

A S E R M O N

DELIVERED AT THE

SPANISH AND PORTUGUESE JEWS' SYNAGOGUE,

BEVIS MARKS,

ON

WEDNESDAY, 7th NISAN (24th MARCH), 5607,

BEING

THE DAY APPOINTED BY HER MAJESTY AS A GENERAL FAST
AND DAY OF HUMILIATION, ON ACCOUNT OF THE
DEARTH NOW UNHAPPILY PREVAILING.

BY

THE REV. D. A. DE SOLA,

MINISTER OF THE ABOVE SYNAGOGUE.

Printed by the Express Desire of the Gentlemen of the Mahamad.

LONDON:

MELDOLA, CAHN & CO., PRINTERS, 18, ST. MARY AXE.

5607.



SERMON.

כי כאשר משפטיך לארץ צדק למדו יושבי תבל :
מסכת ברכות פ' חמישי • אמר רב אמי אין מיתה בלא חטא ואין יסורין
בלי עון :

“FOR WHEN THY JUDGMENTS. ARE ON THE EARTH, THE
INHABITANTS OF THE WORLD WILL LEARN RIGHTEOUS-
NESS.” Isaiah xvi. 9.

We read in the Talmud, treatise Berachoth : “ *Death is the result of sin, so also are divine chastisements never inflicted, but as the consequence of transgression.*”

THE occasion of our present assembly in this holy place, must needs impress you with feelings of awe and devotion, and cannot fail to call forth the sympathy and best feelings of every reflecting and sensitive mind. Still more must it impress with awe, and appal him whose task it is to address you this day, even if better qualified for it, than I can presume to be. For devastation has gone forth through the land, Death stalks around, with disease in its train. The failure of an important vegetable production in various parts of this empire, and of Europe, has caused a scarcity and dearth, in articles constituting the first necessities of life. Thousands of our fellow-men and fellow-subjects have, and are at this moment, suffering the indescribable

pangs of famine, and are perishing from want. Therefore are the portals of every house of prayer opened this day throughout the land, at the command of our most pious and beloved Queen, and numerous congregations are everywhere assembled, jointly to invoke the Universal Creator and merciful father of all mankind, humbly to supplicate Him that He may deign to behold our affliction, accept our penitence, stay His desolating hand, and remove from us the heavy judgments which our many sins and repeated provocations have so justly deserved. And surely, among the judgments by which the Almighty God asserts His sovereignty and providence over the children of man, there is none more grievous, none more awful than that which is the occasion of our present assembly. We have seen sufficient in this metropolis, and have heard and read still more of the dire effect of this calamity (in the sister island, in the north of Scotland, and in various parts of Europe), and they must needs present themselves so strongly to your mind, that I may spare myself the painful task of dilating upon it, and harrow your feelings by a reiteration of the miseries, the diseases, the acts of despair and of insubordination, and the many physical and social evils to which this calamity has given rise. It is certain, however, that so much misery is only the result of a visitation of the Almighty God; and that if we turn to Him, in humble contrition and penitence, He will withdraw His afflicting hand, and pardon our iniquities. For such is the infallible *dictum* of God himself, pronounced by means of His prophet Joel, on the occasion of a calamity, similar to the present, desolating the land of Israel, שׂרר שׂרר אבלה ארמה “The fields lay waste, the land mourneth.” “The husbandmen are ashamed for the wheat and for the barley, because the harvest of the field is perished.” “The trees of the field

are withered.” חגרו וספרו הכהנים הלילו משרתי יי “Gird yourselves, and lament, ye priests. Weep, ye ministers of the altar.” קדשו צום קראו עצרה “Sanctify ye a fast-day, convoke a solemn assembly; gather the elders, assemble all the inhabitants of the land into the house of the Lord, and cry unto God.” הלא לעינינו אוכל נברת “For is not the food cut off from before our eyes, and joy and gladness from the house of the Lord?” ונם עתה נאם יי שבו ערי “And now, saith the Lord, turn ye to me, with all your heart, and with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.” וקרעו לבבכם ואל בנרכם “And rend your hearts, not your garments, and turn to the Lord your God; for He is merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repents of inflicting evil.”¹

In the graphic description and impressive admonition I have read to you, the eloquent prophet at once states the true cause and the sole remedy for this affliction and judgment. Accordingly, I will, in this brief discourse, endeavour to show:—

FIRST, that calamities like the present, are not accidental events of nature, but visitations of Providence in consequence of the sins of the world.

