

## CHAPTER XX

### GOD'S LOVE AND COMPASSION

1. As justice forms the basis of human morality, with kindness and benevolence as milder elements to mitigate its sternness, so, according to the Jewish view, mercy and love represent the milder side of God, but by no means a higher attribute counteracting His justice. Love can supplement justice, but cannot replace it. The sages say: <sup>1</sup> "When the Creator saw that man could not endure, if measured by the standard of strict justice, He joined His attribute of mercy to that of justice, and created man by the combined principle of both." The divine compassion with human frailty, felt by both Moses and Hosea, manifests itself in God's mercy. Were it not for the weakness of the flesh, justice would have sufficed. But the divine plan of salvation demands redeeming love which wins humanity step by step for higher moral ends. The educational value of this love lies in the fact that it is a gift of grace, bestowed on man by the fatherly love of God to ward off the severity of full retribution. His pardon must conduce to a deeper moral earnestness. <sup>2</sup> "For with Thee there is forgiveness that Thou mayest be feared." <sup>3</sup> R. Akiba says: "The world is judged by the divine attribute of goodness." <sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Gen. R. VIII, 4-5; XII, 15; Midr. Teh. to Ps. LXXXIX, 2; comp. Ben Sira, XVIII, 11; Testaments of XII Patr.: Zebulon 9; Ap. Baruch XLVIII, 14; IV Esdras VIII, 31; Psalms of Solomon IX, 7; Prayer of Manasseh, 8, 13.

<sup>2</sup> See J. E., art. "Love." Both Weber, l. c., 57 f. and Bousset, l. c., 443 f. show Christian bias.

<sup>3</sup> Ps. CXXX, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Aboth III, 19; comp. B. Wisdom XI, 23, 26; XII, 16, 18; Ben Sira, II, 18.

2. As a matter of course, in the Biblical view God's mercy was realized at first only with regard to Israel and was afterward extended gradually to humanity at large. The generation of the flood and the inhabitants of Sodom perished on account of their guilt, and only the righteous were saved. This attitude holds throughout the Bible until the late book of Jonah, with its lesson of God's forgiveness even for the heathen city of Nineveh after due repentance. In the later Psalms the divine attributes of mercy are expanded and applied to all the creatures of God. <sup>1</sup> According to the school of Hillel, whenever the good and evil actions of any man are found equal in the scales of justice, God inclines the balances toward the side of mercy. <sup>2</sup> Nay more, in the words of Samuel, the Babylonian teacher, God judges the nations by the noblest types they produce. <sup>3</sup>

The ruling Sadducean priesthood insisted on the rigid enforcement of the law. The party of the pious, the *Hasidim*, however, — according to the liturgy, the apocryphal and the rabbinical literature, — appealed to the mercy of God in song and prayer, acknowledging their failings in humility, and made kindness and love their special objects in life. Therefore with their ascendancy the divine attributes of mercy and compassion were accentuated. God himself, we are told, was heard praying: "Oh that My attribute of mercy may prevail over My attribute of justice, so that grace alone may be bestowed upon My children on earth." <sup>4</sup> And the second word of the Decalogue was so interpreted that God's mercy — which is said to extend "to the thousandth generation" — is five hundred times as powerful as His punitive justice, — which is applied "to the third and fourth generation." <sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ps. CXLIV, 8-9; comp. Ben Sira, XVIII, 13.

<sup>2</sup> Tos. Sanh. XIII, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Yer. R. h. Sh. I, 57 a.

<sup>4</sup> Ber. 7 a.

<sup>5</sup> Tos. Sota IV, 1, with reference to Ex. XX, 5-6. The plural, *laalafim*, is taken to mean *two thousand*.

3. Divine mercy shows itself in the law, where compassion is enjoined on all suffering creatures. Profound sympathy with the oppressed is echoed in the ancient law of the poor who had to give up his garment as a pledge: "When he crieth unto Me, I shall hear, for I am gracious."<sup>1</sup> In the old Babylonian code, might was the arbiter of right,<sup>2</sup> but the unique genius of the Jew is shown in adapting this same legal material to its impulse of compassion. The cry of the innocent sufferer, of the forsaken and fatherless, rises up to God's throne and secures there his right against the oppressor. Thus in the Mosaic law and throughout Jewish literature God calls himself "the Judge of the widow," "the Father of the fatherless,"<sup>3</sup> "a Stronghold to the needy."<sup>4</sup> He calls the poor, "My people,"<sup>5</sup> and, as the rabbis say, He loves the persecuted, not the persecutors.<sup>6</sup>

4. Even to dumb beasts God extends His mercy. This Jewish tenderness is an inheritance from the shepherd life of the patriarchs, who were eager to quench the thirst of the animals in their care before they thought of their own comfort.<sup>7</sup> This sense of sympathy appears in the Biblical precepts as to the overburdened beast,<sup>8</sup> the ox treading the corn,<sup>9</sup> and the mother-beast or mother-bird with her young,<sup>10</sup> as well as the Talmudic rule first to feed the domestic animals and then sit down to the meal.<sup>11</sup> This has remained a characteristic trait of Judaism. Thus, in connection with the verse of the Psalm, "His tender mercies are over all His works,"<sup>12</sup> it is related of Rabbi Judah the Saint, the redactor of the Mishnah,

<sup>1</sup> Ex. XXII, 26; comp. 21, 23.

