

נתיבות עולם

עמדו על דרכים וראו ושאלו לנתיבות עולם. ירמיהו ו' טז

"THE OLD PATHS."—Jer. vi. 16.

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THE season of the Jewish year, which we are now approaching, naturally leads us to the consideration of some subjects more important than those which we have lately discussed. The oral law teaches that the festival of the new year is nothing less than a day of judgment, on which God pronounces sentence respecting the state of every individual.

וכשם ששוקלין זכות אדם ועונותיו בשעת מיתתו כך בכל שנה ושנה שוקלין עונותו כל אחד ואחד מבני העולם עם זכותיו ביום של ראש השנה. מי שנמצא צדיק נחתם לחיים. ומי שנמצא רשע נחתם למיתה. והביטנים תולין אותו עד יום הכפורים אם עשה תשובה נחתם לחיים ואם לאו נחתם למיתה :

"As the merits and the sins of a man are weighed at the hour of his death, so likewise every year, on the festival of New Year's Day, the sins of every one that cometh into the world are weighed against his merits. Every one who is found righteous is sealed to life. Every one who is found wicked is sealed to death. But the judgment of the intermediate class is suspended until the day of atonement. If they repent, they are sealed to life, but if not, they are sealed to death." (Hilchoth T'shuvah c. iii. 3.) This naturally leads us to consider the Rabbinic doctrine of justification, and to inquire how far it agrees with Moses and the Prophets. And here our first business must be to state the doctrine as it is found in the oral law.

This law teaches, first, that he whose merits are more than his sins is accounted a righteous man.

כל אחד ואחד מבני האדם יש לו זכיות ועונות. מי שזכותיו יתרות על עונותיו צדיק. ומי שעונותיו יתרות על זכותיו רשע. מזהה למהצה בינוני :

"Every one of the children of man has merits and sins. If his merits exceed his sins, he is righteous. If his sins exceed his merits, he is wicked. If they be half and half, he is a middling or intermediate person." (Ibid 1.)

It teaches, secondly, that in estimating the comparative state, respect is had not only to the number but to the quality of the actions. ושקל זה אינו לפי מנין הזכיות העונות אלא לפי גדולם. יש זכות שהיא כנגד כמה עונות שנה. יין נמצא בו דבר טוב. יש עין שהיא כנגד כמה זכיות שנאמר הוסיף אחד יאבד טובה הרבה :

"And this weighing is made, not with respect to the number of the merits and the sins, but according to their greatness. There

is a merit which may outweigh many sins, as it is said, 'Because in him there is found some good thing.' (1 Kings xiv. 13.) And there are sins which may outweigh many merits, for it is said, 'one sinner destroyeth much good.' " (Ecclesiast. ix. 18.)

It teaches, thirdly, that it is possible by transgression or obedience to turn the scale.

חשם חשם אחד הרי הכריע את עצמו ואת כל העולם כולו לנף חובה וגרם לו השחודה. עשה מצוה אחת הרי הכריע את עצמו ואת כל העולם כולו לנף זכות וגרם לו ולהם תשועה והצלה שנאמר וצדיק יסור עולם זה שצדק הכריע את כל העולם לזכות והצילו. ומפני ענין זה נהגו כל בית ישראל להרבות בצדקה ובמעשים טובים ולעסוק במצות מראש השנה ועד יום הכיפורים יתר מכל השנה :

"If a man sin one sin, he gives the preponderance for himself and for all the world to the scale of guilt, and causes destruction. But if he perform one commandment, he gives the preponderance both for himself and all the world to the scale of merit, and causes salvation and deliverance to himself and them, as it is said, 'The righteous is the foundation of the world' (Prov. x. 25), which means that righteousness gives the world a preponderance in the scale of merit and delivers it. And on this account all the house of Israel are accustomed to abound in almsgiving and in good deeds, and to be diligent in the commandments in the interval between New Year's Day and the Day of Atonement more than in all the year besides." (Ibid 4.) This then is the doctrine which we have to consider.

