

נתיבות עולם

עמדו על דרכים וראו ושאלו לנתבות עולם ירמיהו טז

"THE OLD PATHS."—JER. vi. 16.

NUMBER 33.]

FRIDAY, AUGUST 26, 1836.

[PRICE ONE-PENNY.]

WE showed in our last number that the first axiom of the oral law respecting the mode of justification is false. Moses requires perfect and universal obedience to all the commandments as the condition of justification and life, whereas the oral law says it is sufficient if a man's merits exceed his sins. One of the two, then, has spoken falsehood. It is for the Jews to consider which of them they will brand with the character of liar. As for ourselves we believe that Moses spoke the truth, and by his standard of right and wrong we proceed to examine the second and third principles of Rabbinic justification. The oral law tells us, further, that when God weighs the merits and the offences, "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.) And for this reason we are told that "In the ten days between the New Year and the Day of Atonement Israel abounds in almsgiving and good works more than in all the year besides." Such is the hope which the oral law holds out to Israel. It first tells a man, that if his merits exceed his sins, he is safe. Then feeling that none but a fool or madman can dream of his merits exceeding his sins, it tries to quiet the conscience by assuring the guilty, that the quality of the deeds is regarded more than their number, and that there may be one meritorious act which will outweigh many sins. It endeavours to prove this by a citation from the Book of Kings. This is in itself suspicious. Why did it not bring one or more plain passages from the Books of Moses? They contain the law of God, and the great principles of God's judgment. In determining a case like this an appeal to the letter of the law is absolutely necessary. Let every Israelite, then, before he trusts his salvation to the oral law, find out one passage in the law of Moses, where Moses himself declares that "one merit may outweigh many sins." We know not of one similar declaration, and therefore hesitate not to say, that whosoever rests his

salvation on this hope, has apostatised from the religion of Moses.

But the passage itself, which the oral law cites, proves nothing in support of the above principle. The words were spoken of the son of Jeroboam. "He only of Jeroboam shall come to the grave, because in him there is found some good thing toward the Lord God of Israel in the house of Jeroboam." (1 Kings xiv. 13.) There is not one word said here about his being justified by that one good thing, whatever it was. It did not save the child from his sickness. It did not change the sentence of death into life. All it did was to procure him a peaceable burial. How, then, can any reasonable man argue, because the son of Jeroboam had a peaceable burial, that therefore some meritorious act will save him from the punishment due to his offences? To warrant such a conclusion, he ought first to show that the son of Jeroboam had been a grievous sinner like his father, which the Bible does not say; and, secondly, that this one meritorious act had obtained pardon of his sins, and restored him to life; and moreover it ought to be expressly said, that God considered him as just. The very circumstance that the rabbies were obliged to have recourse to such a passage, and that they could find nothing better in the law or the prophets, shows that they were hard pushed to find any thing that would even bear a faint resemblance to their doctrine.

The law of Moses gives no countenance to this doctrine, and can give none, because it is directly subversive of all the principles of law and justice. The stern principle of justice is, that every transgression of the law should be followed by punishment without any reference whatever to the good deeds or merits of the transgressor. Even before an earthly tribunal there is no deviation from this principle. If a murderer or a robber be convicted, no degree of previous or subsequent merit can be listened to as a plea against the just sentence of the law. He may in all other respects be an unexceptionable character, he may feed the poor and clothe the naked, and give all his goods in alms, but none of these things can change the sentence of guilty into not guilty, or cause him to be considered as a just or innocent person. And shall we suppose that

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God is less just than man? The law of Moses gives us no reason for such a supposition. It says distinctly—

לא תקחו כושר לנפש רוצח אשר הוא רשע למוח
כי מוח יומת :

“Moreover, ye shall take no satisfaction for the life of a murderer, which is guilty of death; but he shall surely be put to death.” (Num. xxxv. 31.) According to this declaration, the good deeds or merits of a murderer are not to be regarded, and there is nothing which he can do which can avert the sentence of the law. And shall we suppose that God himself will do what he forbids men to do? If so, why did he forbid it to be done? The plain reason of this prohibition is, because it is contrary to the eternal principles of right and wrong, which God himself cannot violate without detracting from his holiness. But it is not with respect to murder only that God has laid down these stern principles of justice. He says generally—

