HOW THE RABBIS REGARDED THE COMMANDMENTS.

BY JULIUS J. PRICE.

FOR the bulk of the Jewish nation, the law was and is the formulation of all religion: it was and is the supreme guide of life; and as being for the Jew the articulate expression of the divine will it was and is the final appeal in all matters of religious life and practise. As the law did in the past so also does it in the present represent the essence of Judaism and as it formed part of the background and of the basis of the newer teachings which were to come, it is important that some insight into the Jewish conceptions of it and of the individual attitude of the Jew towards it, should be illustrated by citations from the Talmud which is based on it.

The influence and power of the law was largely due to the fact that from earliest childhood its practical carrying out was witnessed in the home; the husband taught his wife, the father his child, the master his servants, the precepts of the law and the need of observing them. The commandments seemed to be spoken to the individual soul. "I am the Lord thy God." Each of the assembled Israelites at Sinai was but one among many myriads, and yet he was alone—alone with that voice. "This commandment which I command thee this day, it is not hidden from thee, neither is it far off. But the word is very high unto thee in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it."

The law does not require the belief of man in certain speculative or supernatural theories; such hidden things belong to God, man's happiness consists in following the commandments of the Lord. There is an equal law for everybody; for the free born and for the stranger, for the free man and for the slave. *Lev.* xvix. 33-34, "And if a stranger sojourn with thee in your land, ye

shall do him wrong. The stranger that sojourneth with you shall be unto you as the home born among you, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. I am Jehovah, your God." And again, *Num.* ix. 14, "And if a stranger shall sojourn among you and will keep the passover unto Jehovah, according to the Passover of the statue of the Passover, and according to the ordinance thereof, so shall he do; ye shall have one statue both for the sojourner and for him that is born in the land." Nobody is above or beneath the law.

Israel was to be the priestly people; the sheltering ark in which the pledge was entrusted contained a true knowledge of God and was the positive and preserved. With the divine promise that made Israel the elect of all nations, there is transmitted to them the moral and spiritual equipment which justifies its fulfilment.

The Jewish law was to bring true happiness to all men, hitherto a barren wish. The Torah prohibits the shirking of man's duties to his fellow men, or his sinking in the barren attempt to obtain salvation by castigating the flesh. On the contrary Judaism is impregnated with the spirit of optimism and joy of life.

Fidelity to the law and steadfastness in the knowledge and service of Jehovah was to be the strength and the noblest feature of the Jewish people. Nothing could better express the firm determination to cling unswervingly to the ancient traditions than the words of Mattathias, the first of the great Maccabaean leaders: "If all the nations that are in the house of the king's dominion hearken unto him, to fall away each one from the worship of his fathers and have made choice to follow his commandments, yet will I and my sons and my brethren walk in the covenant of our fathers. Heaven forbid that we should forsake the Law and the ordinances. We will not hearken to the king's words, to go aside from all worship, on the right hand nor on the left." Or better still at the time when Pilate set up the Roman eagles with the images of the Emperor in Jerusalem, the Jews crowded to Cæsaræ and remained for six days in supplication before the prætorium: on the seventh day the procurator surrounded them with his troops and threatened to move them down: but they threw themselves down on the ground, bared their necks and called on Him to kill them rather than impose on them a breach of their law. This spirit was typical of hundreds of thousands of other Jews, who

