Memoirs of a Sephardic Rabbi

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Rabbi Marc D. Angel is Founder and Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, and editor of its journal, Conversations. He is Rabbi Emeritus of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City, where he began serving in 1969.

Memoirs of a Sephardic Rabbi: A Book Review by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“A Rocky Road,” by Rabbi Abraham Levy (with Simon Rocker), Halban Publishers, London, 2017.

Rabbi Abraham Levy has been associated with the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of London for nearly six decades. Those of us who have known him over the years have been impressed with his energy, optimism, single-mindedness, devotion, British elegance…and more.

And now, he has written a volume of memoirs in which he offers candid reflections on his long service as a Sephardic rabbi. Rabbi Levy highlights his many achievements, especially in the area of Jewish education for children and adults. He writes warmly of those congregants who supported his work, who shared his ideals, and who were genuine friends to him and his family.

But he does not shy away from the less pleasant aspects of his rabbinic life. He openly discusses conflicts between himself and others of the synagogue religious and lay leadership. Indeed, the book seems to jump from one crisis to the next, some within the congregation itself and some involving other factions in the Jewish community.

He entitled his book “A Rocky Road,” as an allusion to his upbringing in Gibraltar with its famous rock; and also to the fact that his years in the rabbinate were “rocky,” with plenty of ups and downs. Throughout his long rabbinic tenure, he

stayed focused on his mission to provide religious leadership to his people. His Sephardic upbringing and worldview served him well.

Growing up in the warm Sephardic Jewish community of Gibraltar, he learned to love his Judaism and its many mitzvoth. “The Judaism we experienced was never a burden nor driven by anxiety or fear. It was part of our natural habitat.” (p. 11) The happiness and naturalness of his childhood Judaism has imbued his religious life ever since.

He also learned that a religious leader must identify with his community and must strive to create a sense of family among the various members. In a sermon he delivered in 1977, Rabbi Levy “reflected that a rabbi can only be effective in his work if he is prepared to identify with congregants in their times both of joy and festivity and of sorrow and calamity. A rabbi could not be a detached spectator.” (p. 42)

In a sermon he gave on Rosh Hashana in 1987, marking his 25th anniversary with his congregation, he stated that “while there had been quiet and productive years, a few had been tempestuous and unhappy. I compared the role of the rabbi to that of a shofar. The protracted single blast of tekiah was a wake up call, urging people to think what more they should do to improve the religious lives of themselves and their children. It didn’t always make the rabbi popular…The broken three-note sequence of shevarim, the sound of lament, represented the rabbi’s sharing in the troubles of his congregants and holding their hand in times of need. The staccato burst of teruah—blown in biblical days as a rally to war—was a summons to action. For if I believe that something needs doing I will continue to blow the notes of teruah into everybody’s ears until hopefully it gets done.” (p. 62)

Rabbi Levy, like most (all?) rabbis, had to deal with various synagogue leaders who were less than ideal. “When it came to lay leaders, I always made a basic distinction: there were those who brought honour to the office and those who sought honour from the office…I prayed for honorary officers who were successful in their careers and happy at home because if they were frustrated or unfulfilled, they tended to make the rabbi’s job more difficult.” (p. 116) How difficult it is for a rabbi—and for the congregation as a whole—if synagogue leaders are rude, egotistical, control-freaks. Improper leaders, bent on seeking honor for themselves, end up causing vast damage to the spiritual and material health of the congregation.

Rabbi Levy's Sephardic ideology shines through his book of memoirs. He expressed pride in the fact that Sephardim "can present a religious interpretation of Judaism which does not have an ideological adjective such as Orthodox or Reform attached to it…We Sephardim, with a little give and take, have always managed to have only one Jewish community." (p. 143)

In looking back on his rabbinic career, he confessed: "I have tried not to deviate from the values I inherited from my parents and their family before them. We all remain sentimentally attached to the traditions we grew up with, but I continue to espouse the classical Sephardi outlook out of conviction that it remains important in a polarized Jewish world…I remain a defiant centrist." (p. 235) As the religious ground has shifted to the right, "I came to occupy a lonelier position in the middle of the road." (p. 233)

Rabbi Levy broods over the growing dissension within the Orthodox community, and within the larger Jewish community. Factionalism is rife. Extremism increases. Harold Levy, the former warden of Jews' College, once remarked: "We are becoming a dumb-bell religion." He meant, we are becoming thin in the middle and heavy on the extremes. (p. 111) Rabbi Levy takes genuine pride in the school he established and which has provided strong Jewish and general education to its students. Many families have become more religiously observant thanks to the influence of the school. Yet, some of the graduates have gone on to become more "right wing" Orthodox, and have turned away from the classic Sephardic religious moderation.

In reading Rabbi Levy's "A Rocky Road," we call to mind another road mentioned in a poem by Robert Frost, The Road not Taken. "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--/ I took the one less traveled by,/ And that has made all the difference." Rabbi Abraham Levy, as a young man, could have chosen many roads to live a happy and fulfilling life. He chose the rabbinate, a road less traveled by—and that has made all the difference to him, his family, and his community.