Book Review: The Crown of Solomon and Other Stories

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Rabbi Dr. Phil Cohen is the spiritual leader of Congregation Agudas Israel of Hendersonville, NC. The Crown of Solomon and Other Stories, by Marc D. Angel is published by Albion Andalus Books, Boulder, 2014. It is available through the online store at jewishideas.org, amazon.com, bn.com, or directly from the publisher albionandalus.com.

The Crown of Solomon and Other Stories, is a second work of fiction by Rabbi Marc Angel. His first work of fiction, The Search Committee, is a series of thirteen monologues delivered by eleven people to a search committee seeking a new Rosh Yeshiva for Yeshivat Lita, pictured as a hareidi yeshiva located in Manhattan. In it, Angel creates eleven different voices all arguing their case in favor of one of two candidates for the position, one candidate representing the history of the yeshiva, the other a candidate for change. The novel is a novel of ideas which, though of broad interest, are particularly relevant in the Orthodox community

The Crown of Solomon consists of nineteen very short stories packed into 148 pages. The stories have the tone of parable. They all take place in modern times, yet the language is reminiscent of midrash, S.Y. Agnon, and to some extent Haim Sabato.

We meet a large cast of interesting characters. We meet rabbis, doctors, Anusim, pious poor men, pious rich men, cranky old men, a feisty young girl who stands up to anti-Semites, Wall Street moguls, star-crossed lovers, and more. As in The Search Committee, we see the struggle between traditional society and the desire for halakhic-based change. However, these tales go far beyond that concern. The book opens with stories that take place in various places in Turkey, Rhodes,

and Greece, locales where the Jews are of Sephardic origin. Rabbi Angel, himself of Sephardic origin, recreates Sephardic worlds that barely exist, having been decimated by the Shoah and emptied by emigration to the United States. His stories also take place in Seattle, a city of settlement for Sephardic Jews, New York, and some unnamed locations in America.

This splendid collection of stories is characterized by a continuing use of irony that always enters at the end of the story in the final sentence or paragraph. Indeed, most stories, even the ones drawn from Angel's life, conclude with turns of events worthy of O. Henry.

In the title story, for example, Hakham Shelomo Yahalomi, sets about to write a work of Halakhah and Kabbalah entitled Keter Shelomo, Solomon's Crown. He works on this study for in private for years, never sharing any of its contents with his community. Upon his death, it is discovered that the expected work does not exist. Matatya Kerido, Hakham Shelomo's second in command, opens the box supposedly containing the text, only to find "just one page, a blank page, a tear-stained page without a single word written on it." (p.8). The reader is left to interpret the meaning of this state of affairs. To be sure, the tension in the story prepares the reader for something unexpected. But this conclusion is both startling and thought provoking. What is the meaning of one tear-stained sheet instead of complete work of law and mysticism?

The second story in the collection is perhaps the best story in the book. "Sacred Music" tells the story of David Baruch, born on the Island of Rhodes on the same day as Mozart, who dies the same day as Mozart. David possesses an incredible talent for music, which he hears continually in his head, but, except for one sad instance, never manifests itself in voice, instrument, or on paper. It only ever resides in his interior. This story moved me. The motif of a child possessed of special knowledge or power is common, especially in young adult fiction. Generally, the conflicts are resolved when the young person's talent is recognized. Not so in this case. David goes through his life badly misunderstood by his family and community. Rabbi Angel creates in this story a wonderful though immensely sad framework, which is intended, I believe, as a critique of the limits of traditional society to recognize and develop talent. One is reminded of the similar conflict in Chaim Potok's My Name is Asher Lev. David's music always remains within, because his world lacks the ability to help him develop his genius.

"Murder", acknowledged in the Introduction as a true story, tells of a family member, Joseph. He is one of six children who in 1911 immigrates, along with

their mother, to America to join their father in Seattle. Joseph is refused entry into America, because of a scalp infection. He returns to Rhodes, where he grows up, marries, has children and for various reasons does not consider immigrating to America. As a result, his family perishes in the Shoah along with the rest of the Jewish community of the Island of Rhodes. Angel's anger at the end of this story is palpable. He suggests that the immigration official who sent Joseph back never lost any sleep over his deed, not in 1911, nor in 1944. Yet we see what the official never did: the tragic impact of what likely seemed to the official to be a trivial act of simply following orders.

Most of the stories surprise the reader with their unexpected conclusions. Angel creates situations and characters that, for the most part, reflect a Sephardic world unknown, I would imagine, to most Ashkenazi readers. Their names alone force the reader to consider the world about which they are reading.

Angel looks behind the characters and settings he's creating to surprise, criticize, open up discussion, and, at the same time to memorialize the world of Rhodes, Salonika, and Turkey that are no longer with us. The surprises that greet us at the end of most of the stories, inevitably give us pause to reflect beyond the simplicity one would expect from the style and subject matter.