willingly laid down their lives rather than swerve from what they believed to be the right path. As a result then of Israel's great fidelity in the law and its careful adherence to the commandments "The Holy one—blessed be He!—Was pleased to render Israel meritorious, therefore He multiplied unto them the Law and the precepts, as it is said (Isa. xlii:21), "The Lord is well pleased for His righteousness' sake. He will magnify the Law and make it honourable." Rabbi Samlaii explains that six hundred and thirteen commandments were communicated to Moses—three hundred and sixty-five negative, according to the number of the days of the year, and two hundred and forty-eight positive, according to the number of members in the human body. Rav Hamunah was asked what was the Scripture proof for this. The reply was (Deut. xxiii:4), "Moses commanded us a Law." Torah, Law by gematria, answers to six hundred and eleven. "I am" and "Thou shalt have no other," which were heard from the Almighty himself, together make up six hundred and thirteen . . . David reduced these to eleven, as it is written (Psxv. 1-5). . . . Iraiah reduced them to six, as it is written (Isa. xxxiii:15). . . . Micah reduced them to three, as it is written (Micah vi:8). . . . The second Isaiah again reduced these to two, as it is said (Isa. lvi:1). "Keep judgment and do justice." Amos reduced these to one, as it is said (Amos v:4). "Seek ye me and ye shall live". But to this it was objected that it might mean "Seek ye me by the performance of the whole and entire Law; "but it was Habakkuk who reduced all to one, as it is said (Hab. ii:4), "The just shall live by his faith."

It was a custom with the people of Jerusalem when a person went out of his house on the Feast of Tabernacles, to carry a palm frond in his hand; when he went to the synagogue, he still carried it with him; when reciting the Shema or repeating the usual prayers, he still retains it. When called up to the reading of the Law, or when a priest had to lift up his hands to bless the congregation, then, and then only, did he lay down the palm fond on the ground. When he went to visit the sick or to comfort the mourner, he carried the palm with him; when, however, he went to the Bethhammidrash (academy or lecture hall), he sent it home by his son or some other messenger. Well, what is the import of all this? It is to inform us how heartily the people of Jerusalem observed the precepts. Resh Lakish says, "Even over the transgressors of Israel the fire of Gehinnom will have no

power." This is argued a fortiori; if the golden altar, which was overlaid with gold no thicker than a denar and the wood under the protection of the gold resisted the influence of the fire for many years, how much less will the fire of Gehinnom have power against the transgressors of Israel, who are as full of precepts as a pomegranate is full of pits: as it is written (Cant. iv:3), "Thy temples are like a piece of pomegranate." Read not Thy temples, but read the empty ones; even they that seem to be empty of any good are nevertheless full of good works, as a pomegranate is full of pits."

The school of Shammai say, "He who, having eaten, and has forgotten to return thanks, must go back to the place where he had eaten and there return thanks; "but the school of Hillel say, "He may return thanks on the spot where he called to mind his omission." . . . The latter observed to the former, "according to your words, if one has eaten on the roof of a palace and has forgotten to return thanks he must go back to the roof of the palace and there make up for his omission." The school of Shammai replied to the school of Hillel, "According to your words, if one have left his purse on the roof of a palace, will he go back again to the spot and fetch it? If, then, he returns for his own honour, how much more ought he to return for the honour of Heaven?" There were two scholars, one of whom by mistake followed up the rule of the school of Shammai and he found a purse of gold; the other intentionally followed out the rule of the school of Hillel and he was devoured by a lion. Rabbah, the grandson of Channah, was once travelling in a caravan and having finished his meal, he forgot to repeat the usual thanks on the spot. "What shall I do?" said he. "If I were to tell them that I forgot to repeat the thanksgiving and must therefore return to the place where I had my meal, then they would say, 'Repeat it here, for wherever thou sayest it, thou sayest it to God, who is everywhere.' It is therefore best that I should tell them that I have forgotten a golden dove and must go back and fetch it and ask them to wait here for me." He went and returned thanks upon the spot where he had taken food, and there he actually found a golden dove. But what made him say a golden dove? Because the community of Israel is compared to a dove, as it is written (Ps. lxviii:13), "Ye shall be as the wings of a dove covered with silver and her feathers with yellow gold." As a dove finds no deliverance but by means of her wings, so like-

wise Israel are not delivered from persecution but by the practice of the commandments.

All precepts which Israel has performed in this world will appear in the next, and smite the nations in the face, as it is said (Deut. iv:6), "Keep therefore and do them, for this is your wisdom and understanding in the sight of the nations." Scripture does not say "before the nations," but "in the eyes of the nations", which teaches that the precepts will appear in the world to come, and smite the nations on the face.