The first great principle is that "Every one of the children of men has merits and has sins." That every man has sins we readily admit; but that any man, or any angel, or any of God's creatures has any merit in the sight of God we deny. First, because the idea of merit is utterly inconsistent with the idea of the relation in which the creature stands to the Creator. Every created being is bound by the very fact of his creation to love God with all his heart and soul, and mind and strength, and to do all his will. Whatsoever, therefore, he does, he can never exceed the limit of his bounden duty, and can therefore never lay any claim to merit. If created beings were free from all obligation to love God or to do his will—if they were independent and masters of themselves, then by

loving God or doing his will they might have merit, for they would be doing him a service which He has no right to require. Just as a man that is free may hire himself to do work for another man, which he is not bound to do, and thereby earn wages. But not so the slave, who is his master's property. He can only do his duty, and if he toil all the day and be diligent and faithful in his master's service, he still can lay no claim to wages or to merit; he has only done what he is bound to do. To lay any claim to merit, we must stand on equal terms, and confer what the other has no right to expect. But this no created being can ever do. He is a debtor overwhelmed with such an amount of debt, that all that he has or can raise only goes in part payment, and who therefore will never be able to confer any thing which is not already due. And therefore it is said, "Can a man be profitable unto God?" and again, "Is it gain to him, that thou makest thy ways perfect?" (Job xxii. 2, 3.) The unfallen angels themselves have no merit before God, and much less fallen and rebellious man.

But, secondly, the assertion that man has merits is contradicted by the plain testimonies of Scripture. If man have merits, however few, then so far as those merits are concerned, his nature must be good and holy, but God declares the contrary. "Behold, he putteth no trust in his saints; yea the heavens are not clean in his sight: how much more abominable and filthy is man, which drinketh iniquity like water." (Job xv. 15, 16.) Such language cannot be applied to any creature capable of meriting any thing in the sight of God. Again, if man have merits, his merits must proceed from the good things which he has done. He that does nothing good cannot be meritorious, but yet God says, "There is none that doeth good, no, not one. They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy; there is none that doeth good, no, not one." (Ps. xii. 1-3.) If this be true, then no man has merits. If man have merits, they must proceed from an inherent good principle in his nature, but God says even of Israel that there is no such principle of good: on the contrary, he declares that "the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot, even unto the head, there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and purifying sores." (Isaiah i. 5, 6.) Here God describes Israel, and the description is generally true of mankind, as totally corrupt. There is no soundness in it. The intellect is corrupt, for "the whole head is sick." The affections are corrupt, for "the whole heart is faint." How, then, can he that has a perverted intellect and a corrupt heart have merits? Again, if man have merits, his good deeds, whatever they be, must be such as to

deserve the approbation of God; but the confession of the prophet is—

וְהָיָה כְּשֹׂמֵם כְּלֵנוּ וּכְבָגֵר עֵדִים כֹּל צְדִיקוֹנוּ :

"But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses as filthy rags." (Isa. lxiii. 5.) Either, then, the oral law or the Bible says what is false. The Bible says that the very best of man's deeds, "all his righteousnesses," are no better in the sight of God than filthy rags: if this be true, then man has no merit whatsoever.

But again, the assertion that every man has merits and sins, is based upon a false principle. It takes for granted that God judges men by their individual acts, and not by the state of their hearts; that is, that he judges as we do. When we consider a man's conduct, we can only look at his acts, and to us some of them appear good and others bad. In our sight, therefore, he may have some merits and some demerits. But God looks at the heart, and sees whether a man loves him or not, and by the whole habit of his mind and affections judges the man's state and all his actions. We short-sighted creatures judge a man's heart by his actions; but God judges his actions by his heart, and where the heart is wrong, he is so far from counting any actions as meritorious, that he looks upon the whole conduct as one mass of abominable sin.

The next assertion of the oral law is, that "If a man's merits exceed his sins, he is righteous." This pre-supposes, first, that a man's merits may exceed his sins; and asserts, secondly, that in this case he is accounted righteous. But where is the man whose "merits exceed his sins?" Where is the man who keeps any one of God's commandments perfectly? In all our best deeds and efforts there is sin of admixture or of imperfection. Often, when by the help of God, a good thought or an honest intention is conceived in the heart, before it can be realised in action, some selfish and unworthy motive associates itself with it, and spoils the whole. And in every case the obedience is imperfect, so that all our best acts become occasions of committing sins either of infirmity or imperfection, and thus our sins are certainly as many as our good deeds, for each one of them has a sin as its associate. But how many are our sins of thought, word, and deed, which are mere sins without any admixture of good, and which in themselves are "more than the hairs of our head?" And even if we should admit that the final result depends not upon number, but upon magnitude, then there is one sin that extends from the moment of our birth to the latest hour of our existence, and that is, want of perfect love to God. This he requires at every moment, but yet how many hours of every day

