

I

A contemporary of mine<sup>1</sup> inquired regarding this persecution<sup>2</sup> in which he is forced to confess that that man<sup>3</sup> is God's messenger and that he is a true prophet. He addressed his query to one whom he calls a sage<sup>4</sup> and who was not touched by the tribulations of most of the Jewish communities in this violence, may it pass soon, and he wished to learn whether he should make the confession in order not to die, although his children will be lost among the gentiles, or should he die and not acknowledge what he demands, seeing that in this way he does what he is required by the Torah of Moses, and that the confession leads to the relinquishment of all the commandments.<sup>5</sup>

The man of whom the inquiry was made offered a weak and senseless reply, of foul content and form. He made statements in it distinctly harmful, as even light-minded women can realize.<sup>6</sup> Although his reply is weak, tedious, and confused, I thought I should quote him at length, but I spared the gift that God, blessed be He, bestowed on mankind. I mean speech, of which our sacred Torah states: *Who gives man speech? . . . Is it not I, the Lord?* [Exod. 4:11].<sup>7</sup> A man should be more sparing of his speech than of his money, and should not speak much yet do little. Indeed the Sage<sup>8</sup> has condemned verbosity with little content in his declaration: *Just as dreams come with much brooding, so does foolish utterance come with much speech* [Eccles. 5:2]. You know of course what Job's friends said as he talked on and on:<sup>9</sup> *Is a multitude of words unanswerable? Must a loquacious person be right?* [Job 11:2]; *Job does not speak with knowledge; his words lack understanding* [Job 34:35].<sup>10</sup> There are many such reflections.

Since I am well informed regarding this issue, and am not ignorant of it as this man is, I think it is proper to cite something of the gist of what he said, and omit the rest, which does not merit a response, although on close examination nothing of what he said deserves an answer. Such is his assertion that whoever acknowledges his<sup>11</sup> apos-

tleshship has *ipso facto* disavowed the Lord, God of Israel. In support he brings the statement of our sages, "Whoever professes idolatry is as if he denied the entire Torah."<sup>12</sup> Judging from this analogy, he apparently finds no distinction between one who turns to idolatry not under duress but voluntarily, like Jeroboam and his associates,<sup>13</sup> and one who will under compulsion say of someone that he is a prophet, because he is afraid of the executioner's sword.

When I read this first statement of his, I decided not to challenge him before I read all of it, heeding the instruction of the Sage: *To answer a man before hearing him out is foolish and disgraceful* [Prov. 18:13]. So, when I looked further into his remarks, I noted that he said the following: "Whoever utters that confession is a gentile, though he fulfills the entire Law publicly and privately."<sup>14</sup> This "clear-headed man"<sup>15</sup> evidently sees absolutely no difference between one who does not observe the Sabbath out of the fear of the sword and one who does not observe it because he does not wish to.<sup>16</sup> I read on: "If one of the forced converts enters one of their houses of worship,<sup>17</sup> even if he does not say a word, and he then goes home and offers his prayers, this prayer is charged against him as an added sin and transgression." His proof text is the comment of our sages on the verse, *For My people have done a twofold wrong* [Jer. 2:13]:<sup>18</sup> They bowed to the idol and they bowed to the Temple.<sup>19</sup> This interpretation again does not discriminate between one who bowed to the idol and the Temple because he is a heretic and wants to defile God's name and desecrate His holiness and one who comes to a house of worship in order to behave like someone zealous<sup>20</sup> for the glory of God,<sup>21</sup> but does not utter or say a word that is in any way contrary to our religion, yet he must of necessity go to that house.<sup>22</sup> I likewise found him saying that anyone who avows that that man is a prophet,<sup>23</sup> though he does it under compulsion, is a wicked person, disqualified by Scripture from serving as a witness, since the Torah rules: *You shall not join hands with the guilty* [Exod. 23:1], that is, do not make a wicked man a witness.<sup>24</sup>

