

# נתיבות עולם

עמדו על דרכים וראו ושאלו לנתבות עולם • ירמיהו טז

“THE OLD PATHS.”—Jer. vi. 16.

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ALL who believe the Bible look forward, in full assurance of hope, to that happy period, when Israel shall be gathered from the four corners of the earth, and restored to the land of their forefathers and the favour of their God. The days of their mourning shall then be ended, and their fasts, now observed on account of the misfortunes of the nation, shall be turned into joy and gladness.

כה אמר יהוה צבאות צום הרביעי וצום החמישי וצום השביעי וצום העשירי יהיה לבית יהודה לששון ולשמחה ולמנוחה כצום האמת והשלום ארצו :

“ Thus saith the Lord of Hosts, the fast of the fourth month, and the fast of the fifth, and the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be to the house of Judah joy and gladness, and cheerful feasts : therefore love the truth and peace.” (Zech. viii. 19.) At that time, the prophet goes on to tell us, Jerusalem shall be the metropolis of the world, and the common centre to which all the nations of the earth shall flow “ to seek the Lord of Hosts and to pray before Him.” We Christians believe this as fully, and long for the happy accomplishment as ardently as the Jews. It would give us unspeakable pleasure to behold the Jews on that height of moral dignity and glory for which God destined them, from the first hour that he chose their father Abraham to be His friend. We desire the arrival of this happy period, for the sake of the Jews themselves, but surely no Jew will feel offended with us if we say that we desire it also for our own sakes and the sake of all the families of men. We should wish to see Divine truth triumphant, sin and misery banished, and brotherly love universal, but we see all these things connected with the restoration of Israel, and the establishment of the kingdom of God upon earth, and therefore we join with all our heart in the most ardent aspirations of the Jewish people, and say “ Amen ” to every prayer that God “ would remember his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and that he would also remember the land.” But, alas ! these prayers and wishes and anticipations all remind us that that happy day is still future. Israel is still scattered among the nations, and instead of having days of joy and gladness, is about to observe another solemn day of mourning in remembrance of the desolation of their city and temple. The ninth of the month of Av is still a fast, and Rambam

thus describes the causes of mourning on that day.

וּס'ב' דברים אירש בו . נגור על ישראל במדבר שלא יכנסו לארץ . חרב הבית בראשונה ובשנייה . ונלכדה עיר גדולה וביהר שמה היוו בה אלפים ורובבות מישראל וזיהו להם מלך גדול רמו כל ישראל וגדולי החכמים שהיו מלך המשיח . ונפל ביד הגוים והדירו כולם וזיהו צרה גדולה כמו חורבן בית המקדש . ובו ביום המוכן לפורענות חרש מורנוס רופוס הרשע את ההיכל ואת סביבו לקיים מה שנאמר ציון שדה חרש :  
“ On the ninth of Av five things happened.

It was decreed in the wilderness that Israel should not enter into the land. The temple was destroyed, both the first and second time. The great city named Bithur was taken, and there were in it thousands and tens of thousands of Israel, and they had a great king, whom all Israel and the greatest of the wise men imagined to be the King Messiah. But he fell into the hands of the Gentiles, and the Israelites were all slain, and there was a great affliction similar to the desolation of the temple. On this same day, destined for punishment, the wicked Turnus Rufus ploughed up the sanctuary and the adjacent parts, to fulfil that which is said, ‘ Zion shall be ploughed as a field.’ (Mich. iii. 12.)” (Hilchoth Taanioth. c. v.) The mere enumeration of all these dreadful inflictions of the Almighty suggest many and grave topics for reflection, but the most important of all is, the cause of the last desolation of the temple, and the present long captivity. To mourn over past misfortunes and to humble ourselves for past sins, is indeed good and wholesome, but if it does not teach us how to remedy the one and to avoid the other, it can only terminate in despair. Every Israelite, therefore, who weeps for the desolation of the holy and beautiful house where his fathers worshipped, should also set himself earnestly to inquire into the cause and remedy of this great calamity. Why was it that the God of mercy desolated his own house, the only temple that He had in the world built by his own express command ? The idolatry of the nation was the cause of the destruction of the first temple.