SECONDLY, That our sins have been ample to provoke that anger; and,

THIRDLY, endeavour to point out the means most likely to avert these chastisements.

And ye, my dear brethren, join, O join me in my fervent invocation to our God, that He may enlighten my understanding, direct my words, and grant me His aid and favor, that these my words which proceed from my

¹ Joel i. 10—16. and ii. 12, 13.

heart may enter yours, and produce their intended effect.

יהיו לרצון אמרי פי והגיון לבי לפניך " צורי וגואלי :

" May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart be acceptable before thee, O Lord! my Rock and my Redeemer."¹

I.

The words of my text are too obvious in their meaning to require any explanation, except that the word משפט judgment is often applied in Scripture to those acts of divine justice by which God vindicates His Divine Providence and rule over the world, and for those acts of divine justice by which he manifests his wrath against those who have excited it. Although the calamities with which a considerable part of this realm has been visited, have not exhibited themselves in their more severe and desolating aspect in our immediate vicinity, still we have seen enough of their dire effects to make us shudder, inwardly reflect, and ask ourselves—

על מה עשה ה' ככה לארץ הזאת מה חרי האף הגדול הזה :

" Wherefore has the Lord done so to this land, wherefore this great anger?"² And I fear that the answer would be the same as that given in the quoted text—

על אשר עזבו את ברית "

" Because the covenant and law of God has been forsaken."³ At least, it were to be wished that either as Britons or Israelites we had some just ground to suppose ourselves exempt from the dire judgments now on this land, and, what is still more important, that the hope of such an exemption for the future could be founded in our state and condition as a people that acted righteously, and did not forsake the ordinances of their God."⁴

כגוי אשר צדקה עשה ומשפט אלהיו לא עזב

¹ Ps. xix. 15.

² Deut. xxix. 24.

³ *Ibid.* v. 25.

⁴ Isaiah lviii. 2.

But let us not deceive ourselves. We cannot, alas! put this flattering unction to our soul. The open impiety and profligacy we see daily around us in this vast metropolis, the great corruption both of principles and manners, and the decay of religion among ourselves, give us but too ample cause to conclude, that this exemption is not owing to our righteousness, but to the long-suffering and mercy of our God, "Who did not deal with us according to our sins nor retributed to us according to our iniquities."¹

לא כחטאינו עשה לנו ולא כעונותינו נמל עלינו:

But let us remember that the rod and judgment which are now only suspended over us, will descend with increased severity, if we persevere in our evil courses, and slight this fatherly admonition. For although as our holy law informs us, "God is all-merciful, most gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in mercy and in truth."

ה' אל רחום וחנון אך אפים ורב חסד ואמת

Yet "he will not allow the guilty to go altogether unpunished."²

ונקה לא ינקה

Reason as well as revelation loudly proclaim to us the existence of a Divine and all-governing Providence. Whatever lives or moves on the earth or in the skies, and every event, are not only produced, but directed by Him, and are attributed in Scripture to his immediate agency. Thus it is said that God "shuts up the heavens that there be no rain, so that the earth yields not its produce;"³ or that "He opens the stores of heaven"⁴ and commands Nature to yield its increase. "He maketh the barren wilderness fruitful," or "Through the wilderness of the inhabitants He renders a fertile land sterile."⁵ He alone commands the elements,

¹ Psal. ciii. 10.

² Exod. xxxiv. 5.

