

נתיבות עולם

עמדו על דרכים וראו ושאלו לנתיבות עולם. ירמיהו טז

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THE feast of Purim, now at hand, recalls to the Jewish recollection one of those miraculous deliverances, with which the history of Israel abounds. The narrative of the institution, as contained in the Bible, is a signal proof and illustration of the superintending providence of God, instructive to all the world, but calling peculiarly for the gratitude and praise of the Jewish nation, whose forefathers were then delivered. And it is much to the honour of their posterity that they have not suffered the lapse of more than twenty centuries to wear out the memory of this great event, but that to this day they observe its anniversary with alacrity and zeal. If the oral law simply contented itself with commanding the observance and prescribing the mode of worship for such an important season, we should have no fault to find; but the oral law claims for itself divine origin and authority, anathematizes any denial of these claims as heresy, and sentences the heretic to death. We are, therefore, compelled to examine its pretensions, and to scrutinize its features, in order to see whether they really bear the stamp of divinity. We have already pointed out some, that savoured more of earth than heaven; the constitutions for the feast of Purim may be traced to the same source. The following law respecting the meal to be provided on this occasion did certainly not come to man from heaven:—

דוּבַת סַעֲדָה זוֹ שִׂימַל בְּשֵׁר יִזְקַן סַעֲדָה נֹאֵה כִּפִּי
אֲשֶׁר תִּמְצָא יְדֵי וְשׁוֹתָהּ יֵין עַד שִׁשְׁחֹרֵךְ יוֹדֵם
בְּשִׁכְרוֹתוֹ :

"A man's duty with regard to the feast is, that he should eat meat and prepare a suitable feast according to his means; and drink wine, until he be drunk, and fall asleep in his drunkenness." (Hilchoth Megillah c. ii. 15.) The Talmud, however, is not satisfied with so indefinite a direction, but lays down, with its usual precision, the exact measure of intoxication required.

מִדִּיּוֹב אִינִשׁ לְבַסּוּמִי. בְּפֹרֵאֵי עַד וְלֹא יֵדַע בָּן אֲדוּר
זֶמֶן לְהַרְדֵּךְ מוֹדִי :

"A man is bound to get so drunk with wine at Purim, as not to know the difference between cursed is Haman, and blessed is Mordecai." (Megillah fol. 7, col. 2.) But perhaps some learned champion of the Talmud will fly to that sort of refuge for destitute

commentators, the parabolic language of the orient, and tell us that this precept is not to be understood literally but figuratively; and that so far from recommending intoxication, it means to inculcate excess of sobriety or devotion, such abstraction of the senses, from all outward objects, as not to distinguish between cursed is Haman and blessed is Mordecai. This sort of defence is neither imaginary nor novel. In this way Rabbi Eliezer's permission to split open an unlearned man like a fish has been made to signify the spiritual opening of the understanding, and of course the overweening anxiety of the rabbies to communicate instruction to the ignorant. But however we dull Gentiles may be enlightened by such an exposition, we much doubt whether the greatest amhooretz in Israel will believe the interpretation. The great and learned rabbies Solomon Jarchi and Moses Maimonides have understood literal drunkenness, and have named wine as the legitimate liquor. R. Joseph Karo has simply given the command verbatim as it stands in the Talmud, but a note in the Orach Chaim shows, that some of the modern rabbies were not able to swallow such a command, and, therefore, say that an Israelite does his duty, if he only drink a little more than usual. The Talmud itself admits of no such softening down, nor explaining away, for immediately after the precept it goes on to propose an example and to furnish an illustration of its meaning in the following history of the very rabbi, on whose authority this traditional command rests:—

רַבָּה וְרַבִּי זִירָא עֲבָדוּ סַעֲדָה מוֹרִים בְּהַיְי וְהָדִי
אִיבְסִים קָם רַבָּה שְׁחִשְׁיָה לְרַבִּי זִירָא לְמַדּוּר בְּעַם רַחֲמִי
וְאֻחִידָה לְשֵׁנָה אֲמַר לִיה נִתּוּ מִר וְעֵבֵד סַעֲדָה מוֹרִי
בְּהַיְי וְהָדִי אֲמַר לִיה לֹא בִלְ שִׁטְמָה וְשִׁטְנִי מוֹרְדֵשׁ
נִסָּא :