הנפש אשר תעשה ביד רמה מן הארץ ומן הגר
את יהוה הוא מגרף ונטרחה הנפש הדיא מקרב
עמה: כי דבר יהוה בזה ואת מצותו אשר הכרת
הכרת הנפש הדיא עמה בזה :

“But the soul that doeth ought presumptuously, whether he be born in the land, or a stranger, the same reproacheth the Lord, and that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Because he hath despised the Lord, and hath broken his commandment, that soul shall utterly be cut off; his iniquity shall be upon him.” (Numb. xv. 30, 31.) There is here no promise that his merits shall be weighed against his offences. One presumptuous sin will outweigh all his supposed merits, and for that one he shall die in his iniquity. The doctrine of the prophets is just the same.

הנפש החוטאת היא תמות:
“The soul that sinneth it shall die.”
ובשוב צדיק מצדקתו ועשה על ככל התרבותו
אשר עשה ורשע יעשה חדי כל צדקתו אשר עשה
לא תוכרנה במעלה אשר מעל ובחטאתו אשר חטא
בם ימות :

“But when the righteous turneth away from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity, and doeth according to all the abominations that the wicked man doeth, shall he live? *All his righteousness that he hath done shall not be mentioned*: in his trespass that he hath trespassed, and in his sin that he hath sinned, in them shall he die.” (Ezek. xviii. 20—25.) When one reads this passage, it appears as if God had dictated it on purpose to contradict the doctrine of the oral law. There is here no mention of weighing merits against sins, and no promise that some few extraordinary merits may outweigh many sins. On the contrary, it is distinctly stated, that when the righteous man turneth away from his righteousness, “All his righteousness that he hath

done shall not be mentioned.” If this be true, the doctrine of the oral law is necessarily and totally false. But some one may object that there is a similar declaration made respecting the wicked.

הרשע כי ישבו מכל חטאתיו אשר עשה ושמו את
כל הקותי ועשה משפט צדקה ודיה יהיה לא ימות:
כל פשעיו אשר עשה לא יזכרו לו בצדקתו אשר
עשה יחיה :

“But if the wicked man will turn from all his sins that he hath committed, and keep all my statutes, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall surely live, he shall not die. All his transgressions that he hath committed, they shall not be mentioned to him, in his righteousness that he hath done he shall live.” But this verse is as strongly against the doctrine of the oral law as the others already cited. In the first place, it does not say, that he whose sins exceed his merits is wicked, but that he who commits sin is wicked. In the second place, it does not say that, by causing his merits to exceed his sins, he can become righteous, but by turning away “From ALL his sins that he hath committed,” and by keeping “ALL my statutes.” It confirms the doctrine laid down already from the law of Moses, that to be righteous in the sight of God, a man must commit no sin, and keep all God’s commandments. It therefore directly contradicts the oral law, and overturns the doctrine that some merits may outweigh many sins.

If more proof be needful, we have it in the case of Moses himself. Very few, if any, even of the most devoted friends of the oral law, can imagine that he has so many merits as Moses his master; and yet the merits of Moses did not outweigh one apparently trifling transgression. Because of one sin, he was sentenced to die with the disobedient generation in the wilderness, and not permitted to enter into the land of Israel. If Moses’ merits, then, could do nothing for him, how vain must be the hope of others, who think that, by abounding in almsgiving and good works for ten days, they can turn the scale of God’s righteous judgment? Neither the law nor the prophets know of any intermediate class between the righteous and the wicked. They specify only the two classes, the righteous and the wicked. Those who fulfil all God’s commandments belong to the one, and those who transgress any of God’s commandments belong to the other. Let every man, then, examine his own heart and life, and it will not require much time nor trouble to ascertain to which class he belongs. A very little reflection will convince him that he has been, and is, a transgressor of God’s commandments; that he has no merits and no righteousness; and therefore belongs to

that class of whom Moses says, that they are accursed. Such a conclusion may appear dreadful, and so it ought to be; but the grand question is, Is it true? Let every man ask himself, "Have I kept, or do I keep, ALL God's commandments?" If he can say, Yes, then, according to the law of Moses, he is righteous, and has the promise of life. But if he must say, No, then he is unrighteous, and the curse of God is hanging over him, ready to descend and destroy him.