³ Deut. xi. 17.

⁴ Ibid. xxviii. 12.

⁵ Ps. cvii. 33. 34.

and “raises or hushes at his pleasure the wild tempest and the raging billows of the ocean.”¹ “He maketh peace”² or war, and “the heart of kings are at his command.”³ In short, there is no act, be it for the private or public benefit or calamity of man which does not originate or is guided by Providence. True, we think we see but the effect of natural causes, but God has invariably preferred to act by them, even in the operation of miracles. How the laws of Nature are guided by God; so as in every case to produce the various results He intends them to have, is far too recondite for our confined understandings. For, as the prophet truly says,—“God’s ways are not like ours, nor his thoughts and acts like those of mortal man.”⁴

Even the unhappy occasion of our present meeting affords us an apt illustration of this.

You all know that the present scarcity and dearth, with its usual train of calamity is mainly owing to the failure of an edible root which has long formed a considerable portion of the food of the people of this country, and the only support of the greater part of the Sister Kingdom and elsewhere. Now that destruction has been in so remarkable a way, as to baffle the investigations of science, and has set at nought all human wisdom and skill, either to detect the cause, or to prevent the recurrence for the future. Therefore, be it, that hosts of microscopic animalculæ were chosen by God as the ministers of his wrath, or that he employed other occult agents to devastate and destroy this and other valuable vegetable productions on which the food, and consequently the life of man in a great measure depends: it is certain, that this extraordinary fact ought to open the eyes of the most incredulous, and cause him to exclaim like Pharaoh. אֲצַבֵּעַ אֱלֹהִים הִיא “The finger of God,”⁵

¹ Ps. cvii. 25. 29. ² Is. xiv. 7. ³ Prov. xxi. 1. ⁴ Is. iv. 8. 9. ⁵ Exod. viii. 15.

i. e., his immediate agency, is here visible in this extraordinary event, which so much deviates from the usual course of nature, but in this, as in every event of life, the all-directing hand of Providence is visible to every thinking mind. Reason, as well as revelation, incontestably proves this. For we know that God is the source and perfection of all wisdom; we are equally convinced that the purpose of our creation and sending us into the world, was both for his glory and for our happiness and perfection. Is it therefore not evident that neither of these ends could have been fully attained unless Divine Providence regulated and controlled events? How truly, therefore, and philosophically proved, are the expressions of the Psalmist—

ממכון שבתו השניח את כל יושבי הארץ :

“From the place of his Divine residence He superintendeth all the inhabitants of earth,” because “He who fashioneth all their hearts *must needs* understand all their doings.”¹

היוצר יחד לבם ומבין את כל מעשיהם :

Let us, therefore, be careful that we do not both foolishly and wickedly misapply to this calamity, and to similar occasions, the words “accidental events;” for truly nothing happens in the world by accident: in fact, there is no such thing as chance or accident; what we call so, is nothing else than that for which we cannot discover a cause. It was well remarked by a wise author, that the word “accident” is the reproach of our vocabulary, inasmuch as it is a term of no real meaning, but only invented to veil our ignorance. I trust, therefore, to have proved, that since what we term “accidental events” are but the effect of the mysterious interpositions of a Divine Providence, whose aim it is to promote our happiness, and since nothing does nor can happen without a cause, it therefore follows, that our reason, strengthened as it is

¹ Ps. xxxiii. 12, 13.

here by the direct and explicit words of Holy Revelation, cannot arrive at any other conclusion, than that the cause of this and similar calamities and judgments are only attributable to our sins, and are sent as incentives to our repentance and future improvement, as in the words of my text, "When thy judgments are on the earth, the inhabitants of the world learned righteousness."

II.