Even as I read his abuses, his long-winded foolish babbling and nonsense, I still believed it was not correct to challenge him before I read all the rest; perhaps it might be an example of what Solomon described: *The end of a matter is better than the beginning of it* [Eccles. 7:8].<sup>25</sup> But I found him saying toward the end of his missive that

heretics and Christians likewise assume that they will choose death rather than grant his apostleship.<sup>26</sup> When I learned this I was struck with amazement and wondered: Is there no God in Israel? [2 Kings 1:3, 6].<sup>27</sup> If an idol-worshiper burns his son and daughter to his object of worship,<sup>28</sup> do we even more certainly have to set fire to ourselves for service to God? Alas for the question, alas for the answer! Considering that he began by finding support in something irrelevant to his argument, and concluded by approving the thinking of heretics and Christians, I decided that God's judgment is right: his talk begins as silliness and ends as disastrous madness.

You ought to know that no one has the right to speak in public before he has rehearsed what he wants to say two, three, and four times, and learned it; then he may speak. This is what the rabbis taught, and took their proof text from the verse: *Then He saw it and gauged it; He measured it and probed it.* And afterward: *He said to man* [Job 28:27].<sup>29</sup> So much for what a person is required to do before he speaks. But if a man legislates on his own, and puts it down in writing, he should revise it a thousand times, if possible. This man, however, did nothing of the kind. He reduced all this important advice to writing, and did not think it necessary to prepare a first draft and then revise it. Evidently he considered his remarks free from doubt, in no need of correction. He handed them to someone who was to convey them in every city and town, and in this way brought darkness into the hearts of men. *He sent darkness; it was very dark* [Ps. 105:28].<sup>30</sup>

## II

I shall now undertake to define the magnitude of the error that misled this poor wretch, and how he hurt himself unknowingly.<sup>31</sup> He thought he was doing one kind deed, but instead became guilty of many wrongs, marshalling much irrelevant evidence, spouting words, and becoming the slave of his pen. It is well known from the account of our rabbis that before the Israelites left Egypt, they corrupted their ways and violated the covenant of circumcision,<sup>32</sup> so that none of them save the tribe of Levi<sup>33</sup> was circumcised. Only when the Passover commandment was promulgated, in connection with which God instructed Moses: *No uncircumcised shall eat of it* [Exod. 12:43],<sup>34</sup> he ordered them to

perform the rite. Our rabbis described the performance: Moses did the cutting, Joshua the ripping, Aaron the sucking.<sup>35</sup> The foreskins were collected in heaps.<sup>36</sup> The blood of circumcision got mixed with the blood of the paschal lamb, and this made them deserving of the redemption.<sup>37</sup> This is the implication of God's narration through Ezekiel: *When I passed by you and saw you wallowing in your blood, I said to you: "Live by your blood," Yea, I said to you, "live by your blood" [Ezek. 16:6].*<sup>38</sup> Our rabbis added that they became degenerate with incest, deriving it from the the verse: *O mortal, once there were two women, daughters of one mother [Ezek. 23:2].*<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, although they were corrupt as all this, God rebuked Moses for saying: *What if they do not believe me? [Exod. 4:1].*<sup>40</sup> And he retorted: They are believers, children of believers;<sup>41</sup> believers, as Scripture reports: *and the people . . . believed [Exod. 14:31]; sons of believers: because he believed, He reckoned it to his merit [Gen. 15:6].*<sup>42</sup> But you will end up not believing; it is told in Scripture: *Because you did not believe Me enough to affirm My sanctity [Num. 20:12].*<sup>43</sup> In fact, he was punished at once, as the rabbis understood:<sup>44</sup> "He who suspects the innocent suffers physically. What is the proof? Moses."<sup>45</sup>