ארוז אשר לא יקם את דברי התורה הוואת לעשות
ארוז ואמר כל העם אמין :

"Cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this law to do them. And all the people shall say, Amen." (Deut. xxvii. 26.) Moses holds out no hope, except to those who yield a perfect and universal obedience.

But some one will reply, if this be true, then no man can be accounted righteous, on account of his deeds.

כי אדם אין צדק בארץ אשר ישעה טוב ולא ידושה :

"For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not." (Eccles. vii. 20.) And this is the truth, no man can be justified because of his good works. We must renounce all our pride, and appear at the bar of God as miserable sinners, looking only for mercy, and not for payment. We must come to the same conclusion as Job did—

אמנם ידעתי כי כן ומה יצדק אנוש עם אל :
דושוף לרב עמו לא יענו אדות מני אלה :

"I know it is so of a truth: but how should man be just with God? If he will contend with him, he cannot answer him one of a thousand." (Job ix. 2, 3.) Job had no idea that his merits exceeded his sins, but knew well that if God entered into judgment with him, he could not answer respecting even the thousandth part of his transgressions. David, the man after God's own heart, had the same conviction, and had, therefore, no wish that his merits should be weighed with his sins. His prayer was—

אל תבוא במשפט את עבדי כי לא יצדק לפניך
כל די :

"Enter not into judgment with thy servant: for in thy sight shall no man living be justified." (Ps. cxliiii. 2.) And when Daniel prayed, he did not venture to prefer his petitions on the score of merits, or to expect an answer as the reward of righteousness, but cast himself simply on the mercy of God.

כי לא על צדקותינו אנהו מפילים חטוננו לפניך
כי על רחמיך הרבים :

"For we do not present our supplications before thee for our righteousnesses, but for thy great mercies." (Dan. ix. 18.) How, then, can the modern Jews hope to stand at the tribunal of a heart-searching God, and not only escape condemnation, but obtain a re-

ward because their merits exceed their sins? Are they more pure than Job, more holy than David, more righteous than Daniel? or were those three most holy men mistaken, or ignorant of the way of salvation? Certain it is that there must be some mistake somewhere. Either the rabbies were right, and then Job, David, and Daniel were mistaken, or these three men were right, and then the rabbies are fearfully and awfully mistaken. If the law requires perfect obedience, and denounces a curse against all disobedience, then the former were right in deprecating God's judgment, and casting themselves upon his mercy. But if the law requires only that a man's merits should exceed his sins, and says that all deficiencies can be made up by almsgiving and good works in the ten days between the new year and the day of atonement, then they were wrong. Job was utterly mistaken when he said, "How should man be just with God?" for the rabbies say, only be careful for the first ten days of the year, and you will be just and sealed unto life. David was utterly mistaken when he said, "In thy sight shall no man living be justified;" for the rabbies say that a man's merits may exceed his sins, and that such an one is just before God. Daniel was mistaken in not offering his prayers on the score of righteousness but on the plea of mercy. But still, notwithstanding the certainty with which the rabbies speak, we would rather trust our own salvation to the word of Moses, of Ezekiel, of Job, David, and Daniel, than to that of the rabbies. We would rather kneel as supplicants, than claim the reward of our deeds with the rabbies.

But we cannot pass this subject without observing here also how the religion of the Rabbies exhibits itself at every turn as a religion for the rich and the learned, rather than for the poor and laborious class of mankind. It teaches that almsgiving and good works, at a certain season of the year, will turn the wicked into righteous men, and transform the sinner into the saint. So the rich sinner puts his hand into his pocket, and lavishes his gold to the poor and needy, and buys what is wanting to make up his deficit of merit. The learned man sets to work at his books; for the oral law says:—

אין לך מצוה בל המצות כולן שהיא שקולה כנגד
תלמוד תורה אלא תלמוד תורה כנגד כל המצות כולן
שהתלמוד מביא ידיו מעשה לידו המצות קודם
למעשה בבל המקום :