Rabbi bar Rev. Josi expounded (Prov. vi:23), "For the commandment is a lamp, but the Law is a light. "The Scripture compares the former to a lamp and the latter to a light, which is to teach thee as a lamp shines only at night, and only for an hour or so, so also the commandment is a protection only during the short time in which it is being performed; but as the light shines all day long, and continuously, so also is the Law; it protects those that study it for ever, for the same Scripture says (ibid., ver. 22), "When thou goest it shall lead thee, when thou sleepest it shall keep thee and when thou awakest it shall keep thee," in the right way; "Where thou sleepest," in death, "it shall keep thee" in safety, and preserve thee unto eternal life; "and when thou awakest," at the resurrection of the dead, "it shall come with thee," and for thee it will be thy mediator and intercede on thy behalf, that thou mightest live forever in glory. There is a parable: It is like to a man who travels along a road in a very dark night and is in fear of thorns, of thistles, of ditches, of wild beasts and highwaymen. Having a lighted torch, he is safe from thorns and thistles and also from ditches, but is still in dread of wild beasts and highwaymen, and in doubt as to the road on which he travels. When the morning dawns he is safe also from wild beasts and highwaymen, not free from anxiety as to the road, for he may be going the wrong way. Once having reached the well-beaten track, he is safe from all danger and free from fear and anxiety.

While all Israel on leaving Egypt were busily engaged in spoiling the Egyptians of their gold and silver, Moses was engaged in the performance of the precepts, as it is written (Prov. x:8), "The wise in heart will receive commandments."

Every precept fulfilled in this world goes before and anticipates in the world to come the man who did it, as it is said (Isa. lviii:8), "Thy righteousness shall go before thee." And he

who commits a sin in this world, that sin folds itself round him and goes before him to day of judgment, as it is said (Job. vi:18), "They are folded round as leaven round the heart of a cabbage, by the paths of their way; they go to nothing and perish." Rabbi Elzer says "the sin he has committed is to him like a dog."

Rav. Tuvi bar Kisna asked Rava: "We are taught that he who observes a precept shall receive favour from above; this implies that he who does not observe a precept shall not receive a reward; but we are also taught that he who is passive and commits no sin, a reward is given to him, as if he had actively observed a precept?" Rava replied, "If one is exposed to sin and he resists it, then only is he rewarded as if he had actually performed a precept, as the case of Rabbi Chanina bar Pappa will illustrate. A Matrona (A Roman Lady) solicited him to sin but he in order that she should take a dislike to him, uttered a name (a cabbalistic formula) and at once he became covered with boils and ulcers. But she as quickly cured him by witchcraft, and he ran away and secreted himself in a ruined bath, into which when even two entered at daytime they were injured by evil spirits that haunted the place; but they injured him not. On the following morning he was asked by the Rabbis, "Who protected thee?" He replied, "Some dignitaries of the emperor watched over me all the night." They remarked, "Probably thou wast tempted to an immorality and wast thus rescued therefrom for we are taught, He who is tempted to an immorality and is rescued from it, a miracle is performed on his behalf."

It is Rabbi Jacob who says that there is no reward in this world for the performance of a precept, for tradition teaches that Rabbi Jacob said, "Every precept recorded in the law, by the side of which a reward is expressly attached, the bestowal of that reward depends not on this life, but on the life hereafter, i.e., at the revivification of the dead. For instance, with regard to the precept (Deut. v:16). 'Honour thy father and thy mother', the reward expressly attached to its is, that thy days may be prolonged and that it may go well with thee.' By the precept, 'Let the dam go' (Deut. xxii:7), the reward is stated by the side of it, 'that it may be well with thee, and that thou mayest prolong thy days'. Now a father says to his son, 'Go up to the tower and fetch me a brace of young pigeons.' He goes in obedience to his father and does 'let the dam go', and takes only the young in fulfilment of the precept, as the law directed him: but on coming

