

נתיבות עולם

עמדו על דרכים וראו ושאלו לנתיבות עולם. ירמיהו טז

"THE OLD PATHS."—Jer. vi. 16.

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THE doctrine of justification by merits is agreeable, and seems very reasonable, so long as a man can theorise, that is, so long as he is not in earnest. But so soon as the prospect of death, or any other similar circumstance, compels him to realise the act of divine judgment upon himself, it loses all its beauty and plausibility; the conscience is unsatisfied by its consolations, and reason pronounces that the hope built on merits is insecure. A solemn and earnest review of our past years soon convinces, that our good deeds are but few, that our best deeds are defiled by mixed motives; and, above all, that the love of God has not been the heart's dominant principle, and that, therefore, some other mode of justification is absolutely necessary. The truth of this statement is confirmed by the inconsistency of the oral law with itself. The great principle of the oral law is, that the observance of any one of its commands, purchases a certain quantity of merit, and that an accumulation of these merits will, at last, constitute a sufficiency; but when the solemn season of the New Year and the Day of Atonement arrives, this sufficiency is found to be insufficient, and the alarmed conscience eagerly looks round to find something, that may compensate for the deficiency of merit. We have already noticed some of the rabbinic inventions for this purpose, and now proceed to consider another, and that is, *the merit of their progenitors*. One of the main props of rabbinic hope is the righteousness of their forefathers, as may be seen almost on every page of the Jewish Prayer-book, and as is apparent in the following extracts:—

קשת רוח אשר העקרה. והאשה לקץ תשיעם
 כנתבקה שלחה פאורות ולא שקרה: חסן בנצרים אשר
 חוללו כהיום. ושלש מקרות שהמקור בהו יום: החדיק
 בצדקתם מילדיך איום:

"She who was sorrowful when barren, was made to rejoice with good tidings when ninety years of age; she then sent forth shoots that failed not. Regard the merit of your ancestors who were born on this day, and the three barren ones, who were visited on this day: justify, through their righteousness, those who hope in thee, O Thou, who art tremendous." (Levi's Prayer for the New Year, p. 61.)

And again—

את דלי יום שקרה. באימיו כל לרוח לשקרה.
 נשים בו בך ליקרה. דעם לישר כעל מקרה: היוצר

יחד ככל נשמת. ושוע דלי בלום יושפט וכו' לא
 יעשה משפט. חין ערכו יזכר במשפט: מרם כל מפעל
 חוצב. יום במהשבת צור חוצב: כאחור וקדם בתוך
 חוצב. ליהב עליו כל המחצב: מנחו כהיום כח
 דרשנה נצרו לחשעם שנה: כרמה את היות
 לשושנה: עבור לפניו בה ראש השנה: מלצו מרדזה
 בה יום. צנתם פני כם איום: קול דבובם ירחשו
 כהיום. רוגשים להרע למצוא מרים: שעינים עליה
 בה להפקדה. שואנים בלוק דלוחו לשקרה: המוכים
 ברשן שה עקרה. חשר אשר בו נפקדה:

"The fearful day of visitation is come, its dread goads all flesh; they present themselves with bended knees; O may their repentance be accounted as a burnt-offering. Thou who hast formed them judgest all their thoughts: the rich and poor are all weighed in the balance; remember the merit of him who said, 'Shall he not do justice?' O, remember the tenor of his prayer in judgment. Ere ought was created, didst thou purpose to ordain him the rock from whence the nation was to spring; he was as the centre, the support of all creatures. His wife was on this day endued with youth, to cause the branch to put forth at ninety years of age; she was appointed as a sign to those who are likened to the rose, who are to pass before thee in judgment on this New Year's-day. Her posterity tremble this day, when they stand before thy terrible throne; they utter the voice of prayer this day; they assemble to sound the cornet, that they may obtain redemption. They depend on her merit to be visited like her; their assemblies cry aloud and hasten to enter into thy doors. They depend on the ashes of him who was bound as a lamb,* with whom she was visited in the month Tishri." (Ibid., p. 57.) The offering of Isaac is regarded as particularly meritorious, and constantly urged as a plea for merit. Thus—

הסתכל באשר של יצחק הצבור על גבי המזבח
 וזכרו לנו עקרתו היום לזרעו של יצחק:

"Attentively view the ashes of Isaac, heaped upon the altar; † and remember this day unto his seed, his being bound on the altar." (Ibid., p. 81.) And again—

סמוכים בצדקת אב אהה אחד. נשעינים בסך
 דידי ומיחה. מובטחים בהם ויבשר אב אחד:
 "They depend on the righteousness of the

* Isaac.