Again, in Elijah's time, they were all sinfully deliberate idolaters, all but the *seven thousand—every knee that has not knelt to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him [1 Kings 19:18].*<sup>46</sup> Notwithstanding, when he was about to hurl accusations against Israel at Mt. Horeb, the following dialogue was carried on between God and him. God: *Why are you here, Elijah?* Elijah: *I am moved by zeal for the Lord, the God of Hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken Your covenant.* God: *Is it your covenant by chance?* Elijah: *Torn down Your altars.* God: *Your altars perhaps?* Elijah: *And put Your prophets to the sword.* God: *But you are alive!?* Elijah: *I alone am left, and they are out to take my life [1 Kings 19:10].*<sup>47</sup> God: *Instead of hurling accusations against Israel, would it not have been more reasonable to direct them against the gentile nations? They have maintained a house of prostitution, a house of idol worship, and you plead against Israel! For the text reads: The towns of Aroer shall be deserted [Isa. 17:2]. Go back by the way you came, and on to the wilderness of Damascus [1 Kings 19:15].*<sup>48</sup> This is all explained by the sages in Midrash Hazita.<sup>49</sup>

Similarly in Isaiah's time, they indulged heavily in sin, as the text

accuses: *Ah, sinful nation! People laden with iniquity! [Isa. 1:4];*<sup>50</sup> they worshipped idols (*behind the door and doorpost you have directed your thoughts [Isa. 57:8];*)<sup>51</sup> they were also murderers (*Alas, she has become a harlot, the faithful city that was filled with justice, where righteousness dwelt—but now murderers [Isa. 1:21];*)<sup>52</sup> they even desecrated God's name (*Eat and drink, for tomorrow we die [Isa. 22:13];*)<sup>53</sup> and they disdained God's law (*Leave the way! Get off the path! Let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel [Isa. 30:11].*)<sup>54</sup> Despite this, in punishment of his complaint: *And I live among a people of unclean lips, immediately one of the seraphs flew over to me with a live coal. . . . He touched it to my lips and declared: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt shall depart and your sin be purged away" [Isa. 6:5-7].*<sup>55</sup> According to the sages, his sin was not forgiven until Manasseh killed him.<sup>56</sup>

When the angel appeared<sup>57</sup> to plead against Joshua son of Jozadak because his sons married girls who were unworthy to be the wives of priests,<sup>58</sup> God silenced him, since the text continues: *The Lord rebuke you, O Accuser; may the Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! For this is a brand plucked from the fire [Zech. 3:2].*

If this is the sort of punishment meted out to the pillars of the universe—Moses, Elijah, Isaiah, and the ministering angels<sup>59</sup>—because they briefly criticized the Jewish congregation, can one have an idea of the fate of the least among the worthless who let his tongue loose against Jewish communities of sages and their disciples, priests, and Levites, and called them sinners, evildoers, gentiles, disqualified to testify, heretics who deny the Lord God of Israel?<sup>60</sup> These are verbal quotations from his response; can you picture his punishment? They<sup>61</sup> did not rebel against God to seek satisfaction and delight, they did not abandon our faith to achieve status and worldly pleasures. *For they have fled before swords: before the whetted sword, before the bow that was drawn, before the stress of war [Isa. 21:15].*<sup>62</sup> This man did not realize that they are not rebels by choice. God will not abandon nor forsake them, *for He did not scorn, He did not spurn the plea of the lowly [Ps. 22:25].* It is as the sages, peace be upon them, interpreted the verse, *And he smelled his clothes [Gen. 27:27];*<sup>63</sup> and pronounced it "his traitors" not "his clothes."<sup>64</sup> But this person wrote only what he invented and concocted.

It is common knowledge that in the course of a persecution during which Jewish sages were executed, Rabbi Meir was arrested.<sup>65</sup> Some who knew him said: "You are Meir, aren't you?" and he replied: "I am not."<sup>66</sup> Pointing to ham they ordered: "Eat this if you are not Jewish." He responded: "I shall readily eat it," and he pretended he was eating, but did not in fact. In the view of this modest person who knows the true meaning of Torah, Rabbi Meir is undoubtedly a gentile, for so his responsum rules: He who acts openly as a gentile, although secretly he behaves like a Jew, is a gentile, since according to him worship of God is open,<sup>67</sup> and he<sup>68</sup> hides it, as Rabbi Meir did.