down from the tower, he falls and is killed. Where is the good and the long life promised as a reward for the fulfilment of these two precepts? It is plain, therefore, that there is no reward in this world, but in the world which is perfectly good and without end. The remark arises, 'Perhaps this never happened.' 'Rabbi Jacob witnessed the fact', is the response. 'Perhaps he intended to commit sin, and he was punished.' 'God does not reckon and punish and evil intention a sinful act.' But 'Blessed is the man that feareth the Lord, that delighteth greatly in His commandments' (Ps. cxii:1). In His commandments but not in the reward of His commandments; and this it is that we are taught, "Be not like servants who serve their master on condition of receiving a reward, but be like servants who serve the master without the condition of receiving a reward."

Both the new as well as the old commandments demand rigorous observance. Rava has expounded what is written in Cant. vii.13, "the mandraks give a smell", as these are the young men of Israel that have never tasted sin. "And at our gates are all manner of pleasant fruits;" these are the young daughters of Israel that tell their husbands, etc., etc. "New and old which I have laid up for thee, O my beloved." The community of Israel said before the Holy One blessed by He—"Lord of the universe! I have imposed upon myself many new decrees, besides the old decrees Thou hast imposed upon me, and I have observed them." Rav Chasda asked a certain disciple of the Rabbi's, who was making up a Haggada before him, "Hast thou not heard what the meaning of "New and Old is?" He replied, "The meaning is, the 'New' are the light, and the 'Old' are the 'weighty' commandments.' "What!", asked Rav Chasda, "was the Law given twice? But let me tell thee the 'Old' means the words of the Law, and the 'New' means the words of the Scribes. Give heed, my son, to the words of the Scribes more than to the words of the Law, for the words of the Law consist of positive and negative commandments, the transgression of which is often punished by the infliction of stripes only, but whosoever transgresseth the words of the Scribes is always guilty of death."

Be swift in the performance of a light precept as in that of a weighty one, and flee from transgression. For the fulfilment of one precept leads to the fulfilment of another and one transgression leads to another so that the fulfilment of a second precept is the reward for the first and one transgression is the recompense for

another. "Flee from that which is ugly and from that which is unsightly in appearance"; therefore, the sages say, "flee from a light sin, lest it induce thee to commit a weighty one; pursue a light precept, that it might induce thee to perform a great one." But for the transgression of a light or weighty precept a like punishment is decreed, for the Rabbis inform us "The ministering angels said before the Holy one—blessed be He—"Lord of the universe! why didst thou decree death upon the first Adam?" He replied, "Because I commanded him a light percept and that he transgressed." They further asked, "And did not Moses and Aaron, who kept the whole and entire Law, also die?" He replied unto them (Eccles. lx:2), "There is one chance for the righteous and the wicked," etc.

Rabbi Akiva says, "Whosoever associates with transgressors partakes of their punishment, though he has not transgressed like them; and whosoever accompanied those who perform a precept, though he himself does not do like them, he partakes of their reward."

"Since scripture punished as sinners those who associate with sinners, how much more will it reward those who associate with them that fulfil the commandments, as if they themselves had actually fulfilled them." And Scripture considers him who causes another to fulfil a commandment as if he himself had fulfilled it, as it is said. (Exod. xxvii:5), "And thy rod wherewith thou smotest the river." Did Moses smite the river? Was it not Aaron that smote it? (Exod. xvii:5). But this is to tell thee that who so causeth his companion to fulfil a commandment Scripture considers him as if he had himself fulfilled it. Rabbi Yochanan says, "Every woman who solicits her husband to fulfil the precept (par excellence) will have sons whose equals were not found even in the generation of Moses."