† Alluding to Isaac's being bound; and thus considered as if he had been offered, and his body burnt to ashes on the altar." (Levi's note.)

first patriarch, and rest on the merit of the only peculiar Son, and are secure in the perfection and rectitude of the father of the nation." (Ibid., p. 105.)

These passages show plainly that, after all, the rabbies felt their own doctrine of justification by merits very unsafe ground on which to build their hope of salvation; and that they were glad to flee to merits more adequate, which they hoped to find in the righteousness of their ancestors. The modern Jews, who still adopt these prayers, profess to entertain the same hope, and we therefore proceed to inquire, whether it be built on a better foundation than that which they are compelled to relinquish. We think that it is not; for, in the first place, the saints of old, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, though we revere them as pious and holy men, were after all only sinful men like ourselves. They did not, and could not, save themselves by their own righteousness, and if they did not save themselves, it is folly to think that they can save us. Abraham, though by the grace of God the father of the faithful, was yet in himself so weak in faith, and so distrustful of the goodness and mercy of God, as to endeavour to save himself from the Egyptians by means of a deliberate falsehood. Sarah had so little faith as to laugh within herself at the promise of God, and then to defend herself by a lie. Isaac was guilty of similar conduct, and Jacob's sin in deceiving his brother plainly shows, that he also was a poor sinful creature. Where then are their superabundant merits, whereby they are to justify all their posterity? The Word of God says expressly,—

אח לא פדה אדם את יתרו לאדם כסף:

"No man can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him." (Ps. xlix. 8.) How then are these three men to redeem all their posterity? If they have got merits sufficient to compensate for the unrighteousness of their children, then they have a ransom; and then the Word of God, which says that no man has a ransom, is not true. But if the words of the Psalm be true, and he is no Jew who thinks them false, then the patriarchs have no superabundant merits, and no ransom to offer for their children, and then the hope built on their righteousness is deceitful, and those that lean on it will find themselves mistaken in the hour of judgment. Nay, more, they will find themselves accursed for departing from the Lord. He that trusts in the righteousness of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to deliver him from the wrath to come, is evidently trusting in man, and making flesh his arm. If the merits of the patriarchs can save their children from the wrath of God, then God is not the Saviour of Israel, but the patriarchs are Israel's redeemers, and poor mortal men are their hope and their trust: but the Prophet says,—

אמר הנגר אשר יבשה בדם בשר ורועו ומן
יהיה יסור לכו:

"Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the Lord." (Jer. xvii. 5.) So far, then, from being secure by trusting in the righteousness of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, this trust increases the sinner's guilt, and draws down upon him a double curse. But it has pleased God himself to argue this question at large with the Jews, to suppose the case of a righteous father who has an unrighteous son, and to declare that the son cannot be saved by the righteousness of the father. In the Prophet Ezekiel, God says, "If a man be just, and do that which is lawful and right — he is just, he shall surely live, saith the Lord God. If he beget a son that is a robber, a shedder of blood, and that doeth the like to any of these things, and that doeth not any of those duties, but even hath eaten upon the mountains, and defiled his neighbour's wife, hath oppressed the poor and needy, hath spoiled by violence, hath not restored the pledge, and hath lifted up his eyes to the idols, hath committed abomination, hath given forth upon usury, and hath taken increase: shall he then live? he shall not live: he hath done all these abominations; he shall surely die; his blood shall be upon him." (Ezek. xviii. 5—13.) Here God sets the matter at rest, and decides that the righteousness of a father is of no use to an unrighteous son, and cannot deliver him from the punishment due to his evil deeds. The doctrine, then, of justification by the merits of ancestors, is directly opposed to the plain declaration of God himself, and, therefore, in this case also the Jewish Prayers and the oral law teach error, and seduce the Jews to their everlasting destruction, by teaching them to trust in that which can do them no good. It is an awful and melancholy spectacle to see God's ancient people thus misled. At this season of the year, the devout amongst them endeavour to turn to God, fast and pray, and yet neither the one nor the other is accepted, because they put their trust in the merits of men, and their heart is turned away from God their Saviour. The prayers of the Synagogue, instead of drawing down a blessing, only help to accumulate wrath, by seducing them from the Redeemer of Israel to refuges of lies. And hence it happens that all the fasts and the prayers of Israel for these seventeen centuries have been disregarded by God, and that Israel still continues in captivity. But as every lie and every error is built upon some truth as its foundation, it will be well to inquire what truth it was that gave rise to this error of justification by the merits of ancestors? The principle is, *that the guilty may be saved by the merits of another person, who is righteous*: how, then, did this principle become current among the Jews? It was cer-