"Rabba and Rabbi Zira made their Purim entertainment together. When Rabba got drunk, he arose and killed Rabbi Zira. On the following day he prayed for mercy, and restored him to life. The following year Rabba proposed to him again to make their Purim entertainment together, but he answered, 'Miracles don't happen every day.'" (Talmud, Tr. Megillah, fol. 7, col. 2.) This history of the very man, who is the authority for the above Talmudic command to get drunk, plainly illustrates its meaning, and shows that the Talmud meant and commanded

its followers to drink wine to excess on this occasion. It sets before them the example of one of the greatest Rabbies committing murder in his drunkenness, and so far from reproaching this sin, it gravely tells us that God interposed by a miracle to prevent the ill consequences; and that the Rabbi, far from being cured of his propensity, or making any declaration of his intention to amend, continued in that state of mind, that his colleague found it imprudent to trust himself at his table. Now every body that is acquainted with the Jews, knows that they are a temperate and sober people; and because they are so, we ask them whether the above command can be from God? and whether they believe that the Talmud speaks truth in giving the above narrative? It says not merely that men may get drunk with impunity, but that to get drunk is an act of piety, and obedience to a command! Here, again, the Talmud is directly at issue with the New Testament, which says, "Be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess." (Ephes. v. 18.) "Take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and the cares of this life, and so that day come upon you unawares." (Luke xxi. 34.) The New Testament holds out to us no hope, that if in our drunkenness we should commit murder, a miracle will be wrought in order to deliver us from the consequences; but tells us, that "neither murderers nor drunkards shall inherit the kingdom of God." (1 Cor. vi. 9, 10.) Now which of these two doctrines is the most agreeable to the revealed will of God? How would you desire to meet death, if death should come upon the feast of Purim? Would you wish the angel of death to find you, in obedience to the oral law, insensible from overmuch wine? or in that state of sobriety and thoughtfulness prescribed by Jesus of Nazareth? Does not the inward tribunal of the heart decide that Jesus of Nazareth is right, and that the Talmud is wrong? And does not the Old Testament confirm the sentence? Isaiah says, "Wo unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; that continue until night, till wine inflame them! and the harp and the viol, the tabret and pipe, and wine are in their feasts; but they regard not the work of the Lord, neither consider the operation of his hands. Therefore my people are gone into captivity, because they have no knowledge; and their honourable men are famished, and their multitude dried up with thirst." (Isaiah v. 11—13.) And so Moses commands the parents that should have a son "a glutton and a drunkard," to bring him to justice, and to have him stoned. (Deut. xxi. 20.) The Talmud, then, manifestly contradicts the Old Testament; it therefore cannot speak truth when it narrates that God wrought a miracle

in order to save a drunkard and a murderer from that punishment, which He had himself commanded to be visited upon either of these crimes. The story of the miracle is therefore a palpable falsehood, contradictory to the law of Moses, and derogatory to the honour of God. How, then, can the Talmud be of God? If you attempt to distinguish, as some do, between the Talmud and the oral law, and say that though the Talmud contains the oral law, yet it is not all inspired, then we ask, how can you rely upon the testimony of a witness convicted of wilful, gross, and flagrant falsehood? If you do not believe in the above miracle of the drunken Rabba, you denounce it as a liar. If it lie, then, upon this solemn occasion in relating a miracle, in handing down the law of God, how can you depend upon it at all? If it does not scruple to forge miracles, what warrant have you for believing that it does not forge laws also?

But suppose, which is far more probable, that Rabbi Zira, when killed by Rabba, had not come to life again, would Rabba, in the eye of the modern Jewish law, be considered as a murderer, and guilty of death, or as an innocent person, who might safely be permitted to go at large, and pursue his usual avocations? This is a question well deserving an answer from some of your learned men, and naturally suggested by some principles asserted and implied in the following decisions of the oral law:—

קראת המגלה בזמנה מצות עשה מדברי סופרים
 הדרגים דונים שהיא תקנת הנביאים. והכל דיינים
 בקריאה אנשי ונשים וגרים ועבדים משחרור. ומחנך
 את הקטנים לקוחה. ואפילו כהנים בעבודתן מבטלין
 עבודתן ובאין לשמוע מקרא מגלה. וכן מבטלין תלמוד
 חור' לשמוע מקרא מגלה קל החומר לשאר מצות של
 תורה שכולן נדרין מפני מקרא מגלה. ואין לך דבר
 שנדרה מקרא מגלה מפניו חוץ ממה מצוה שאין לו
 קובץ שהפונט בו קוברו תחלה ואחר כך קרא:

"The reading of the Megillah (the book of Esther) in its time is an affirmative precept according to the words of the scribes, and it is known that this is an ordinance of the prophets. The obligation to read it rests upon all, men, women, and proselytes, and manumitted slaves. Children also are to be accustomed to the reading of it. Even priests in their service are to neglect their service, and to come to hear the reading of the Megillah. In like manner the study of the law is to be omitted, in order to hear the reading of the Megillah, and a fortiori all the remaining commandments of the law, all of which give way to the reading of the Megillah: but there is nothing to which the reading of the Megillah gives way, except that particular class of dead person called the dead of the commandment, who has none to bury him. He that happens upon him is first to bury him, and afterwards to read." (Hilchoth Megillah, c. i. 1.) On

this extract we have several remarks to make, but at present we request the attention of our readers to the reason given why the reading of the Megillah is more important than any of the commandments. It is this. According to the oral law, "the study of the law is equivalent to all the commandments, and the other commandments are to give way to this study." But according to the passage before us, the study of the law is to give way to the reading of the Megillah. The reading of the Megillah, therefore, being greater than the greatest of the commandments, is of course greater than all the inferior ones. Now apply this reasoning to the above command to get drunk, and you will prove that getting drunk at Purim feast is the greatest of all the commandments. In order to get drunk, it is plain that the study of the law must give way. The man who cannot distinguish between "Cursed be Haman and blessed be Mordecai," certainly cannot study, neither can he bury the dead. The commandment, therefore, to which the study of the law and the burying of the dead give way, must be the greatest of all the commandments; i.e., the getting drunk on Purim is the greatest of all the commandments. This conclusion, which inevitably follows upon Talmudic principles, necessarily shows that those principles are false. But that is not the object for which I have exhibited this conclusion; it is with reference to the case of Rabbah above-mentioned. Having got drunk according as the oral law commanded, and having thereby obeyed the greatest of the commandments, and one to which all others are necessarily in abeyance, was he guilty or innocent in having murdered R. Zira? It certainly seems a very hard case to condemn him to death for an act, which resulted from his obedience to the greatest of all the commandments. He might urge that he had a great dislike to drunkenness—that he had overcome his natural aversion simply to satisfy the rabbinical requirements—that by the time that he had arrived at the prescribed incompetency to distinguish between Haman and Mordecai, he had lost all power of distinguishing between right and wrong—that, therefore, he had not done it with malice propense; what sentence, therefore, does the Talmud pronounce against a murderer of this sort? If Rabbah was allowed to go at large, as would appear from his invitation to Rabbi Zira the following year, a repetition of the same offence was possible, a repetition of the miracle in R. Zira's opinion highly improbable. Thus Rabbah might go on from year to year killing one or more with impunity, and would be a far more dangerous neighbour than "the ox that was wont to push with his horn." If, on the other hand, he is to be punished capitally, then the oral law is plainly not from God; for obedience to

the greatest of its commandments makes it possible for a man to commit the greatest of crimes, and to subject himself to the extremity of punishment. But we object, secondly, to the exaltation of a mere human ordinance above the Word of God. The reading of the book of Esther at the feast of Purim, is no doubt a very appropriate, and may be a very profitable exercise. But it is confessedly of human appointment. It is of the words of the scribes; the time and the mode are altogether rabbinical ordinances. Why, then, "are all the remaining commandments of the law to give way to the reading of the Megillah?" The priest was to neglect the service to which God had appointed him, in order to obey a mere human institution. And the Israelites to neglect the duties of love and charity, to fulfil a mere ceremonial commandment. Here is a plain token that the oral law is not from God, but is the offspring of human invention and superstition. The human mind exalts ceremonies above moral duties. God declares that all outward observances are secondary. "I desired mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt-offerings." (Hos. vi. 6.) "He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (Mic. vi. 8.) And so the New Testament says in the very same spirit, "The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord, and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, &c. This is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these." (Mark xii. 29—31.) The oral law, on the contrary, tells us that "all the commandments, except the burying of the dead, are to give way to the reading of the Megillah," to a mere ceremony; and that not even of God's appointment. God prefers mercy before the sacrifices which He himself has instituted. The Talmud prefers a human institution to all God's commandments. A more striking instance of genuine superstition, and a stronger proof of the human origin of the oral law cannot be found.