do we pursue our business or our pleasure without a single remembrance of him? And how few, how hasty, and how interrupted are our grateful recollections of the love and mercy of God! Here then is a sin which in magnitude far exceeds the aggregate of all our gratitude and all our services, and which in itself would sink the scale of guilt down to the lowest hell. But by the side of it there is another equally immense, and that is our continued transgression of the commandment, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." The very best of all God's saints makes, at the most, but a feeble struggle against the love of self. He admits the extent of his duty to his neighbour, he knows it—he desires to fulfil it. He watches against himself, and yet, with all his care, self-love creeps in again and again, and asserts the mastery over his thoughts and actions. These two sins would outweigh a thousand times all the six hundred and eleven remaining commandments of which Israel boasts, even if they kept them all without a single transgression or a shade of imperfection. With these two sins on our consciences, it is perfectly absurd to talk of our merits exceeding our sins. There is not, and never was in the world, a mere child of Adam, whose sins did not far exceed his good deeds. If, therefore, it be necessary, in order to be accounted just, that our merits should exceed our sins, we must give up all hope of being justified before God.

But let us suppose for a moment that such a thing were possible, that there was a man whose merits exceeded his sins, would such an one be accounted just before God? First let us ask Moses, let us hear what he says. Does he promise that if your merits exceed your sins, ye shall be considered just? and does he promise life, as the oral law does, to imperfect obedience? Hear the words of Moses himself:—

ושמרתם לעשות כאשר צוה יהוה אלהיכם לא תסורו ימין ושמאל: בכל הדרך אשר צוה יהוה אלהיכם תלכו למען חיותו ושוב לכם הארכתם ימים בארץ אשר חירשתו:

"Ye shall observe to do therefore as the Lord your God hath commanded you: ye shall not turn aside to the right-hand or to the left. Ye shall walk in ALL the ways which the Lord your God hath commanded you, that ye may live and that it may be well with you, and that ye may prolong your days in the land which ye shall possess." (Deut. v. 32, 33.) Here Moses requires perfect obedience as the condition of life, and does not allow a single deviation either to the right-hand or to the left. It is not a single declaration, nor a sentiment wrested from its context. Moses repeats the same again and again. In the very next verses to those just quoted, he says—

וזאת המצוה החוקים והמשפטים אשר צוה יהוה אלהיכם ללמד אתכם לעשות בארץ אשר אתם עומדים שמה לשמחה: למען חירא את יהוה אלהיך לשמור את כל הדיקות ומצותיו אשר אנכי מצוה אתה ובנך וכן בכל כל ימי חיך ולמען יארכתו ימך:

"Now these are the commandments, the statutes, and the judgments, which the Lord your God commanded to teach you, that ye might do them in the land whither ye go to possess it; that thou mightest fear the Lord thy God, to keep ALL his statutes and his commandments, which I command thee; thou and thy son, and thy son's son, all the days of thy life: and that thy days may be prolonged." (vi. 1, 2.) Here again Moses requires perfect obedience to the whole law. He requires it of every individual of Israel. "Thou and thy son, and thy son's son;" and this universal obedience he exacts not at some stated period of the year, but every day of a man's whole life. "All the days of thy life." Moses leaves no room for some merits and some sins. If a man does what Moses requires, he can have no sins. If a man have any sins whatever, he does not fulfil what Moses requires as the condition of life. We might quote several other similar passages, but content ourselves with one, where Moses expressly declares that universal obedience is necessary to righteousness.