גם כל שר הכהנים העם הרבו למעל מעל ככל הרעות הגוים וישמאו את בית יהוה אשר הקדיש בירושלם : וישלח יהוה אלוהי אבותיהם עליהם ביד מלאכיו השכם ושלחו כי חמלו על עמו ועל מעונו ; והיו מלעבים במלאכי האלוהים ובזוים דבריו ומתעצתים ; נבניאו עד עלות חמת יהוה בעמו על לאן כפרה וגו' :

“Moreover, all the chief of the priests, and the people transgressed very much, after all the abominations of the heathen, and polluted the house of the Lord which he had hallowed in Jerusalem. And the Lord God of their fathers sent to them by his messengers, rising up betimes and sending; because he had compassion on his people, and on his dwelling-place: but they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against his people, till there was no remedy. Therefore he brought upon them the King of the Chaldeans, who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion upon young man or maiden, old man or him that stooped for age: he gave them all into his hand—and they burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem, and burned all the palaces thereof with fire, and destroyed all the goodly vessels thereof.” (2 Chron. xxxvi. 14—19.) Here then obstinate idolatry is represented as the cause of the first desolation. Israel learned and practised the abominations of the heathen, and thus polluted the temple, and therefore God destroyed the temple and sent them into captivity. There were no doubt many and other great sins in Israel, but they are not mentioned, as if to show that nothing short of a wilful and obstinate departure from God could have led him to adopt so severe a measure. As long as they retained their allegiance to God and rejected the abominations of the heathen, there was a hope and a possibility that they might repent of other sins, but when men obstinately turn away from God, and will not hearken to his warnings, all hope of repentance is at an end, and there is no alternative but just judgment. But was this the case in the second temple? Were the Jews then obstinate idolaters? Had they images amongst them, and did they pollute the second temple with such abominations of the heathen? No, rather than bow down to images, they willingly endured every torture, and offered up even their lives as a sacrifice to the truth, and when the second temple was destroyed, there was not amongst Israel a single vestige of idolatry. Never, in the whole course of their history, from the going forth out of Egypt to that day, was there such an apparently scrupulous observation of the letter of the law, and never had Israel had so many learned men devoted to the study of the commandments. What then could be the cause of the second desolation? It was not idolatry, but it must have been something equally odious in the sight of God, and it must have been a sin committed equally by the priests and the people. You observe that in the above description of the first destruction, it is said, “All the chief of the priests,

and the people transgressed very much.” If the priests had remained faithful to their God, He would not have destroyed their temple, for there would have been hope, that, by their exertions and teaching, the people would have been brought to a better mind. Or if the people had remained faithful, God would not have punished the people for the sins of the priests; he would have cut off the wicked priests and raised up others according to his own heart. Nothing short of the unanimous wickedness of priests and people could have brought on so great a calamity. In like manner we infer that the cause of the second destruction was not any partial wickedness, but some sin, of which both priests and people were guilty, that drew down that calamity. And, further, it must have been a sin against which they were warned by special messengers of God. When the priests and the people fell into idolatry, God did not immediately destroy the first temple. He first tried whether they would listen to his warnings and repent, and therefore “he sent to them by his messengers, rising up betimes, and sending; because he had compassion on his people, and on his dwelling-place.” Now, surely, when we see that God showed such compassion, when He was about to send so small a calamity as the seventy years’ captivity, we may safely infer that he would not bring the more tremendous judgment of eighteen hundred years’ desolation, without exhibiting a compassion proportionate to the coming infliction. In the former case he sent special messengers and prophets to warn them, he must also have acted similarly before the second destruction. Who, then, were the messengers and the prophets that warned the Jews of their sin? The Jews say, that during the second temple there was no prophecy; but is it possible to imagine that the God of Israel would shut up his bowels of compassion, and pity neither his people nor his dwelling-place, but give them both over to the most dreadful visitation that ever descended on a nation without one word of warning? When he was about to destroy Nineveh he first sent Jonah to call them to repentance, and when his judgments were about to descend upon Babylon, the words of warning were miraculously written on the wall; can we suppose, then, that God would not have as much mercy on Jerusalem and the Jews as on Babylon and Nineveh? The supposition is utterly inconsistent with God’s character and dealings. There must have been prophets who announced the coming judgment and warned the people of their sin. Who were they, then, and what was that sin equal to idolatry which priests and people committed and obstinately persevered in, despite of all warning, and in which their descendants still persevere? Idolatry is a

