PART TWO

MACRO-ECONOMIC ISSUES
CHAPTER THREE

ECONOMIC SELF-INTEREST AND SOCIAL PROGRESS

In this chapter we move on from the backgrounds to talmudic economic analysis and begin to consider some of the rabbinic discourses which look forward to much later controversies amongst social theorists. At the outset, it should be emphasized that like other analysts in antiquity and the middle ages, the Talmudic scholars did not set out to establish a systematic body of economic doctrine in the modern sense. Nevertheless, they explored so many of the fundamental issues relating to the operation of free-market economies that, taken together, their insights represent an extremely comprehensive anticipation of European debate in later centuries. Since much of that debate was bound up with the onset of analytical perspectives inspired by an increasing disposition towards economic liberalism, it is appropriate to begin a treatment of the Talmudic anticipations with an investigation of the manner in which the early writers dealt with the role of self-interest in the solution of communal economic problems.

An Ancient Controversy

Talmudic discussion of self-interest and its role was well underway by the second century B.C.E. At this time, Aggadah, the non-legal contents of the Talmud and Midrash, had begun to register the impact of non-Jewish, particularly Greek, concepts.¹ A deal of theological controversy was generated as a result. This controversy was evident within the Sanhedrin (or, “council court”) which was a prominent institution of the latter part of the Second Temple period.² There, as Hellenistic notions gained momentum, the sage, Antigonus of Socho (a leading figure in