We are next to prove, "that we have given ample cause for this judgment." Her most gracious Majesty, in her Proclamation appointing this day of humiliation, truly states, "the many iniquities of this land" to be the cause of the present calamity. Indeed, no one who calmly views modern society, and observes the unceasing, the all-engrossing, and insatiable pursuit of wealth by all classes, and the lax morality and vices it has induced, can for a moment doubt the correctness of this assertion. It is the nature of sinful man in prosperity, to forget the Author thereof. Our own nation has proved an early example of this truth. ¹ וישמן ישרון ויבעט was the reproach Moses made us, and often since his time have we continued to deserve it. It was, perhaps, not to be expected that our nation, living as it does in the midst of the present artificial society, could have escaped the faults or vices of the age; but it is to faults peculiar to us, as Israelites, that I feel it my duty this day more particularly to advert. I am aware that I am treading here on tender ground; but the paramount sense of this my duty silences all other considerations, and therefore "That which God shall put in my mouth, that will I speak;" ² premising, however, in order not to be misunderstood or misconstrued, that the

¹ Dent. xxxii. 15.

² Numb. xxiii. 1.

observations I am about to make, do not apply to either this or any other particular congregation, but to Israel and the state of Judaism in general.

In this and in other countries it is, alas! of that nature, as to give us cause justly to dread that the same retribution which has punished our ancestors, must also overtake us, unless we avert it by timely repentance. At no period of our history, excepting that immediately preceding the destruction of our Sanctuary, when Saducees, Pharisees, and other sects mutually destroyed each other, and caused our nationality to perish, has infidelity and abandonment of God's law shewn itself more strongly and more openly than during the last few years. Have we not seen in Israel not only some of the laity; but even some of those who should have been the shepherds and guides of their flocks, impiously and presumptuously, like Uzzah of old, extend their hand against the ark of the Lord, to alter and (according to them) reform and improve the law of the Omniscient, which He, to whom futurity is revealed, has declared to be eternal and unchangeable. How forcibly are we reminded of the words of the prophet Jeremiah,¹ when he predicted the approaching downfall of Israel :

חופשי התורה לא ידעוני והרועים פשעו בי

“The professors of the law knew me not, and the pastors rebelled against me.”

How many, alas! there are in Israel who, having neither piety, nor mental energy, to enable them to emancipate themselves from the thralldom of the attraction of the world, know of no other way (to use their own phrase) “to make the law and life agree,” than to lower the law to their level, and constantly to place it in the back ground whenever it interferes with their inclinations or convenience.

¹ Chap. ii. 9. I more particularly allude here to the so called “Assembly of Rabbis” held at Frankfort last year.

² Compare Ps. i. 16, 17.

Neither are those wanting, whose blind zeal and superstition, cause as much mischief as the preceding class, who, instead of friendly guiding and admonishing the erring brother, and giving him a helping hand to restore him to the right path, cast him forth with maledictions, and are thus the cause of his persevering in error and constantly falling into greater and more grave ones. True religion is thus brought to unmerited reproach, as if it prompted or sanctioned proceedings, so entirely opposed to its nature and best interest. Yes, my brethren, there are yet Pharisees, as well as Sadducees among us. Both, as in the days of old, threaten the destruction of our sanctuary, and from neither can Israel expect much good.

If I further consult the holy writings and our ancient history, I find the cause of all our calamities attributed to *עבודה זרה* and *שנאת חנם*, i. e. rancorous and causeless enmity against each other. *ע"ז* means the abandonment of God's worship for that of idols. It is true that since the destruction of the first temple we do no longer, in the literal sense of the word, worship golden calves, the Moloch, or any other idols of our own invention or as adopted from other nations. But, would to God, we could hold ourselves equally guiltless of having abandoned the service of our God, and of having set up in our hearts, instead of Him, idols: in a figurative sense of the word indeed, but idols nevertheless, and devoted to them those powers and energies derived from, and due to our great Creator. In this figurative sense God's revealed will, and the duties we owe to Him, are but too often laid aside, to follow and worship the golden calf of filthy lucre, and to sacrifice our children, nay, our own lives and dearest affections, to the idol of insatiable avarice and ambition. But it may be said: Is it not lawful, nay, indispensable, that we should devote our best energies to obtain our daily bread, and even to improve our