<sup>2</sup> See Harper: *Code of Hammurabi*, 1900; Oettli: *D. Gesetz Hammurabis und d. Thora Israels*, 1903; Cohn: *D. Gesetz Hammurabis*, Zürich, 1903; Grimm: *D. Gesetz Chammurabis und Moses*, Cologne, 1903. Also M. Jastrow, *Hebrew and Babylonian Traditions*, p. 255-319.

<sup>3</sup> Deut. X, 18; Ps. LXXXIII.

<sup>4</sup> Isa. XXV, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Ex. XXII, 24.

<sup>6</sup> Ex. R. XXVII, 5; Eccles. R. to III, 15.

<sup>7</sup> Gen. XXIV, 19.

<sup>8</sup> Ex. XXIII, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Deut. XXV, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Lev. XX, 28; Deut. XXII, 6.

<sup>11</sup> Git. 62 a, with reference to Deut. XI, 15.

<sup>12</sup> Ps. CXLV, 9.

that he was afflicted with pain for thirteen years, and gave as reason that he once struck and kicked away a calf which had run to him moaning for protection; he was finally relieved, after he had taught his household to have pity even on the smallest of creatures.<sup>1</sup> In fact, Rabban Gamaliel, his grandfather, had taught before him: "Whosoever has compassion on his fellow-creatures, on him God will have compassion."<sup>2</sup> The sages often interpret the phrase "To walk in the way of the Lord" — that is, "As the Holy One, blessed be He, is merciful, so be ye also merciful."<sup>3</sup>

5. Thus the rabbis came to regard *love* as the innermost part of God's being. *God loves mankind*, is the highest stage of consciousness of God, but this can be attained only by the closest relation of the human soul to the Most High, after severe trials have softened and humanized the spirit. It is not accidental that Scripture speaks often of God's goodness, mercy, and grace, but seldom mentions His love. Possibly the term *ahabah* was used at first for sensuous love and therefore was not employed for God so often as the more spiritual *hesed*, which denotes kind and loyal affection.<sup>4</sup> However, Hosea used this term for his own love for his faithless wife, and did not hesitate to apply it also to God's love for His faithless people, which he terms "a love of free will."<sup>5</sup> His example is followed by Jeremiah, most tender of the prophets, who gave the classic expression to the everlasting love of God for Israel, His beloved son.<sup>6</sup> This divine love, spiritually understood, forms the chief topic of the Deuteronomic addresses.<sup>7</sup> In this book God's love appears as that of a father for his son, who lavishes gifts upon him, but also chastises him for his own

<sup>1</sup> B. M. 85 a; Yer. Kil. IX, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Tos. B. K. IX, 30; Sifre, Deut. 96.

<sup>3</sup> Sifre, Deut. § 49; Shab. 133 b; comp. Philo: *De Humanitate*.

<sup>4</sup> See Concordance to *ahabah* and *hesed*. Note especially Hos. VI, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Hos. III, 1; XI, 1, 4; XIV, 5.

<sup>6</sup> Jer. XXXI, 2, 19.

<sup>7</sup> Deut. VII, 8; X, 15.

good.<sup>1</sup> The mind opened more and more to regard the trials sent by God as means of ennobling the character,<sup>2</sup> and the men of the Talmudic period often speak of the afflictions of the saints as "visitations of the divine love."<sup>3</sup>

6. The sufferings of Israel in particular were taken to be trials of the divine love.<sup>4</sup> God's love for Israel, "His first-born son,"<sup>5</sup> is not partial, but from the outset aims to train him for his world mission. The Song of Moses speaks of the love of the Father for His son "whom He found in the wilderness";<sup>6</sup> and this is requited by the bridal love of Israel with which the people "went after God in the wilderness."<sup>7</sup> It is this love of God, according to Akiba's interpretation of the Song of Songs, which "all the waters could not quench," "a love as strong as death."<sup>8</sup> This love raised up a nation of martyrs without parallel in history, although the followers of the so-called Religion of Love fail to give it the credit it deserves and seem to regard it as a kind of hatred for the rest of mankind.<sup>9</sup> Whenever the paternal love of God is truly felt and understood it must include all classes and all souls of men who enter into the relation of children to God. Wherever emphasis is laid upon the special love for Israel, it is based upon the love with which the chosen people cling to the Torah, the word of God, upon the devotion with which they surrender their lives in His cause.<sup>10</sup>

7. Still, Judaism does not proclaim love, absolute and unrestricted, as the divine principle of life. That is left to the Church, whose history almost to this day records ever so many acts of lovelessness. Love is unworthy of God, unless it is guided by justice. Love of good must be accompanied by

<sup>1</sup> Deut. VIII, 5; see Sifre, Deut. 32.

