

EDITOR'S PREFACE.

[To the first edition.]

THE Hebrew edition of Rosh Hashana contains an elaborate introduction in three chapters, the translation of which does not appear as yet. Its contents include many important rules which we have followed in the entire work, but we do not feel called upon at this time to engross the time of the English reader by reciting them. We, however, deem it a duty to say a few words, so that the reader may understand our position and the reason why we have undertaken a work which will probably be productive of much adverse criticism in certain quarters.

The fate of the Talmud has been the fate of the Jews. As soon as the Hebrew was born 1 he was surrounded by enemies. His whole history has been one of struggle against persecution and attack. Defamation and deformation have been his lot. So too, has it been with the Talmud. At the beginning of its formative period, viz., the development of the Mishna, it was beset by such enemies as the Sadducees, the Boëthusians, and other sects, not to mention the Roman Government. 2 When its canon was fixed, the Karaites tried to destroy or belittle its influence, and since that time it has been subjected to an experience of unvarying difficulty. Yet, with remarkable truth, the words of Isaiah [xl. 2] may be applied to both: "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee; when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee." There is, however, one point concerning which this simile is not true. The Jew has advanced; the Talmud has remained stationary.

Since the time of Moses Mendelssohn the Jew has made vast strides forward. There is to-day no branch of human activity in

which his influence is not felt. Interesting himself in the affairs of the world, he has been enabled to bring a degree of intelligence and industry to bear upon modern life that has challenged the admiration of the world. But with the Talmud it is not so. That vast encyclopædia of Jewish lore remains as it was. No improvement has been possible; no progress has been made with it. Issue after issue has appeared, but it has always been called the Talmud Babli, as chaotic as it was when its canon was originally appointed. 1 Commentary upon commentary has appeared; every issue of the Talmud contains new glosses from prominent scholars, proposing textual changes, yet the text of the Talmud has not received that heroic treatment that will alone enable us to say that the Talmud has been improved. Few books have ever received more attention than this vast storehouse of Jewish knowledge. Friends and enemies it has had. Attack after attack has been made upon it, and defence after defence made for it; yet whether its enemies or its defenders have done it more harm it would be hard to tell. Not, forsooth, that we do not willingly recognize that there have been many learned and earnest spirits who have

labored faithfully in its behalf; but for the most part, if the Talmud could speak, it would say, "God save me from my friends!" For the friends have, generally, defended without due knowledge of that stupendous monument of rabbinical lore; and the enemies have usually attacked it by using single phrases or epigrams disconnected from their context, by which method anything could be proven. In both cases ignorance has been fatal. For, how many have read the whole Talmud through and are thus competent to judge of its merits? Is it right to attack or defend without sufficient information? Is it not a proof of ignorance and unfairness to find fault with that of which we are not able to give proper testimony?

Let us take the case of those persons in particular who attacked the Talmud and made it the object of their venomous vituperation. Is it possible that they could have believed it a work capable of teaching the monstrous doctrines so frequently attributed to it, when that work says, among other things, "When one asks for food, no questions shall be asked as to who he is, but he must immediately be given either food or money"? Could a work be accused of frivolity and pettiness that defines wickedness to be

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[paragraph continues] "the action of a rich man who, hearing that a poor man is about to buy a piece of property, secretly overbids him"? (Qiddushin, 59a.) Could there be a higher sense of true charity than that conveyed by the following incident? Mar Uqba used to support a poor man by sending him on the eve of each Day of Atonement four hundred zuz. When the rabbi's son took the money on one occasion he heard the poor man's wife say, "Which wine shall I put on the table? Which perfume shall I sprinkle around the room?" The son, on hearing these remarks, returned with the money to his father and told him of what he had heard. Said Mar Uqba: "Was that poor man raised so daintily that he requires such luxuries? Go back to him and give him double the sum?" (Ketuboth, 7a.) This is not recorded by the Talmud as an exception; but it is the Talmudical estimate of charity. The Talmud is free from the narrowness and bigotry with which it is usually charged, and if phrases used out of their context, and in a sense the very reverse from that which their author intended, are quoted against it, we may be sure that those phrases never existed in the original Talmud, but are the later additions of its enemies and such as never studied it. When it is remembered that before the canon of the Talmud was finished, in the sixth century, 1 it had been growing for more than six hundred years, and that afterward it existed in fragmentary manuscripts for eight centuries until the first printed edition appeared; that during the whole of that time it was beset by ignorant, unrelenting, and bitter foes; that marginal notes were easily added and in after years easily embodied in the text by unintelligent copyists and printers, such a theory as here advanced seems not at all improbable.

The attacks on the Talmud have not been made by the enemies of the Jews alone. Large numbers of Jews themselves repudiate it, denying that they are Talmud Jews, or that they have any sympathy with it. Yet there are only the few Karaites in Russia and Austria, and the still fewer Samaritans in Palestine, who are really not Talmud Jews. Radical and Reform, Conservative and Orthodox, not only find their exact counterparts in the Talmud, but also follow in many important particulars the practices instituted through the Talmud, *e.g.*, New Year's Day, Pentecost (so far as its date and significance are concerned), the QADDISH, etc. The modern Jew is the product of the Talmud,

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which we shall find is a work of the greatest sympathies, the most liberal impulses, and the widest humanitarianism. Even the Jewish defenders have played into the enemy's hands by their weak defences, of which such expressions as "Remember the age in which it was written," or "Christians are not meant by 'gentiles,' but only the Romans, or the people of Asia Minor," etc., may be taken as a type.

