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By Order, M. HART, Secretary.

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ברשות הגאון אב"ד דקהלתנו נר"ו

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[V. No. 26, Full No., 108.] LONDON, 26th of 2nd Adar, A.M. 5608. — MARCH 31, 1848.

[PRICE 2d., STAMPED 3d.]

EMANCIPATION WITHIN. — THE SELECT VESTRY SYSTEM.

Although the affairs of our Synagogues sink into insignificance, when compared with the magnitude of the events involved in the recent political movements and gigantic agitations, yet the same principle, which guides the most important fabrics of states and empires, and the lessons derivable from them, may often be applied to the most trivial domestic affairs; and the moral example set by the government of a state or a nation, exercises an influence over the management of a comparatively trivial and insignificant body of people.

Without, however, giving any opinion as to the matter in dispute between the various sovereigns of Europe and their subjects, one thing is certain, that the ruling powers, if they have a rational desire to continue at the head of affairs, must set their houses in order, and re-model their arrangements, or else they will see their minds for being carried away by that current of innovation which has set in over the whole of Europe; the end of which, whether for good or evil, no one now living can foresee. If not for good (which God in his mercy avert!), then the result will be with the ruling powers, who, by timely concessions, might have prevented the evil.

Turn we now from this part of the subject to contemplate the system of government under which our Synagogues have for centuries been ruled; and we shall find, that, while all the world has progressed, we, the Jews, of all the people of the earth, have remained stationary. There can be no doubt, that when the generality of the Jews possessed but little of general knowledge — when it was deemed even sacrilege to acquire the English language (why man was not so honoured we have yet to learn), and which was carried to such an extent that no sermon (דרשה), and no public announcement, or proclamation, was permitted to be made in English in the Synagogue, the select vestry system was, under the circumstances, the best. But, in the course of time, as knowledge and enlightenment have progressed, and the privilege of a liberal education is not confined to the few, but pervades all classes and ranks of society — when then the time has arrived which a late monarch desired, that all his subjects might be enabled to read their Bibles — it must be confessed, even by the strictest stickler for the "wisdom of our ancestors," that that system has had its day, and is completely worn out, and that a system more in accordance with the spirit of the age and the rights of the tax-payers should be accorded to the seat-holders of the various Synagogues of Britain.

As far back as the 16th century, the principle, that he who is taxed should have a voice in the making of those laws, was admitted by the great writer, Rabbi Joseph Albo. of Castile; and it is lamentable, that, although we have arrived at the 19th century, so far as our community is concerned (in this respect), this great principle is still in abeyance in respect to the seat-holders, who pay their scot and lot towards the support of the various establishments. — It may be said, that the select vestry system is the one preferred, or else why have not the seat-holders them-

selves stirred in the matter? But if we look to Manchester and to Liverpool (in Birmingham, every seat-holder has the right of speaking and voting, etc., in vestry), we shall find, that the determination of the governing powers of the congregations of those places to be an exclusive body, led to an outbreak among the seat-holders, who, having been refused those rights to which they were entitled, seceded, and formed themselves into separate and independent congregations.

We are aware that the privilege of attending and voting in vestries differs in the metropolitan Synagogues; the Hambro' giving the privilege to such as pay a certain amount for their seats; in the St. Helen's we believe the right is conferred on such as have served office, and who thus become privileged members, to whom only the right of attending the vestry is accorded; while in the Great Synagogue, in addition to the honorary officers, only a few of the privileged members (בעלי בחים), chosen by their own body, have a right to attend on those occasions. The consequence is easily foreseen; the stipendiary officers (ecclesiastical and civil), seeing with whom centres all the influence of office, pay court to, and flatter and fawn on, the powers that be, and can afford to treat with contempt the great body of rate-payers, upon whom they merely look as "hewers of wood and drawers of water." The evil of this system is seen even in our religious observances; for in many of the Synagogues, especially in the Great Synagogue, no person, not being a privileged member, is permitted to be called to the reading of the Torah (Law) on the Sacred Festivals, nor is any seat-holder allowed, on these solemn occasions, any of the honours of Mitzvas (מצות). Another evil attendant upon the select vestry system is, that the rate-payers know nothing of the funds of the congregation; for a balance-sheet of income and expenditure they never see. They know not whether, by judicious management, the rents of seats in these hard times might not be reduced, so as to square with their means. The consequence is, that many a respectable man, who for years without a murmur paid his scot and lot, finds himself compelled, from the enormous taxes to which he is subjected, to throw up his seat, and either to take refuge on the New Year and Day of Atonement in the temporary Free Synagogue, held in the Free School, and having the stamp of poverty on his brow, or is under the necessity of absenting himself from public Divine service, numerous and painful instances of which have come to our knowledge.

Our duty as public journalists compels us to notice the great defect in our present vestry system, so decidedly contrary to the liberal spirit of the age, and to advocate progression. Let our present officers take warning by what is passing around us — let them be indeed our leaders — let them call meetings of their various vestries, and pass laws more in accordance with justice and the rights of man; and, having given to the supporters of the Synagogue the right of participating in its financial and

✦ We are surprised that the Chief Rabbi, when compiling his late code of rules for improvement in divine service, did not direct his attention to this indignity to the seat-holders, especially as he often contends in his sermons for the truth, that all are equal in the house of God.