tainly not the invention of human reason, for reason can discover no necessary connexion between the merits of one righteous man and the pardon of another who is guilty. The principle does not hold in the ordinary judicial proceedings of this world: a robber or a murderer is not and cannot be pardoned because another member of the community, or of his family, is a good and righteous man. We must therefore look elsewhere for the origin of the principle, and we find it in the revealed will of God. We see it in the appointment of sacrifice and atonement, according to which a guilty man was pardoned by the suffering of an innocent animal. Here is at once the principle of substitution of the innocent for the guilty; and human reason, when it once has the substratum, can easily proceed to erect the superstructure. In the present case it naturally argued, if the death of one of the brute creation could effect so much, how much more would the merits of a righteous man avail, if such an one could be found? The error, then, is not in the principle, but in its application. According to the Scripture, it is true that the innocent may be substituted for the guilty; but the rabbies were wrong in applying this truth to the case of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and other men, who were only sinners as themselves. The Word of God, which gave the principle, also directs us to the right application. It tells us of one for whose righteousness' sake the Lord will forgive sin.

יהוה חפץ למצן צדק יגדיל תורה ויאיר:

"The Lord is well pleased for his righteousness' sake; he will magnify the law and make it honourable." (Isaiah xlii. 21.) Who, then, is this person? The preceding verses tell us that it is the servant of the Lord. Who, then, is the servant of the Lord? Kimchi says, on this verse, that the servant of the Lord is the prophet; but this cannot possibly be true, for the prophet was not righteous, but a sinner, as he himself tells us in the sixth chapter—"I am a man of unclean lips." The servant mentioned in the nineteenth verse is the same person as he who is called "My servant" in the first verse of the chapter—"Behold my servant, whom I uphold, mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth: I have put my Spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles." But here Kimchi says,—

הו מלך המשיח כמו שפירשנו

"This is the King Messiah, as we have interpreted." If then, in the first verse, "The servant of the Lord" means the Messiah, it must mean the same through the chapter, and the Messiah is the person for whose righteousness' sake the Lord is well pleased.

This same prophet tells us again, concerning this servant,—

ברעתו יצדיק צדיק עבדי לרבים ועונותם הוא יכבול:

"By his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities." (Isa. liii. 11.) That the Messiah is here intended no Jew can doubt, who uses the Synagogue prayers; for on the day of atonement and at the Passover this chapter is applied to him.* Here, then, it is expressly stated, that the Messiah, by his righteousness, shall justify the guilty. And, therefore, the prophet calls the Messiah יהוה צדקו "THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS." (Jer. xxiii. 6.) That the Messiah is here intended there can be no doubt, for he is described as "the righteous branch" of David, and thus all the commentators explain it. In these three passages, then, of the Word of God, sinners are pointed to the Messiah as their hope and their righteousness. He is God's righteous servant, and his sufferings and his merits are all-sufficient to do that which Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob cannot do. The great mistake of the oral law is to point to wrong persons, who have no righteousness, and almost totally to pass by Him whom God hath set forth as the hope of sinners. But it may here be asked, if Messiah be a man, how can he have merits more than Abraham, or any other of the children of Adam? The answer is, that though very man, he is not a sinful man as we are, neither is he a mere man. If he were a man like us, he could have no merits, and therefore could not justify us any more than we could justify him. The declaration, therefore, that he is the Lord's righteous servant, and that he is appointed for the justification of sinners, necessarily implies that he is more than a man, and the title given him by the Prophet Jeremiah puts this beyond doubt. Jeremiah calls him by the incommunicable name of God יהוה, concerning which God himself says—

אני יהוה הוא שמי וכברו לי אחר לא אתן:

"I am the LORD: that is my name, and my glory will I not give to another." (Isa. xlii. 8.) If then יהוה be the name of God, then that Being who is called by that holy name must be God. Some of the modern rabbies reply, that this holy name is also given to the city of Jerusalem, both by Jeremiah and Ezekiel. But even if we admit this, still this is no answer to our argument. There is no fear that a city which, however great or noble, is only a mass of stones and mortar, should be mistaken for the living God, the Creator of the Universe. When, therefore, the name of God is attributed to the city, God's honour is not given to it. But when we are told of the Messiah, first that he is righteous, secondly that his righteousness is so great as to justify the guilty, and lastly that his name is יהוה, "THE LORD our Righteousness;" that is,