Amid its bitter enemies and weak friends the Talmud has suffered a martyrdom. Its eventful history is too well known to require detailing here. We feel that every attack on it is an attack upon the Jew. We feel that defence by the mere citation of phrases is useless and at the best weak. To answer the attacks made upon it through ludicrous and garbled quotations were idle. There is only one defence that can be made in behalf of the Talmud. Let it plead its own cause in a modern language!

What is this Talmud of which we have said so much? What is that work on which so many essays and sketches, articles and books, have been written? The best reply will be an answer in negative form. The Talmud is not a commentary on the Bible; nor should the vein of satire or humor that runs through it be taken for sober earnestness. ¹ Nor is the Talmud a legal code, for it clearly states that one must not derive a law for practical application from any halakhic statement, nor even from a precedent, unless in either case it be expressly said that the law or statement is intended as a practical rule [Baba Bathra, 130*b*]. Further: R. Issi asked of R. Jo'hanan: "What shall we do if you pronounce a law to be a Halakha?" to which R. Jo'hanan replied: "Do not act in accordance with it until you have heard from me, 'Go and practice.'" Neither is the Talmud a compilation of fixed regulations, although the Shul'han Arukh would make it appear so. Yet, even when the Shul'han Arukh will be forgotten, the Talmud will receive the respect and honor of all who love liberty, both mental and religious. It lives and will live, because of its adaptability to the necessities of every age, and if any proof were needed to show that it is not dead, the attacks that are with remarkable frequency made on it in Germany might be given as the strongest evidence. In its day the Talmud received, not the decisions, but the debates of the leaders of the people. It was an independent critic, as it were, adapting itself to the spirit of the times; adding where necessary to the teachings of former

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days, and abrogating also what had become valueless in its day. In other words, the Talmud was the embodiment of the spirit of the people, recording its words and thoughts, its hopes and aims, and its opinions on every branch of thought and action. Religion and Ethics, Education, Law, History, Geography, Medicine, Mathematics, etc., were all discussed. It dealt with living issues in the liveliest manner, and, therefore, it is living, and in reading it we live over again the lives of its characters.

Nothing could be more unfair, nothing more unfortunate than to adopt the prevailing false notions about this ancient encyclopædia. Do not imagine it is the bigoted, immoral, narrow work that its enemies have portrayed it to be. On the very contrary; in its statements it is as free as the wind. It permits no shackles, no fetters to be placed upon it. It knows no authority but conscience and reason. It is the bitterest enemy of all superstition and all fanaticism.

But why speak for it? Let it open its mouth and speak in its own defence! How can it be done? The Talmud must be translated into the modern tongues and urge its own plea. All that we have said for it would become apparent, if it were only read. Translation! that is the sole secret of

defence! In translating it, however, we find our path bristling with difficulties. To reproduce it as it is in the original is in our judgment an impossible task. Men like Pinner and Rawicz have tried to do so with single tracts, and have only succeeded in, at the best, giving translations to the world which are not only not correct but also not readable. If it were translated from the original text one would not see the forest through the trees. For, as we have said above, throughout the ages there have been added to the text marginal notes, explanatory words, and whole phrases and sentences inserted in malice or ignorance, by its enemies and its friends. 1 As it stands in the original it is, therefore, a tangled mass defying reproduction in a modern tongue. It has consequently occurred to us that, in order to enable the Talmud to open its mouth, the text must be carefully edited. A modern book, constructed on a supposed scientific plan, we cannot make of it, for that would not be the Talmud; but a readable, intelligible work, it can be made. We have, therefore, carefully punctuated the Hebrew text with modern punctuation marks, and have reëdited it by omitting all such irrelevant matter as interrupted

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the clear and orderly arrangement of the various arguments. We have also omitted repetitions; for frequently the same thing is found repeated in many tracts; while in this translation each statement is to be found only once, and in the proper place for it. In this way there disappear those unnecessary debates within debates, which only serve to confuse and never to enlighten on the question debated. Thus consecutiveness has been gained, but never at the expense of the Talmud, for in no case have we omitted one single statement that was necessary or of any importance. In other words, we have merely removed from the text those accretions that were added from outside sources, which have proven so fruitful a source of misunderstanding and misrepresentation.

We continue our labors in the full and certain hope that "he who comes to purify receives divine help," and that in our task of removing the additions made by the enemies of the Talmud we shall be purifying it from the most fruitful source of the attacks made on it, and thereunto we hope for the help of Heaven. As we have already said, we feel that this work will not be received everywhere with equal favor. We could not expect that it would. Jewish works of importance have most usually been given amid "lightning and thunder," and this is not likely to prove an exception.

We are always ready to accept criticism, so long as it is objective, and we shall gladly avail ourselves of suggestions given to us, but we shall continue to disregard all *personal* criticism directed not against our work but against its author. This may serve as a reply to a so-called review that appeared in *one* of our Western weeklies.

At the same time we deem it our duty to render to *Dr. Isaac H. Wise*, the venerable President of the Hebrew Union College of Cincinnati, our heartfelt thanks for the several evenings spent in revising this volume, and for many courtesies extended to us in general.

THE EDITOR.

CINCINNATI, May, 1896.

Footnotes

[ix:1](#) *Vide* Genesis, xliii. 32.

[ix:2](#) In our forthcoming "History of the Talmud" the reader will find all details of the persecution, until the present time, in twenty chapters.

[x:1](#) *Vide* Brief Introduction.

[xi:1](#) According to others, in the eighth century. See our "History of the Talmud."

[xii:1](#) See our article, "What is the Talmud?" in the prospectus.

[xiii:1](#) In others of our works we have named some of these interpolators.

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