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.

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.

If a man sins one sin, he gives the preponderance to 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 fail 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; yes 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 meritizing 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—

“יהי נמעה לוהי בערר כותש לארץATIONS

“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 de-
sires 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:

"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—

"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 fulfill 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.

"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 righteous-
ness, if we observe to do all these com-
mandments 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 re-
quires perfect and universal obedience as the
condition of life. It becomes, therefore, an
important, an awfully important, considera-
tion 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 par-
tial 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 judg-
ment, find himself awfully mistaken. Moses
knows of no righteousness, but that of uni-
versal 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.

"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 upon thee," &c. And then, after enumerating the blessings, he adds——

"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 middle way; he is either righteous or 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.