"Amongst all the commandments, there is not one that is equivalent to the study of the law. Whereas the study of the law is equivalent to all the commandments: for study leads to practice. Therefore, study always goes before good deeds." (Hilchoth Talmud Torah.) The one with his money therefore, and the other with his books, can effect a

balance in his favour; but what is to become of the poor labouring classes, who have no money to buy righteousness, and no time for study, which is equivalent to all the other commandments? For them to turn the balance is impossible—they have not the means; and therefore, according to the oral law, they stand but a poor chance when the final account comes to be made up. This of itself would prove that the doctrine of the oral law cannot be true. God is a righteous judge, and he accepts no man's money and no man's learning. He takes no bribes, and will not wrest the judgment of the poor. The true mode, therefore, of appearing just before God is some other than that pointed out by the oral law, and one according to which the poor sinner will stand on equal terms with his richer brother.

There is, however, another point to which we wish to direct attention. The oral law says, if a man's merits exceed his sins he is just and sealed unto life, but if his sins exceed his merits, then he is sealed unto death; what then are we to think of all who die in each succeeding year? It is plain that they have not been sealed unto life, for then they could not have died. Then they were sealed unto death; then we must conclude that their sins exceed their merits; and as all die, then we must conclude, further, that all die in their sins—that their sins are more than their merits; and so, after all, this Rabbinical doctrine comes to nothing. It tells a man that by having his merits greater than his sins, he is righteous, and will be sealed unto life, and yet, after all his almsgiving and good works, he dies like other men, and it turns out that he is not a just man, nor even one of the intermediate class, but one of the wicked. How can any rational man put his faith in such a system, which promises a great deal, but does not keep its promise? Above all, how can he trust his soul's everlasting welfare upon a promise which each successive year proves to be false? Many an one has passed into eternity already before the new year, and of all such the oral law says they have died in their sins. Many more may pass into eternity between the new year and the day of atonement. If the oral law be true, all such belong to the decidedly wicked who did not deserve the ten days' grace. Their friends and relations must, therefore, stamp their memory with the brand of the

impenitently wicked, or if they entertain a hope that such persons have not died in their sins, they must declare of the oral law that it is false. If they would have a promise that will not and cannot deceive, let them take up the law and the prophets. The reader of this paper is still alive, but who can tell how soon his turn must come, and come it will, and that soon in every case. What consolation then will he have on his dying bed? Will he begin to balance his account of merit and sin? Alas! there is no use in that. If the oral law be true, it was balanced on the last day of atonement, and the sins were found to outweigh the merits, as his approaching death testifies. Where then will he flee for refuge or for consolation? In the agony and feebleness of a death-bed hour there is no time for doing good works, and poverty may cut off the Rabbinical hope of purchasing salvation? In the oral law there is no hope. Can he find it, then, in the law of Moses? That law requires perfect and universal obedience, and pronounces the sinner accursed. As an accursed sinner, then, he must stand at the bar of God, unless there be some other way and some other hope. When Jacob was on his death-bed he had another hope. He could say—

ישועתך קרית דוד:

"I have waited for thy salvation, O Lord." (Gen. xlix. 18.) Oh! let the reader seek this salvation in time, that when his last hour comes, he may be as calm, as happy, and as full of hope as his pious forefather. He died in a foreign land, but he died happy, trusting not in his own righteousness, but in the salvation of God. He had learned by experience that man cannot deliver himself from mere temporal trouble, but that even there God is his only refuge and his hope, and still more so in the hour of death and the day of judgment. But he had learned also to believe in *המלאך הגואל* the Angel who had redeemed him from all evil, and was persuaded that He would not forsake him in the great transition from time to eternity. He had not put off the consideration of salvation to the last. He could say, "I have waited for thy salvation, O Lord," and therefore when the awful moment arrived, he could in perfect tranquillity gather his children about him, and tell them of Shiloh who was to come, and of the salvation which he had expected.

London:—Sold at the London Society's Office, 16, Exeter-hall, Strand; by James Duncan, Paternoster-row; and B. Wertheim, 57, Aldersgate-street. This publication may be had by applying at No. 5, No. 7, or No. 13, Palestine-place, Bethnal-green.

Macintosh, Printer, 20, Great New-street, London.