condition, when we can honestly do so?—Undoubtedly this is our duty, and also the intention of Him, who gave us those energies and powers. But it is against God's intention, against His revealed will, and against our best interests, if we unnecessarily render ourselves such slaves of our ambition and to money-getting, that even the chance or pretext thereof, is held a sufficient excuse for the neglect of our sacred duties and the obligations of the law. Do the exertions to obtain our daily bread, *necessarily* occasion that so many Israelites cannot find time to worship and thank their Maker when “they rise up” or “lie down”¹ without תפלת שחרית or ערבית, or even a few words in lieu thereof? Will it justify the neglect of the great precept of תפילין and ציצית² by so many in Israel? And how many take that very daily bread without thanks or thoughts of the giver, like ungrateful children, who eat at the tables of their parents and take it as a thing to which they are entitled, and for which they *need* not be thankful. Business, all-engrossing business is the excuse. But is not the praise of God, the acknowledgment of His goodness, and the propitiation of His future favor, *at least*, as important a part of our business of life, as any other we can have?—Acknowledged as this may be in theory, yet, in practice, the all absorbing desire to procure riches and superfluities, engrosses all the thoughts, faculties, will, and feelings of mankind. Thus, for the chance of obtaining the fleeting goods and pleasures of this world, they neglect the certain and permanent bliss attached to the observance of God's will, as our sages remark: מניחים חיי עולם ועוסקין בחיי שעה:

Many other derelictions of our duty I could specify, but one more must suffice, to which I request your particular attention.

¹ Deut. vi. 7.

² Ibid. 25, and Numb. xv. 37, 40.

None of the observances of our holy law is described as more sacred, and is oftener repeated, than that of the Sabbath.

“The Sabbath,” say our sages, “is equal to all the other commandments of the law.” שקולה שבת כנגד כל מצות שבתורה
That great and eternal sign between God and Israel, which as men and Israelites we are bound to celebrate, on account of the cessation thereon of the action of the Creative power; שבת וינפש.—That day hallowed by God, and ordained unto Israel as a memorial of their deliverance from Egyptian bondage.—That holy day given to us as a boon in this weary life, and as a type and foretaste of the eternal rest and bliss in this world to come—That *most* sacred day is but too often desecrated, the name of God prophaned, His commands contemned, and sacrificed to the idol of lucre and the worship of the golden calf. To that, the transgressors of the sabbath trust. For they will not believe God’s promise that He will give them sufficient during the week if they observe the Sabbath. ראו כי י נתן לכם השבת על כן הוא נותן לכם ביום הששי לחם יומים : Nay, they will not believe their own eyes and experience which tells them that those who do not work on the sabbath have generally as much as those that violate it. They shut their eyes to the great fact that their fathers and grandfathers who observed the Sabbath, and who had greater political difficulties to contend with, which hampered the development of their industry, than we have at the present day, did nevertheless prosper. The only allegation we hear from transgressors of the Sabbath, in justification of their conduct, amounts to this—“Its strict observance” they say, “would occasion loss of money.” Would they not feel utterly ashamed to assign this as a justification for the breach of moral laws? And yet, how inconsistent are they, if they consider that the mere fact of the danger of losing

money, is a sufficient cause for the violation of this great and divine precept. But let them remember that this very golden calf they so assiduously follow, will no doubt grievously disappoint most of its worshippers. For thus God spoke by means of his prophet Hosea, *זנה עגלך שומרון* "Thy calf O Samaria! hath cast thee off, mine anger is kindled against thee." *כי רוח יורעו וסופתה יקצרו כמה אין לו צמח בלי יעשה קמח* "For as they have sown the wind, so shall they reap the whirlwind, having no stalk, the bud shall yield no meal, and should it even yield; strangers shall devour it." ¹
אלי יעשה זרים יבלעהו

The application of this text is obvious. And so much I have thought it necessary to say on this head, in order that the judgment of God may be justified unto man, and that we may truly say as our ancestors did of yore on the occasion of their solemn fast and repentance, in the days of Nehemiah, *ואתה צדיק על כל הבא עלינו כי אמת עשית ואנחנו הרשענו* "But thou art just concerning all that is come upon us, for Thou art just, but we have acted wickedly." ²

III.