<sup>2</sup> Prov. III, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Ber. 5 a; Sifre, l. c.; Mek. Yithro 10.

<sup>4</sup> See Mek. and Sifre, l. c.

<sup>5</sup> Ex. IV, 22.

<sup>6</sup> Deut. XXXII, 6, 10 f.

<sup>7</sup> Jer. II, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Song of Songs, R. to III, 7. Comp. Davidson, l. c., 235-287.

<sup>9</sup> See Schreiner, l. c., 103-112; Perles: *Bousset*, 58 f.

<sup>10</sup> Pesik, 16-17; Mek. Yithro 6, at end.

hate of evil, or else it lacks the educative power which alone makes it beneficial to man.

God's love manifests itself in human life as an educative power. R. Akiba says that it extends to all created in God's image, although the knowledge of it was vouchsafed to Israel alone.<sup>1</sup> This universal love of God is a doctrine of the apocryphal literature as well. "Thou hast mercy upon all . . . for Thou lovest all things that are, and hatest nothing which Thou hast made. . . . But Thou sparest all, for they are Thine, O Lord, Lover of souls," says the Book of Wisdom;<sup>2</sup> and when Ezra the Seer laments the calamity that has befallen the people, God replies, "Thinkest thou that thou lovest My creatures more than I?"<sup>3</sup>

8. Among the mystics divine love was declared to be the highest creative principle. They referred the words of the Song of Songs, — "The midst thereof is paved with love,"<sup>4</sup> to the innermost palace of heaven, where stands the throne of God.<sup>5</sup> Among the philosophers Crescas considered love the active cosmic principle rather than intellect, the principle of Aristotle, because it is love which is the impulse for creation.<sup>6</sup> This conception of divine love received a peculiarly mystic color from Juda Abravanel, a neo-Platonist of the sixteenth century, known as Leo Hebraeus. He says: "God's love must needs unfold His perfection and beauty, and reveal itself in His creatures, and love for these creatures must again elevate an imperfect world to His own perfection. Thus is engendered in man that yearning for love with which he endeavors to emulate the divine perfection."<sup>7</sup> Both Crescas and Leo Hebraeus thus gave the keynote for Spinoza's "Intellectual love" as the cosmic principle,<sup>8</sup> and this has been echoed even

<sup>1</sup> Aboth III, 14.

<sup>2</sup> XI, 23-26.

<sup>3</sup> IV Esdra VIII, 47.

<sup>4</sup> III, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Zohar I, 44 b; II, 97 a.

<sup>6</sup> See *Or Adonai*, I, 3, 5, and Joel: *Crescas* 36-37.

<sup>7</sup> *Dialoghi di Amore*; see Zimmels: *Leo Hebraeus*, 1886.

<sup>8</sup> Ethics V, proposition XXXV.

in such works as Schiller's dithyrambs on "Love and Friendship" in his "Philosophic Letters."<sup>1</sup> Still this neo-Platonic view has nothing in common with the theological conception of love. In Judaism God is conceived as a loving Father, who purposes to lead man to happiness and salvation. In other words, the divine love is an essentially moral attribute of God, and not a metaphysical one.

9. If we wish to speak of a power that permeates the cosmos and turns the wheel of life, it is far more correct to speak of God's creative goodness.<sup>2</sup> According to Scripture, each day's creation bears the divine approval: "It is good."<sup>3</sup> Even the evil which man experiences serves a higher purpose, and that purpose makes for the good. Misfortune and death, sorrow and sin, in the great economy of life are all turned into final good. Accordingly, Judaism recognizes this divine goodness not only in every enjoyment of nature's gifts and the favors of fortune, but also in sad and trying experiences, and for all of these it provides special formulas of benediction.<sup>4</sup> The same divine goodness sends joy and grief, even though short-sighted man fails to see the majestic Sun of life which shines in unabated splendor above the clouds. Judaism was optimistic through all its experiences just because of this implicit faith in God's goodness. Such faith transforms each woe into a higher welfare, each curse into actual blessing; it leads men and nations from oppression to ever greater freedom, from darkness to ever brighter light, and from error to ever higher truth and righteousness. Divine love may have pity upon human weakness, but it is divine goodness that inspires and quickens human energy. After all, love cannot be the dominant principle of life. Man cannot love all the time, nor can he love all the world; his sense of justice demands that he hate

<sup>1</sup> "The Theosophy of Julius": "God."

<sup>2</sup> *Middath tobah*.

<sup>3</sup> Gen. I, 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 23, 31.

<sup>4</sup> Gen. R. IX, 5, 9; Ber. 60 a; Yer. Ber. IX, 13 c-14 b; Taan. 21 a.

wickedness and falsehood. We must apply the same criterion to God. But, on the other hand, man can and should *do good* and *be good* continually and to all men, even to the most unworthy. Therefore God becomes the pattern and ideal of an all-encompassing goodness, which is never exhausted and never reaches an end.