"Keys to the Palace," Rabbi Israel Drazin reviews Rabbi Hayyim Angel's new book

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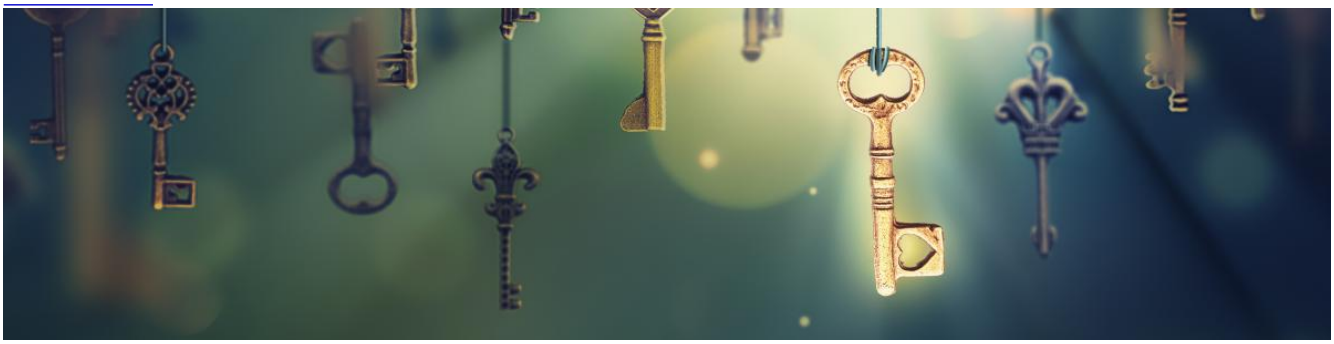

Rabbi Israel Drazin is the author of 38 books on Tanakh, Maimonides, Onkelos and other topics. He is a frequent reviewer of books for jewishideas.org

Keys to the Palace

Exploring the religious Value of reading Tanakh[1]

Rabbi Hayyim Angel is one of my favorite authors who write on the Bible. He is very popular with other readers and scholars as well. This book contains twenty essays and virtually all were accepted by and published previously by well-respected magazines. I always look forward to reading each of his new books and articles. I like the way that he focuses upon what the Bible is actually saying, what is called in Hebrew, the peshat.

What is peshat?

Many commentators and scholars who interpret the Bible seek to discover a message in the biblical verse, which they frequently find in ingenious ways through such things as missing letters in words, redundancies, interpretations of events that are only imaginative, called *derash* and *midrash*, but not explicit in the passage itself. This is good. It has an important teaching, even moral purpose, but it does not tell us what the Torah itself is saying. This is the method used by most pulpit rabbis in their sermons, with the result that the congregants do not learn what the Torah really says.

The ancient rabbis, in my opinion, recognized this problem and addressed it with a strong recommendation. Although they were the authors of *midrash*, wrote books containing it, and used it to teach Jews proper behavior, they wanted Jews to know what the Bible actually states, not just the lessons they ingeniously derived from passages and words. They created the law that Jews should read the weekly Torah portion twice in its original Hebrew and once in the Aramaic translation of *Targum Onkelos*. They did not require fellow Jews to read their *Midrash.* They did so not only because *Onkelos* was written in Aramaic, the language the people spoke at the time, but because *Onkelos* contained the *peshat,* the plain non-midrashic meaning of the Five Books of Moses.[2]

Rabbi Angel's contribution

Rabbi Angel concentrates on the words of the Torah and the context in which the words appear. He uses *midrash* when the *midrash* examines what the Torah explicitly states, when it helps clarify the passage. He recognizes that the Bible means what it says, not what people imagine or want to teach. He should be commended and thanked for his approach to Torah.

Rabbi Angel devotes seven of the twenty essays in this book to discussing the more mature and sophisticated manner in which the Torah is studied today. The seven are followed by thirteen that focus on specific interesting texts. In the seven, he tells readers about the growing circle of religious scholars, with Israel's Yeshivat Har Etzion at the vanguard of the enterprise. Their method is to understand that oral law and traditional commentary are central to the way we understand the revealed word of God and that it is vital to study biblical passages in their literary and historical context.

In the past, religious schools did not teach Tanakh because there are inconsistencies in the books, biblical figures performing acts contrary to the dictates of the Torah, and other problems. Modern religious Bible scholars address these problems. For example, many critical scholars propose that different sections of the Five Books of Moses were composed by close to a half dozen different authors and editors, each with a different agenda and each using his own writing style. Rabbi Angel tells readers in the first seven chapters how these problems are addressed by religious scholars today. The problems are not dismissed or somehow covered over. Angel surveys the approaches offered by religious scholars, which thoughtfully engage in the interaction between tradition and contemporary scholarship.

Many issues are addressed in the seven chapters, such as the authorship of the Torah and other biblical books, the reliability of the Masoretic Text, archaeology

and the historicity of the Torah narratives, comparisons between the Torah and ancient Near Eastern texts, the preponderance of contradictions in both narrative and legal sections of the Torah, the different wordings in the Masoretic Text and the quotes by the sages in the Talmud and Midrashim. Was the world created in six days some 6,000 years ago, is Maimonides correct that all angelic encounters mentioned in the Torah were visions and not actual reality, how are we to understand the wrongs committed by biblical heroes?... And much more.

Among Rabbi Angel's discussions in the remaining thirteen chapters, is a thorough analysis of the binding of Isaac story in Genesis 22. His analysis includes the views of Maimonides, Immanuel Kant, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, Moshe Halbertal, Soren Kierkegaard, David Shatz, and others. Among the questions he addresses is why did Abraham try to save the inhabitants of Sodom, but remained silent and acquiescent when he understood that God told him to kill his son?

Similarly, he addresses how we should understand Jacob's deception of his father Isaac in Genesis 27 when he misled his father to give him the blessing Isaac wanted to give to Esau. Again, the views of many scholars are examined.

Among the other incisive analyses in the thirteen chapters, he compares the story of the Garden of Eden and the various Jacob narratives, the contradiction between the prophet Nathan's prophecy of the eternal reign of the Davidic dynasty in one verse and the conditional formulation in another, and the current view that there is life after death and why there is no explicit reference to it in the Tanakh.

In short, Rabbi Hayyim Angel has made a significant contribution to Jewish thought in this volume and has done it interestingly and well.

[1] Keys to the Palace, by Rabbi Hayyim Angel, Kodesh Press, 2017.

[2] I prove in my forthcoming book "Nachmanides: The Unusual Thinker," that all the sages prior to Nachmanides understood that *Onkelos* was offering readers the *peshat*, with changes to remove anthropomorphic and anthropopathic depictions of God, showing Israelite ancestors in a favorable light, and some similar reasons. Nachmanides was the first scholar who mistakenly believed that *Onkelos* contains *derash.*