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## A JEWISH BOSWELL.

THERE is a remarkable saying in the Talmud "Nothing exists of which there is not some indication in the Torah." These words are often quoted, and some modern authors have pressed them so far as to find even the discoveries of Columbus and the inventions of Watt and Stephenson indicated in the Torah. This is certainly misapplied ingenuity. But it is hardly an exaggeration to maintain that there is no noble manifestation of real religion, no expression of real piety, reverence and devotion, to which Jewish literature would not offer a fair parallel.

Thus it will hardly be astonishing to hear that Jewish literature has its Boswell to show more than three centuries before the Scotch gentleman came to London to admire his Johnson, and more than four centuries before the Sage of Chelsea delivered his lectures on Hero Worship. And this Jewish Boswell was only guided by the motives suggested to him in the old Rabbinic literature. In this literature the reverence of the great man, and the absorption of one's whole self in him, went so far that one Rabbi declared that the whole world was only created to serve such a man as company (*Sabbath 30b*).

Again, the fact, that, in the language of the Rabbis, the term for studying the Law and discussing it is "to attend" or rather "to serve the disciples of the Wise" (שימוש ת"ח) may also have led people to the important truth that the great man is not a lecturing machine, but a sort of living Law himself. "When the man," said one Rabbi, "has wholly devoted himself to the Torah, and thoroughly identified himself with it, it becomes almost his own Torah." Thus people have not only to listen to his words but to observe his whole life, and to profit from all his actions and movements.

This was what the Jewish Boswell sought to do. His name was Rabbi Solomon, of St. Goar, a small town on the Rhine, whilst the name of the master whom he served was R. Jacob, the Levite, better known by his initials Maharil, who filled the office of Chief Rabbi in Mayence and Worms successively. The main activity of Maharil falls in the first three

decades of the fifteenth century. Those were troublous times for a Rabbi. For the preceding century with its persecution and sufferings—one has only to think of the Black Death and its terrible consequences for the Jews—led to the destruction of the Yeshiboth, the decay of the study of the Law, and to the dissolution of many congregations. Those which remained lost all touch with each other, so that almost every larger Jewish community had its own *Minhag* or ritual custom. (See Güdemann, III. i.)

It was Maharil who brought some order into this chaos, and in the course of time his influence asserted itself so strongly that the rules observed by him in the performing of religious ceremonies, were accepted by the great majority of the Jewish communities. Thus the personality of Maharil himself became a standing *Minhag*, suppressing all the other *Minhagim*.

But there must have been something very strong and very great about the personality of the man who could succeed in such an arduous task. For we must not forget that the *Minhag* or custom in its decay degenerates into a kind of religious fashion, the worst disease to which religion is liable, and the most difficult to cure. It is therefore an irreparable loss both for Jewish literature and Jewish history, that the greatest part of Maharil's posthumous writings are no longer extant, so that our knowledge about him is very small. But the little we know of him we owe chiefly to the communicativeness of his servant, the Solomon of St. Goar whom I mentioned above.

Solomon not only gave us the *Minhagim* of his master, but also observed him closely in all his movements, and conscientiously wrote down all that he saw and heard, under the name of לקוטים, *Collectanea*. It seems that the bulk of these *Collectanea* was also lost. But in the fragments that we still possess we are informed, among other things, how Maharil addressed his wife, how he treated his pupils, how careful he was in the use of his books, and even how clean his linen was. Is this not out-Boswelling Boswell?

The most striking point of agreement between the Boswell of the fifteenth and him of the eighteenth century, is that they both use the same passage from the Talmud to excuse the interest in trifles which their labours of love betrayed. Thus Solomon prefaces his *Collectanea* with the following words: "It is written, His leaf shall not wither. These words were explained by our teachers to mean that even the idle talk of the disciples of the wise deserves a study. Upon this interpretation I have relied. In my love to R. Jacob the

Levite, I collected every thing about him. I did not refuse even small things, though many derided me. Everything I wrote down, for such was the desire of my heart."

Thus far Solomon. Now, if we turn to the introduction to Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, we read the following sentence: "For this almost superstitious reverence, I have found very old and venerable authority quoted by our great modern prelate, Secker, in whose tenth sermon there is the following passage: "Rabbi Kimchi, a noted Jewish commentator who lived about five hundred years ago, explains that passage in the first Psalm, 'His leaf also shall not wither' from Rabbins yet older than himself, that even the idle talk, so he expressed it, of a good man ought to be regarded."

Croker's note to this passage sounds rather strange. This editor says: "Kimchi was a Spanish rabbi, who died in 1240. One wonders that Secker's good sense should have condescended to quote this far-fetched and futile interpretation of the simple and beautiful metaphor, by which the Psalmist illustrates the prosperity of the righteous man." Now Kimchi died at least five years earlier than Croker states, but dates, we know from Macaulay's essay on the subject, were not Croker's strongest point. But this lack of sympathy one can hardly forgive to the editor of Boswell. Had he known what strong affinity there was between his most Christian author and the humble Jew Solomon, he would have less resented this condescension of Archbishop Secker.

As to the Jewish Boswell himself, we know very little about him. The only place in which he speaks about his own person is that in which he derives his pedigree from R. Eleazar ben Samuel ha-Levi (died 1357), and says that he was generally called "Der gute Rabbi Salman." He well deserved this appellation. In his Will we find the following injunction to his children: "Be honest, and conscientious in your dealing with men, with Jews as well as Gentiles, be kind and obliging to them; do not speak what is superfluous." And wisdom is surely rare enough to render inappropriate a charge of superfluousness against the work of those who in bygone times spent their energies in gathering the crumbs that fell from the tables of the wise.

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