What is the meaning of "that thought upon His name?" (Mal. iii:16) Rav Ashi says, "It means if a man purposes to do a commandment, but is forcibly prevented doing it, Scripture counts it as if he had actually performed it. But if one has kept himself from the performance of a precept and has engaged himself in the commission of a sin, his wife will finally die of the plague, as it is said (Exek. xxiv:16), "Son of man, behold I take away from thee the desire of thine eyes (thy wife) with a stroke." Yet Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak said, "Sin committed with a good motive is better than a precept fulfilled for a bad motive."

Tradition records that Rabbi Simon ben Gamliel said, "All those commandments which Israel have accepted with joy such, for instance as circumcision, as it is written (Ps. cxix.162), 'I rejoice at Thy word as one that findeth great spoil'—are still observed by them with joy; but all those commandments which they have accepted with ill-will—such as the prohibition of incest, as it is written (Num. xi:10), 'Then Moses overheard the people weep throughout their families', i. e., about the prohibition of consanguinity—are still observed by them with ill will; for there is not a marriage without some quarrel connected with it." Rabbi Simon ben Elazer said, "All those commandments upon whose account during their interdiction by the government, Israel have laid down their lives, such as those relating to idolatry and circumcision, are still scrupulously observed by them; but all those commandments for the observance of which they would not have had to forfeit their lives at the time the interdict was force, such as that relating to the phylacteries, etc., are still but losely observed by them."

Regarding the relative values of the precepts, the Rabbis say "Visiting the sick has not limited measure." Rav Joseph thought that its reward was commensurate, but Abaii said to him, "Is there, then, a limited measure to the reward for the performance of any other precept? For we are taught: Be diligent in the performance of a light precept as of a weighty one; for thou knowest not which of the precepts has the larger reward." But the meaning of this is, said Abaii, "Visiting the sick has not limited measure; even those of exalted station in life should visit those who are of low estate." Rava said, "No limited measure means to visit even a hundred times in a day if needs be." Rabbi Acha bar Channina says, "He who visits the sick takes away a sixtieth part of his illness." "If that be the case," observed Abaii, "let sixty visitors go at once and they would raise him from his illness." Rabbi Acha replied, "It means the sixtieth part according to the tithing scale of Rabbi, and the visitor must have been born under the same star which was in the ascendant when the invalid was born."

Rabbi Meir says, "Great is the precept of circumcision, for there is no one who has engaged himself in the performance of the commandments as our father Abraham did, and yet even he was not called perfect, but on account of circumcision, as it is said (Gen. xvii:1), 'Walk before me and be thou perfect;' and

immediately after it is written (Ibid. ver. 2), 'And I will make my covenant (of which circumcision is the sign) between thee and me.' Again, great is the precept of circumcision; for in weight it is equal to all the commandments recorded in the Law; for it is said (Exod. xxxiv:27), 'After the tenor of these words (of the commandment) I have made a covenant the sign of which is circumcision) with thee and Israel.'"

It is a precept binding upon a debtor to pay his debts.

With regard to entering and leaving the synagogue, it is said that he who comes out of the synagogue should not make long steps (as if glad to get away quickly from the place of worship). Abaii says, "This is said only with reference to coming out from the synagogue; but with respect to going into it, it is a commandment to run, for it is said (Hosea vi:3), 'Let us run on to know the Lord.'"

Rabbi Illaa said in the name of Rabbi Elazer ben Rabbi Simon, "It is lawful for a man to prevaricate or quibble in the interest peace, as it is said (Gen. 1, 16, 17), 'Thy father did command before he died,' etc." Rabbi Nathan said, "To quibble is a command; for it is said (1 Sam. xvi:2), 'How can I go? If, Saul hear it, he will slay me, and the Lord said, take an heifer with three and say, I am come to sacrifice to the Lord.'"

The Rabbis differentiated between the precepts that were binding upon men and women. We read "All precepts concerning a father toward his son are binding upon men only, but not upon women; all precepts concerning a child's duty towards his father are obligatory both upon men and women. (This is a Mishna—it is thus explained in the Cemara:) The Rabbis teach, "A father is bound to circumcise his son, to redeem him if he is a firstborn, to instruct him in the Law, to provide him with a wife, and to teach him a trade;" some say "he is to teach him also to swim." Rabbi Yehudah says, "He who does not teach his son a trade teaches him as it were to rob."