The book of Esther appears to have been a peculiar favourite of the rabbies. The reading of it takes precedence of all other duties but one, and is considered as obligatory even upon the women, who are declared exempt from the study of the law. It is true that it contains a very notable warning for disobedient wives, and a striking instance of the deliverance of Israel by the instrumentality of a woman; but when we consider that the name of God does not occur once in the whole book, and that the law contains the account of man's creation and fall, the ten commandments, the deliverance from Egypt, and all those events

of primary interest to women as well as men, it becomes of some importance to consider why the women, who are not bound to study the law of God, are bound to read the book of Esther. The authors of the oral law appear to have attached uncommon importance to this book, as appears from this circumstance, and still more so from the following startling declaration of Maimonides:—

כל ספר הנביאים וכל הכתובים עתידין ליבטל לימות המשיח חוץ ממגילת אסתר ודור היא קיימת כחמשה דומשי תורה ומהלכות של תורה שבעל פה שאינן במלין לעולם:

“All the books of the prophets, and all the Hagiographa, except the roll of Esther, will cease in the days of Messiah. But it is perpetual as the five books of the written law, and the constitutions of the oral law, which shall never cease.” (Hilchoth Megillah.) Some of the rabbies say that this is to be taken conditionally, “although they were all to cease, yet this would not cease.” But this still attributes a decided superiority to the book of Esther above all the other books. What then is there in it, that gives this book such a peculiar favour, and makes the history of Esther more important than that of the conquest of Canaan, or of the glory of Solomon, or of the restoration of the house of the Lord? Is there more devotion and piety to be found in it than in the Psalms of David? Does it contain more wisdom than the Proverbs of Solomon? Is there a sublimer flight of divine poetry, a more heavenly afflatus than in the visions of Isaiah? A more open revelation of the mysteries of the Deity than is to be found in Job, or Daniel, or Ezekiel? Why do the rabbies pronounce it worthy of preservation, whilst they contemplate without emotion the loss of all the other books? We cannot possibly discover, unless it be that it furnishes more gratification to the spirit of revenge so natural to all the children of Adam, whether they be Jew or Gentile. To forgive is to be like God—and God alone can teach forgiveness either speculatively or practically. But the book of Esther contains an account of the revenge which the Jews took upon their enemies, not like the destruction of the Canaanites, fulfilling the commands of God upon His enemies, but taking personal and individual revenge on their own. And this very fact may be one reason why God did not permit his most holy

name to occur in the whole book—just as he did not permit David to build him a temple, so he would not have his name associated with deeds of personal revenge. But, however that be, we can discover no other reason for the decided preference which the oral law gives to the book of Esther. And we think that after the specimens which we have already given of their spirit towards idolaters we do them no injustice: especially as, in this particular case, the oral law breathes this spirit aloud.

נרץ שיאמר אורו המן נרץ מרדכי אורה ושר
נרצה אסתר אורחם כל ענ"ים נרצים כל ישראל:

“It is necessary to say, cursed be Haman, blessed be Mordecai, cursed be Zeresh, blessed be Esther, cursed be all idolaters, blessed be all Israel.” (Orach Chaiim, sec. 690.) Why this is necessary, is not told us. It appears not to bring glory to God, nor any blessing to man. Haman and Zeresh have long since passed into eternity, and received from the just Judge the reward of their deeds. Mordecai and Esther have in like manner appeared before the God of Israel, and received according to their faith. To these, then, the voice of human praise or reproach is as nothing. But to curse a dead enemy, to pursue with unrelenting hatred those who have already fallen into the hands of the living God, is certainly not a divine ordinance, and cannot be an acceptable act of worship in poor sinners, who themselves stand so much in need of forgiveness. To curse the dead is bad, but to curse the living is, in one sense, still worse. “Cursed be all idolaters.” According to our calculation, there are 600 millions of idolaters—according to the Jewish account, there must be more. Why, then, should they be cursed? That will not convert them from the error of their ways. It will not make them more happy, either in this world or in the next. We are not aware, even if God were to hear this execration and curse the idolatrous world, that it would be productive of any blessing to Israel. Why make a day of thanksgiving for mercies received an opportunity of invoking curses upon the majority of mankind? The Word of God teaches a very different petition for the heathen. “God, be merciful to us, and bless us, and cause his face to shine upon us. That thy way may be known upon earth, thy saving health among all nations. Let the people praise thee, O God; yea, let all the people praise thee.” (Ps. lxxvii.)

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