It is likewise well known that Rabbi Eliezer was seized for heresy, which is worse than idolatry.<sup>69</sup> The heretics—may God destroy them—mock religion, and call anyone who adheres to it a fool, anyone who studies it deranged. They reject prophecy utterly. Rabbi Eliezer was a celebrated scholar in the sciences.<sup>70</sup> They inquired: "How can you be at your level in learning and still believe in religion?" He answered them in a way that made them believe that he adopted their doctrine, whereas in his reply he was really thinking of the true religion and no other. This incident is recounted in the midrash on Ecclesiastes<sup>71</sup> as follows: Rabbi Eliezer was seized in order to be converted to heresy. The chief brought him to the capital and said to him: "Say, old man, is a person like you engaged in this stuff?" He replied: "I have faith in the judge." The chief thought he meant him, whereas he was really thinking of God, and the chief continued:<sup>72</sup> "Rabbi, in view of your having faith in me, I was indeed wondering, can he possibly have been misled by such stuff? By God, you are free!" It is clear that Rabbi Eliezer feigned before the chief that he was a heretic, although he was sincerely devoted to God. Now heresy is far more grievous than idolatry; it has been clearly expounded in the entire Talmud.<sup>73</sup> Yet according to this virtuous individual, Rabbi Eliezer is definitely disqualified. But in this persecution to which we are subjected we do not pretend that we are idolaters, we only appear to believe what they assert.<sup>74</sup> They fully understand that we do not mean it at all, and are simply deceiving the ruler. *Yet they deceived Him with their speech, lied to Him with their words* [Ps. 78:36].<sup>75</sup>

We know what happened to Israel in the reign of the wicked Neb-

uchadnezzar, when all the inhabitants of Babylon, except Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah bowed before the molten image. The Lord, blessed be He, foretold it: *No more shall Jacob be shamed, no longer his face grow pale* [Isa. 29:22].<sup>76</sup> It may be that even the artisans and laborers<sup>77</sup> were among those who prostrated themselves in Babylon, if they were there at the time. Despite this, I have not come across anyone who named them wicked, gentiles, disqualified to give testimony. God did not charge them with the sin of idolatry, because they acted under duress. The sages put it this way, reflecting on the time of Haman: They only pretended, I also shall only pretend.<sup>78</sup> That man,<sup>79</sup> however, is undoubtedly God-fearing. *Shame on him who argues with his Maker, though naught but a potsherd of earth! Shall the clay say to the potter, "What are you doing?"* [Isa. 45:9].<sup>80</sup>

We likewise know of the evil, cruel decrees during the wicked rule of the Greeks,<sup>81</sup> including the order that none was to shut the door of his house, so he would not be alone, fulfilling a divine command. Nevertheless our sages did not label them gentiles, or sinful, but absolutely righteous. They prayed for them and added the thankful prayer—recited on Hanukkah—"for the Miracles,"<sup>82</sup> which one can read down to "and the wicked in the hands of the righteous."

If in my opening remarks I had not decisively stated that I would not repeat all of his prattle, I would let you read it *in extenso* how one can be fool enough to speak in this manner or let himself go and write or respond to irrelevant matter in answer to a simple question that was asked of him. He cited proof from "contradicted witnesses,"<sup>83</sup> one who reviles his father and mother,<sup>84</sup> the law of fringes,<sup>85</sup> one who plows with an ox and an ass together,<sup>86</sup> letting one's cattle mate with a different kind,<sup>87</sup> as if the man asked him to compose *azharot*,<sup>88</sup> in which all the precepts would be enumerated. He reported that the Muslims have an idol in Mecca and in other places; was he asked whether he should go on a pilgrimage to Mecca? He informed him that Muhammad<sup>89</sup> killed 24,000 Jews, as if he wished to know if Muhammad would share in the world-to-come, and many such unrelated items. He should have more properly paid much heed to Solomon's admonition: *Keep your mouth from being rash, and let not your throat be quick to bring forth speech before God* [Eccles. 5:1]. Had he heeded

