount of space — not too little and not too much" — finding a balance between our own needs as individuals and as ones who engage with the world around us. For this issue of *Sh'ma Now*, I solicited essays that address both the *Mussar* of humility — that is, the character traits we hope to live by that keep us humble — and also two essays that confront humility (or the lack thereof) among Jewish professionals. We hope that these essays will help our readers to recognize humility as an essential Jewish value to practice daily.

*Sh'ma Now* has never viewed learning or "meaning-making" as solely an individual activity. That's why we have included this guide, which is specifically designed to help you to consider the idea of going forth independently or with others, formally and informally.

## How to Begin

This guide offers a variety of suggestions, including activities and prompts for individual contemplation and informal or more structured conversations. We suggest that you use this guide to share reflections and thoughts over a Shabbat meal, or, for those who are more adventurous, to lead a planned, structured conversation, inviting a small group of friends and family to your home or to a coffee shop. If you would like more information about ways in which this journal might be used, please contact Susan Berrin, *Sh'ma Now* editor-in-chief, at [SBerrin@shma.com](mailto:SBerrin@shma.com). You can also print out a PDF file of the entire issue at <http://forward.com/shma-now/>.

## Guidelines for Discussion

If you wish to hold a structured conversation, the following guidelines may help you to create a space that allows for honest personal exploration through sharing:

- Create a sense of shared purpose that can foster the kind of internal reflection that happens through group conversation.
- Remind participants of simple ground rules for conversations. For example: Avoid commenting on and critiquing each other's comments. Make room for everyone to speak. Step into or away from the conversation appropriately. No one participant should dominate the conversation. Let silence sit, allowing participants to gather their thoughts.
- For each of the questions below, we recommend that you print out the article in question, or provide the link to it, and we ask that you take a moment to read it in print or on screen, before the conversation begins.
- Allow people a few minutes to absorb the article, perhaps even to read it a second time, before moving into the discussion.

# Consider & Converse

A Guide to 'Anavah' — 'Humility'

## Interpretive Questions

*can focus the reader on the ideas in the articles.*

- **Joey Weisenberg** [page 1] introduces readers to several Jewish historical figures who embodied “*anavah*” — “humility” — and one who sought to learn to be humble. Weisenberg shares the ways in which music can be an expression of humility. He writes, “The best musicians may assert their own ideas, but they always leave just as much space for others, and, collectively, they all strike a symbiotic balance between their sounds and the world’s sacred silence.” Who have you known — personally or as a historical figure — who has embodied humility, and how has that individual shown it? What are some experiences of humility that have touched you?
- **Yoni Gordis** [page 3] facilitates organizational change and growth. During a decades-long career, he has noticed a problematic paradigm associated with leadership: “Those who want to lead will generally believe that they have something to give, and that their voice matters, often more than other voices. Why else would they step forward? Placing themselves somewhere on the spectrum between pure altruism and pure ego, leaders need motivation and incentive to step up. How then, can they do so without leaving everyone else behind?” Yoni goes on to describe two distinct leadership styles. He notes that the masters of great leadership whom he has known have positioned their role as relational — as building on relationships — rather than transactional. Each does something to help the other. Can humility be taught? Is humility part of our DNA, or can we learn it? What are the steppingstones to learning humility? Who are the most effective leaders in your communities? What traits do they embody?
- Rabbi **Chai Levy** [page 3] explores the complicated and nuanced role that rabbis play in the lives of their communities. During her rabbinic career, Levy has reconsidered the rabbi-centric “sage on the stage” platform and chosen instead to serve as a “guide on the side.” She writes, “Instead of spouting knowledge and authority ... my goal was to empower others in their own Jewish learning and ritual skills.” But as she evolved as a congregational rabbi, she learned that there were times and situations that demanded a strong, visible rabbi to hold and lead the congregation. “...I learned that taking up the right amount of space is situational. I also came to know that humility depends on the particular traits and personality of the individual; some of us need to learn to take up less space and some of us, more space. We don’t want to be so big that at a *shiva* house, people are talking about the rabbi who delivered the eulogy instead of talking about the deceased. But we also want our presence to be big enough to inspire others and to create a sacred space.” What are useful models of leadership and followership, where just the right amount of space is taken up by the leader? When a congregational leader does model humility, what types of exchanges become possible? Which types of situations demand a more proactive presence from a leader, and which less?



# Consider & Converse

A Guide to 'Anavah' — 'Humility'

## Reflective Questions

*can help one to integrate the ideas in these articles with one's own sense of self.*

- Rabbi **Geoffrey Claussen's** essay [page 4] helps readers to think about how they may overestimate their own worth, and to comprehend the cultural forces that influence the ways in which we understand others and ourselves. He explains that “powerful cultural currents exist in contemporary America that encourage Americans to consider our country ‘exceptional’ or superior to other nations. Most of us insist that, when we claim any such exceptionalism, we do not mean to disregard others. But cultivating humility, as Americans, requires us to overcome our defensiveness and search our souls for harmful, internalized notions of American superiority.” And for Jews in America, we add the concept of “chosenness.” “When we American Jews speak of Jews as ‘chosen,’ we often vociferously deny that we mean to imply any notion of Jewish superiority. But our defensiveness may blind us and prevent us from thinking critically about how we, as Jews, internalize conceptions of Jewish preeminence.” What role does humility play in this dynamic of “exceptionalism”? When we speak about Jews as the “chosen people,” how do we understand the concept of chosenness? What is the relationship of our own sense of privilege to our sense of humility?
- In *NiSh'ma*, [page 2] our simulated Talmud page, three writers explore a well-known line following the first line of the *Sh'ma* prayer, “And you shall love your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” Rabbi **Stan Levy** explains that Franz Rosenzweig’s teaching that “God is asking: ‘love Me.’ God is not self-sufficient.” Levy goes on to explain that God needs and seeks our love. **Tali Anisfeld** shares the story of Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peshischa about having two notes in one’s pockets — “*I am everything,*” and “*I am a worthless piece of garbage*”— and challenges the notion that we are one or the other. “The world can so easily send us swinging from one pocket to the other, convinced of our own importance in one moment and of our inadequacy in the next.” She asks: How do we hold ourselves and each other in a balance of mutual need? **Becky Voorwinde** echoes the notion that we are multidimensional beings, sometimes winning and sometimes not. How do hubris and humility figure in this discussion about God needing our love? How did you react to the story about having two notes in your pockets? What reminders would those notes evoke in you?