The precept "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. i:28) is obligatory on man only, but not on woman. Rabbi Yochanan ben Berokah says, "It is obligatory upon both for it is said, 'And God said unto them, be fruitful and multiply.'"

A hundred Mizwot ought to be fulfilled by the Israelite each day, and seven ought to surround him constantly like guardian spirit. But there are, however, several classes of individuals who are exempt from these commandments, viz.: Professional writers

of holy books, phylacteries and Mezuzahs (i. e., doorpost charms), as also the vendors of such articles, their agent, and every one that deals in the sacred trade, including the sellers of purple and wool for fringes, are exempt from reading the Shema, from repeating the usual prayers, from wearing phylacteries, and from all the commandments recorded in the Law. This corroborates the words of Rabbi Yosi the Galilean, who used to say "He who is engaged in the performance of one precept is free from the performance of another." The Rabbis also relate that, "A deaf-mute, an idiot and a child, are free from all the precepts contained in the Law." "He who has a corpse before him is exempt from reading the Shema, from prayer, from the phylacteries and from all the commandments mentioned in the Law." A mourner, however, is bound to observe all the commandments mentioned in the Law, excepting phylacteries, for they are named a "Tire" an ornamental headdress, as it is said (Ezek. xxiv:17), "Bind the tire of thine head upon thee."

Tradition teaches that Rabbi Simon ben Gamliel says, "For the sake of a living child only a day old the Sabbath may be desecrated, but it may not be desecrated for a dead child; no, not even for David the King of Israel." In the former case the Law says, "Desecrate one Sabbath for the preservation of the child, in order that he may observe many Sabbaths afterwards"; but in the latter case the Sabbath is not to be desecrated, for when a man dies he is exempted from the commandments; and this is what Rabbis Yochanan said (Ps. lxxxviii:5), "'Free among the dead' i. e., when a man is dead he is freed from the commandments."

Each prohibition inculcates its individual meaning, viz.: the suppression of sensuality, of selfishness, the consecration of life and especially the sentiments. The following extracts from the Talmud will well illustrate the above contention: (a) "He who obliterates one letter from the written name of God break a negative command, for it is said (Deut. xii. 3, 4), 'And destroy the names of them out of that place. Ye shall not do so unto the Lord your God.'" (b) "He who has intercourse with a female slave is guilty of breaking fourteen negative precepts, and shall be cut off by Heaven. He is guilty because (1), 'Thou shalt not sow thy vineyard with diverse seeds'; (2), 'Thou shalt not plough with an ox and ass together'; (3), 'Thou shalt not wear a garment of diverse sorts, etc., etc., etc. . . . He who marries a suitable wife, Elijah will kiss him and God will love him; but he who

marries an unsuitable wife, God will detest him and Elijah will chastise (55) him." (c) Rabbi Akiva says, "He who marries a woman not suited to him violates five negative precepts: (1) 'Thou shalt not avenge'; (2) 'Thou shalt not bear a grudge'; (3) 'Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart'; (4) 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself'; (5) 'That thy brother may live with thee.' For if he hates her, he wishes she were dead and thus (virtually) he diminishes the population." (d) "He who is party to a quarrel breaks a negative command, for it is said (Numb. xvi:40), 'Be not as Korah and his company." (e) Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi says, "He who partakes of anything belonging to the avaricious breaks a negative precept, for it is written (Prov xxiii:6, 7), 'Eat thou not the break of him that hath an evil eye," etc. Rav Nachman bar Yitachak says, "He breaks two negative precepts, 'Eat thou not' and 'Desire thou not.'" (f) Rava said, "He who discourses common talk (that is, converses upon any other subject but Scripture) transgresses a positive precept, for it is said (Deut. vi:7), 'And shalt talk of them.' 'Of them,' but not of other matters."