* See the Machsor for the Day of Atonement, in ברך וא מלכני בראשית, and for the Passover, in יהוה יהוה.

when we see that the attributes and the name of God are attributed to him, then we must conclude either that he is God, or that God has done what he has declared that he would not do, and given his honour to another. Righteousness is the attribute of God alone, and so Daniel says—

לך אדני הצדקה ולנו בושם פנים כיום הזה :

“O Lord, righteousness belongeth unto thee, but unto us confusion of faces, as at this day.” (Dan. ix. 7.) But, in the above passages, righteousness is said to belong to the Messiah, and that in such an immeasurable degree as to be sufficient to justify the guilty sons of men; if then he have this attribute of God, he must also have the nature of God. Again, another prophet says, that of God men will say that they have righteousness in him—

אך ביהוה לי אמר צדקות ועו :

“Surely shall one say, in the Lord have I righteousness and strength.” (Isa. xlv. 24.) And again—

ביהוה יצדקו ויהללו כל ווע ישראל :

“In the LORD shall all the seed of Israel be justified, and shall glory.” Here it is said that God is our righteousness, and that in Him we shall be justified; but in the passages quoted above, it is said that Messiah is our Righteousness, and that in Him we shall be justified; the person then intended in these different passages must be one and identical. Thus the difficulties are all removed, and we have one in whose righteousness we may safely trust, without making ourselves liable to the curse denounced against those who put their trust in sinful men. This is the Christian's hope. Many Jews think, and speak and argue too, as if Christians had departed from the living God and put their trust in a man; but that of which they accuse us, they have done themselves. We have not departed from the living God. Our hope and trust and confidence is in יהוה צדקנו, The LORD our Righteousness. You have departed from the Lord, for in your prayers you say that your hope and trust is in the merits of sinful men. Our confidence is based upon the Word of God, and your hope is taught you by the rabbies, who are fallible men. Your doctrine is the doctrine of men, and your hope is in the merits of men. You have, therefore, doubly departed from God, both from his word and his righteousness. Our desire is that you would return to Him, not to us,—to his word, and not to ours. You have no merits more than we have. Your forefathers have no more than either of us, and the blowing of a ram's horn is but a poor foundation on which to build our hope of salvation; and yet these are the things on which your

rabbies have taught you to depend. Examine your prayers, and compare them with the Word of God, and you will find, that as long as the Jewish nation continues to offer such petitions, their cry cannot be heard; and that if they wish for salvation, they must forsake their arm of flesh, and return to Him who was the hope of their fathers.

It was not by his own merits, nor the merits of his forefathers, nor by any ceremonial observance, that Abraham was justified, but by faith in the LORD, יהוה, as it is written,—

האמין ביהוה ויחשבו לו צדקה :

“And he believed in the LORD, and it was counted to him for righteousness.” (Gen. xv. 6.) David the King did not expect to be forgiven and justified on account of Abraham's or his other ancestors' merits; neither did he say, Blessed is the man who puts his trust in the righteousness of the patriarchs, but

אשר נשאר פשע כמו חמאה : אשר אדם לא יחשב

יהוה לו עון ואין ביהוה רמיה :

“Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the LORD imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile.” (Ps. xxxii. 1.) Every one, then, who desires to have this blessing, must renounce all pretensions to merit, and acknowledge himself a sinner needing forgiveness; and for this forgiveness he must look not to anything that man has done, or can do, but to the mercy of God in passing by transgression and sin. And therefore the Prophet Habakkuk lays it down as a general rule—

יודק באמונתו יחיה :

“The just shall live by his faith.” (Habak. ii. 4.) This is the scriptural mode of justification, and this the hope of Abraham, David, and Habakkuk. Will the Jews, then, cast in their lot with their father Abraham, and trust to that way of justification in which he walked? or will they refuse to be justified as he was, and still persist in following the inventions of men, which are not even consistent with themselves? If the oral law pointed out one way of justification, and then consistently adhered to it, there would at least be an appearance of reason in following its directions. But it points out two ways as opposite as east and west. It says a man may be justified by his own merits, and then it tells him he is to be justified by the merits of another. Both cannot possibly be true. It is the duty, then, of every man earnestly to inquire which is the true way of salvation, and to decide, whether he is to be saved by his own merits, or the merits of his forefathers, or the merits of “THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.”

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