departure from the true God, and the setting up a false system of religious worship. Now it is granted that the Jews did not make images, but did they set up a false system of worship and religion contrary to the religion of Moses and the prophets? Let the oral law and the Jewish Prayer-books answer that question. We have shown in these papers that the oral law sanctioned by the Jewish Prayer-books is directly at variance with the written Word of God. It teaches the Jews to put trust in amulets, charms, and magic, which are mere heathenism. It teaches a cruel and unmerciful system for the Jews, gives false ideas of the character of God, and actually forbids the Jews to love their Gentile brethren as themselves. The setting up of this system was the great sin which priests and people all joined in committing, and in which their posterity still continue. They were warned against this sin: God sent them extraordinary messengers, He sent them Jesus of Nazareth, the prophet like unto Moses, and the Messiah. The great burden of his preaching was against this false religion, the oral law, but they would not hearken to his words. Priests and people conspired together to reject and crucify him. Here, then, was the result of the false system which they adopted. The oral law was the tree, the rejection of the Messiah the fruits. But still the Lord had compassion upon his people, and upon his dwelling-place, he spared them yet for forty years, and in the mean while sent his apostles to warn them and testify against their iniquity; "but they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against his people, till there was no remedy," and he gave them into the hands of the Romans. Because they rejected Jesus of Nazareth and his disciples, the temple and city were desolated. The Jews have been taught to think that Jesus and his disciples were deceivers, but let them consider this fact, that if they were, God himself has sealed the truth of their assertions by the acts of His Providence. The preservation of the temple and city to this day would have been incontestable evidence that they were deceivers. Had no judgments followed upon the crucifixion of Jesus, it would have been evident to all mankind, that he was not what he pretended to be. But if he was indeed the Messiah, the strongest possible attestation that God could give, was the exemplary punishment of those who crucified him, and this God has given. They crucified Jesus, and God destroyed the temple and scattered the people. Without this, the religion of Jesus never could have triumphed as it has done. If the temple were still standing, and the Jews in their land, they could point to the temple and say, "See that temple, the monument of God's favour

and presence, it is still amongst us, and shows that Jesus could not have been the Messiah. If he had been the Messiah, God would not have left us this unequivocal testimony of his favour." But this proof of their righteousness God has taken away, and that within forty years after the crucifixion of Jesus; so that God himself has given the strongest possible attestation to the truth of his claims. Let any reflective Israelite calmly consider this, that if Jesus was not what he claimed to be, his crucifixion was the most meritorious act that the Jews ever performed. They thereby did what they could to stay the progress of a false religion that was to overrun the world, and to uphold the truth; can they, then, suppose that God would punish them for doing that which was right, and give the sacred sanction of His Providence to him that was doing wrong? When Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, slew the Israelite and the Midianitish woman with his spear, the plague was stayed from Israel, and can we imagine that the high priests who condemned Jesus would have had a less reward if his claims had been false? If Christianity be not true, then God himself has interposed to crush the truth, and to build up falsehood. If Christianity be true, then God could do nothing more to attest its truth than he has done by the destruction of the temple. There was but one unanswerable argument against Christianity, and that was the existence of the temple; but God himself has answered that argument by taking away the temple, and therefore we infer that as God has done all that he could to establish the truth of Christianity, it must be true.

The Jews think that if Jesus had been the Messiah, it is impossible that the priests and learned men of his time could have rejected him. But the events which they commemorate on the ninth of Av show the untenableness of this argument. On this day the Jews commemorate, first of all, the decree that the Israelites should die in the wilderness. And why did they die in the wilderness? Because they would not believe in Moses. "And the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron: and the whole congregation said unto them, Would God that we had died in the land of Egypt! or would God that we had died in this wilderness. And they said one to another, Let us make a captain, and let us return into Egypt." (Numbers xiv. 2.) Yet they had seen the plagues of Egypt, and they had passed through the Red Sea, and were at that moment supplied miraculously with food, but for all that they did not believe, and that "The whole congregation." Will any Jew say, that this unbelief proves that Moses was a false prophet? If not, why not? Every argument that will prove that the unbelief of

that generation is no argument against the claims of Moses, will equally demonstrate that the unbelief of the Jews in the time of Jesus is no argument against his Messiahship. If it was possible for them to disbelieve the word of Moses, after all that they had seen, it is equally possible that they should have rejected Christ.