רצונו יהוה לעשות את כל החקים האלה ליראה את יהוה אלהינו ושוב לנו כל הימים לחיותנו כדיום זהו: וצדקה חיה לנו כי נשמר לעשות את כל המצוה הזאת לפני יהוה אלהינו כאשר צונו:

"And the Lord commanded us to do ALL these statutes, to fear the Lord our God always, that he might preserve us alive, as it is at this day. *And it shall be our righteousness, if we observe to do ALL these commandments before the Lord our God, as he hath commanded us.*" (Deut. vi. 24, 25.) This is Moses' idea of righteousness, and if Moses be right the oral law is wrong. It says, "If a man's merits exceed his sins, he is righteous." Moses says, If a man keep all the commandments all the days of his life, he is righteous. The oral law promises life to him who confessedly has sins. Moses requires perfect and universal obedience as the condition of life. It becomes, therefore, an important, an awfully important, consideration for every Israelite, whether he will rest his soul's salvation on the word of Moses, or on that of the oral law. If he rests upon the oral law, then he will be satisfied that a partial obedience is sufficient to secure everlasting salvation, and in this hope he will die. But if he is to be judged according to the law of Moses, he will, at the hour of God's judgment, find himself awfully mistaken. Moses knows of no righteousness, but that of universal obedience every day of a man's life, and promises life to none but those who have

this righteousness. He that has it not, therefore, must be condemned. And let every Israelite mark well that Moses has not left us to draw this just conclusion from the premises which he has laid down, but has himself stated, in the distinctest and plainest terms, That he who does not yield this universal obedience is accursed. And that no man may mistake his meaning, he sums up all that he has said upon this subject, and repeats, that he who keeps ALL God's commandments shall be blessed, and that he who does not keep ALL God's commandments shall be accursed.

היה אם שמעו השמע בקול דתה אלהיך לשמור
לעשות את כל מצותיו וחקותיו אשר אנכי מצוך היום ונתנך
יהיה אלהיך עיית על כל גוי הארץ: ובאו עליך כל
ברכת האלה וגו' :

“And it shall come to pass, if thou shalt hearken diligently unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe and to do ALL his commandments which I command thee this day, that the Lord thy God will set thee high above all nations of the earth; and all these blessings shall come on thee,” &c. And then, after enumerating the blessings, he adds—

היה אם לא השמע בקול אלהיך לשמור לעשות
את כל מצותיו וחקותיו אשר אנכי מצוך היום ובאו
עליך כל הקללות האלה והשיגך: ארור אתה בעד
וארור אתה בשדה וגו' :

“But it shall come to pass, if thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe to do ALL his commandments and his statutes which I command thee this day, that all these curses shall come upon thee, and overtake thee. Cursed shalt thou be in the city, and cursed shalt thou be in the field,” &c. (Deut. xxviii. 1—15.) Here Moses plainly says, that he who is perfectly obedient is blessed, and that he who is not perfectly obedient is cursed. And it is to be noted that Moses knows nothing of an intermediate state of man, the בנינים who are neither righteous nor wicked. He divides all Israel into two classes, the blessed and the cursed. He who keeps ALL God's commandments belongs to the former; he who does not keep ALL God's commandments to the

latter. In this matter, then, the most important that can employ the mind of man, the oral law contradicts the plain words of Moses. One of the two is certainly in error. It is for the Israelites to choose whether they will believe Moses, or that oral law which contradicts his words. If they believe in Moses, then no one is accounted just before God, but that man who has all the days of his life kept all God's commandments without one deviation. Every other person is so far from being just, that he is accursed. If there were a human being who had all his life kept all the commandments, and only once been guilty of transgression, that one transgression makes him unjust and accursed. But there is no such person. Every man's conscience tells him that his sins far exceed his obedience, and therefore if Moses speak truth he is accursed. Oh, let no one endanger his salvation by trusting to the oral law. Let him take up the law of Moses, let him investigate the conditions which Moses lays down. We ask not now, that the Israelites should read the New Testament, or that they should listen to our arguments or any reasoning of man. We simply point out to them the words of Moses, and we show other passages of the oral law which teaches an entirely different doctrine. We ask, then, whether the man who rebels against the law of Moses can hope for salvation? Yet this is what every one who follows the oral law is doing. If his temporal welfare only were concerned, it would not be of such moment. But here his eternal interests are at stake. If the oral law be mistaken, and mistaken it is, if Moses spoke truth, their eternal salvation is forfeited by every one who follows it. We therefore entreat every reader of this paper to take up the law of Moses, and to investigate this question:—“What are the conditions of blessing and cursing, of life and death, according to the declarations of Moses? Does he promise life to that man whose merits exceed his sins, or does he require universal obedience?” To Moses himself we appeal, and him we constitute the arbiter of our differences.

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