If I have succeeded in proving to you the allegations of the two first divisions of this discourse, I need not in this last, enlarge to shew you, that the only remedy and preventive for this and similar judgments, consist in a perfect and immediate repentance, not however externally only, and limited to words, but, we must prove our sincerity by deeds. "Tear your hearts not your garments" ³ says the prophet, God did not accept the penitence of the Ninivites, and regarded neither their fast, nor the sackcloth they had put on, until they had changed their actions and turned from their evil ways." ² *את שקם ואת תעניתם לא נאמר אלא וירא*

¹ Hosea viii. 5, 7.

² Nehem. ix. 33.

³ Joel ii. 13.

אלהים אל מעשיהם כי שבו מדרכם הרעה וכ"ו "Let, therefore, he who knoweth repent, and God will turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish." ¹ Let us remember, that the same power and mercy, which causes the humble grass to grow, as well as the lofty cedar to flourish, "provides for all, and for the meanest of His creatures," and assuredly, he could not design that man, the first of His creatures, whom he intended for happiness, should perish through misery and want, in the common course of nature, unless it be caused by his own act and misuse of the divine gifts. The poor, the orphan, and helpless will find "that God's mercies extend over all his works." ² "For, lo! the eye of the Lord is upon those who fear Him, and hope for His mercy. To deliver their souls from death, and to preserve them alive in time of famine." ³ Finally let us remember, that divine chastisement has no other motive, than to bring about our amendment, and to promote our eventual good. Thus says the Lord in His holy law: "Consider in thy heart, that even as a father chastens his son (for his good), thus doth the Lord, thy God, chasten thee" ⁴ "to humble and try thee, and to do thee good at thy latter end." ⁵ And in the words of my text "When thy judgments are on the earth, the inhabitants thereof will learn righteousness." Then, if we repress our worldly desires and observe God's law, both the ceremonial and moral; if the holy Sabbath be called and esteemed a day of delight, dedicated to the honor of God מכובד ה' לקרוש ⁶; "if we, as in duty bound, think of Him and thank Him, when we lie down and when we rise up," and gratefully remember His benefits when we take our daily food, and on other occasions, then He also will observe His promise, as written in

¹ Jonah, iii. 10.

² Ibid. v. 9.

³ Compare Ps. cxlv. 15, 16.

⁴ Psalm xxxiii. 18, 19.

⁵ Deut. viii. 5.

⁶ Ibid. v. 16.

⁷ Is. lviii, 13.

the law." את שבתתי תשמרו וכי' אם בחקתי תלכו וכי' ונתתי לכם לחם... ואכלתם לחמכם לשבע "If ye observe my Sabbath, and reverence my sanctuary, if ye walk in my statutes and keep my commandments, then will I give you rain in due season, the land shall yield its increase, and the trees of the field their fruit; ye shall be satisfied with food, and dwell securely in your land."¹ Be then comforted and have good courage, O ye who trust in the Lord!"² for (as the prophet Joel says)³ "The Lord will pity His people and say unto them: Behold, I will send you corn, wine and oil, and ye shall be satisfied therewith; the threshing floors shall be full of wheat, ye shall eat in plenty, and be satisfied and praise the name of the Lord your God, that he has dealt wondrously with you, and my people shall never be ashamed." "Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord, shall be delivered, for on mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be deliverance."

May this soon happen, Amen.

¹ Lev. xxi. 25. ² Ps. xxxi. 25. ³ Ch. ii. 18, 19, 24, 26, 32.

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