But remark here, it was only the old generation that God sentenced to die in the wilderness. The children who did not participate in the unbelief of their fathers entered into the land. Now if anything similar had happened to the Jews since the destruction of the second temple, that is, if after a few years' captivity they had returned to their land *without becoming Christians*, they might then argue that the rejection of Jesus was not the sin for which they were exiled. They might say, We have not become Christians, and yet God has restored us; it is plain therefore that this was not the cause of the second desolation. But God's dealings have been just the reverse. The Jewish nation have gone on from century to century, fasting and humbling themselves before the God of their fathers, and yet he does not restore them, a plain token that they still participate in the sin of their fathers. And a plainer proof still of the truth of Christianity, for God still continues the providential act, whereby he originally proved that Christianity was true. Israel still rejects Christianity, and therefore Israel still continues in dispersion. The only argument, that could even appear to prove that the rejection of Jesus was not the cause of the second desolation, would be the restoration of the Jews in an unconverted state. But that argument God refuses to grant, and has refused it to his beloved people for many centuries. If Judaism be true, why should he thus continue to declare against it? If Christianity be false, why should he from century to century stamp it with the seal of truth?

But, in the next place, the Jews commemorate the destruction of the first temple, that is, they commemorate the idolatry of the chief priests and the people. They remember that the learned and the unlearned of the nation rejected the true God and turned to dumb idols. How then can the Jews say that it is impossible for a nation, that openly rejected the God of their fathers, to reject the Messiah? There can be no greater proof of folly and wickedness than to reject God and worship a stock or a stone; but of this Israel has been guilty, and because of this sin the first temple was destroyed. The man who rejects the true God will also reject his messenger. But Israel has done the one, why then should it be denied that they could do the other? The only possible answer that can be given is, that

the priests and the people were a great deal wiser and better in the days of Jesus than in those of the first temple. But if this be true, why was the temple destroyed? Why were those, who were so much wiser and better, punished with a more dreadful punishment than those who were so much more foolish and wicked? If we are to judge of the comparative wisdom and piety of the two by the measure of punishment, then we must say, that the idolatrous priests and people of the first temple were a great deal wiser and better than the priests and people of the second temple, for the former escaped, after a captivity of seventy years, the latter have been exiled for seventeen centuries. The tremendous nature of the punishment would show, that the priests and people, who rejected Jesus, were more wicked than their idolatrous forefathers, and if so, their testimony against Jesus is of no value.

But the Jews also commemorate on this day the destruction of the city of Bithur, that is, they commemorate the folly of all their greatest rabbies in following an impostor, and believing in him as their Messiah. There Bar Kochav took refuge with those whom he deluded. Rambam says, "All Israel, and the greatest of their wise men, imagined him to be the Messiah," and we know that the famous Rabbi Akiva was amongst the number. Here, then, we have practical proof that the judgment of those rabbies, who rejected Jesus, was not to be depended upon. If they had succeeded in their efforts, they would have taught all Israel to believe in an impostor; but the providence of God gave them all over to destruction in the very act of following a false prophet. And yet these are the men who have handed down the oral law, and compiled the precepts of Rabbinic religion; men, whom the Jews themselves tell us, were the followers of a false prophet and the dupes of an impostor. How can they possibly believe in a system which has such men for its authors; men who seduced thousands and tens of thousands of Israel to plunge themselves into ruin? If Rabbi Akiva, and his colleagues, had not espoused the cause of Bar Kochav, he could never have succeeded in deluding such numbers of Israelites; they, therefore, are answerable for that dreadful calamity. But when the Jews of the present day commemorate that sore affliction, should they not remember also that it is high time to give up that religious system that was the cause of it, and of all the evils that have since followed; or at least seriously and carefully investigate a religion, fidelity to which is compatible with the departure of God's favour, the destruction of the temple, and a long and awful captivity?

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