Book Review of Rabbi Hayyim Angel's "Jewish Holiday Companion"

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Jewish Holiday Companion
By Rabbi Hayyim Angel
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Rabbi Hayyim Angel has rightly earned a reputation as being one of the great teachers on Tanach in our time. He has authored a handful of books and hundreds of articles on biblical and religious themes, and has garnered a huge following based on his 17 years at Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue and 20 years at Yeshiva University, where he has even taught classes on how to teach Tanach. His new book, Jewish Holiday Companion, is a gem. In a time of year when we are pulled in every direction at once, Rabbi Angel offers guidance and clarity in how to approach the holidays, both intellectually and spiritually.

Jewish Holiday Companion is comprised of brief and insightful essays, each focusing on one specific religious issue. Rabbi Angel is known for his mastery of classical Jewish texts: the Tanach, Talmud, Midrashim, Rishonim and Achronim, but he also freely draws from diverse sources such as ancient Near Eastern literature and classic Chasidic writings. In each article, Rabbi Angel is able to zero in on one discussion at a time for a focused and deep exploration of the religious themes that permeate the different festivals.

One article explores the symbolism of the shofar. He quotes from Saadiah Gaon that “there are no fewer than 10 purposes of the shofar” (p. 20): coronating God as Creator, the Akeidah, the giving of the Torah, heeding the prophets (whose

words are compared to a shofar), the wars that exiled the Jewish people, the messianic era, the future Day of Judgment, the resurrection of the dead, inspiring awe, and inspiring repentance. Rabbi Angel then explores, within the theme of the shofar, the presence of silence, and the importance of silence in the context of sounding the shofar. Abraham travelled three days to sacrifice his son Isaac. This journey must have been a time of introspection and quietude; there is no dialogue recorded between the two during their journey. It was said that the jazz pianist Thelonious Monk was a master at getting “in between the notes” and making the audience focus on the silence contained in the melody. The same is true of the shofar: we focus on what is absent as much as we focus on what is there. The tekiah represents fullness while the teru’ah symbolizes brokenness. Both elements are present on Rosh Hashanah.

Another discussion compares the concept of repentance in the thought of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. For these two great twentieth-century luminaries, teshuvah represents two different processes. For Rabbi Kook, teshuvah is a return to self. Each person is created as a tzelem Elokim, but loses himself in the snares of this world, and grows distant from the image of God within him, from his own soul, from his own Godliness. Thus teshuvah – which in Hebrew really means “return” – is when the individual restores himself to his own internal Godliness.

For Rabbi Solovetchik, however, teshuvah is about creation. Through the process of teshuvah, “we create ourselves and our relationship with God” (p. 29). Rabbi Soloveitchik’s thought has some strong existentialist tendencies in it, and this is a powerful example; can we harness the gift of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur to recreate ourselves, not with our own divinity but our own humanity?

The Jewish Holiday Companion has articles for every Jewish holiday, and even contains entries for Yom HaShoah, Yom HaAtzma’ut, and Thanksgiving. It is a pleasure to have Rabbi Angel’s writings available for the Jewish holidays. His new work is sure to be a source of wisdom, guidance, and inspiration, for the coming year.