Book Review of Rabbi Marc Angel's new book, "Rhythms of Jewish Living"

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The Rhythms of Jewish Living
A Sephardic Exploration of Judaism’s Spirituality
By Rabbi Dr. Marc D. Angel
Reviewed by Rabbi Dr. Israel Drazin

Rabbi Angel demonstrates his well-known knowledge and writing skills in this very informative exploration Jewish practices. He offers details about and explains Jewish daily observances and holidays, the differences between Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jewry, the unique Jewish use of time, halakhah, theology, history, sacred places, divine revelation and providence, confronting death with the right attitude and without fear, the significance of the State of Israel, the manner in which Jews highlight and celebrate family, how people can transcend themselves, and much more.

I’ll give some examples.

The rabbi stresses the importance of a sensitive relationship between humans and nature. The Bible emphasizes this relationship by speaking about creation in the beginning of the Bible. Additionally, all of the biblical holidays are related to nature: spring (Passover), summer (Shavuot), and fall (Sukkot). Many blessings do not focus on what is eaten but on the renewal of nature. Jews recite blessings when they observe natural phenomenon such as lightning, thunder, very strong winds, and rainbows. They approach God in a two-fold manner, through the divine creation of nature and the divine revelation of the Torah. But it is God that is the

most important; therefore Jews turned to the west away from the sun as they left the temple.

He writes, “There has been a steady and increasing alienation between Jewish religious observance and the natural world, with a parallel diminution in sensing awe for God as Creator of the natural universe.” He points, for example, to the wide-spread current practice of placing stained-glass windows in synagogues, which obstructs outside views and “symbolize a changed sense of spirituality, a break from traditional outdoor religiosity.”

Rabbi Angel describes some Sephardic practices, such as the custom during the Passover Seder “of placing a piece of matzah in a sack and carrying it on their shoulders as though they were among the Israelites of old carrying their belongings as they escaped from Egypt.” This practice, as many similar Sephardic ones during Passover and other Jewish holidays, deepens the holiday, “we are sharing a historical national memory and we are attempting to identify ourselves with our redeemed ancestors.”

The Jewish meal is another example of our identification with our ancestors. “The table upon which one eats is considered symbolically to be the altar in the Temple in Jerusalem. It is consecrated. One is not supposed to treat the table with disrespect, to sit on it, to place one’s shoes on it. Before eating a meal, we ritually wash our hands as a sign of purification. Just as Jews in ancient Jerusalem had to purify themselves before coming to the altar, so we must do likewise. We recite the blessing over bread, but before eating it we dip it in salt. This is reminiscent of the practice in the Temple to add salt to the sacrifices offered on the altar.”

Rabbi Angel gives readers an extensive interesting historical account of the ancient great court in Jerusalem, popularly known as the Sanhedrin, comprised of seventy-one scholars. Readers may be surprised to learn that the Great Court “even had the power to overrule a law of the Torah (see, for example, the discussion in the Talmud, Yevamot 90b.” Maimonides wrote in his Mishneh Torah, Laws of Rebels 2:1, that in ancient times the law was fluid and flexible. Each Court had the right and responsibility to use its own understanding in applying the word of God to the people of Israel. Each Court “ruled according to the way it seemed to them that the law should be – their judgment is the law. If a subsequent Great Court found a reason to refute their decision, it should refute it” for the Torah states we are “only obligated to follow the Court which is in your generation.”

This power to change laws was traditionally given only to the Great Court. Unfortunately, the Great Court ceased to operate when the Romans destroyed the temple in 70 CE. Several efforts were made to reestablish the authority of the Court, but these efforts failed. The latest call for the reinstitution of the Great Court was made by the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Benzion Uziel (1880-1953) in 1936, but his call went unheeded. Soon thereafter the dissolution of the Court in 70 CE, in the mid-second century, Rabbi Yehuda the Prince compiled the Mishnah, a record of the rabbinical teachings up to his time. From then on, the Mishnah and the subsequent discussions on the Mishnah in the Gemara, together called the Talmud, one composed in Israel and the more widely accepted one in Babylon, became, together with later composed law codes, the fixed laws. Rabbis no longer went to the Torah to determine the law. Today, the law, called halakhah, is no longer fluid.

Rabbi Angel discusses the different approach that Sephardic rabbis take to Jewish law and Judaism from that of Ashkenazic rabbis after the time of the Great Court. Ashkenazim primarily lived in Europe under Christian domination under harsh conditions and were generally unable to secure a secular education. It wasn't until the eighteenth and nineteenth century that these Jews were westernized. In contrast, Sephardim had a far better life in Spain until they were expelled in 1492. They made great contributions to the Spanish culture in science, medicine, philosophy, and mathematics. Whereas Jews in Ashkenazic lands – France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Russia, and Eastern Europe – lived a sober, melancholy life, and focused on piety because of their restraint, Sephardic Jews were on the whole a happy people. While they were quite observant of halakhah, their observance did not lead them to become sober or overly serious.

"Rather, the pleasures and aesthetics of this world were viewed in a positive light. Sephardic holiday celebrations and lifecycle observances, for example, were characterized by the preparation of elaborate delicacies to eat, the singing of songs, and a general spirit of gaiety and hospitality…. This spirit carried itself even to the serious season of the High Holy Days, when self-scrutiny and repentance were expected…. The unstated assumption was that eating, rejoicing, and being happy of heart were not in conflict with piety, even in the serious season of penitential prayers."

The effect of Christian persecution upon Ashkenazic Jewry also resulted in Ashkenazic rabbis being more stringent in their halakhic rulings. "H. J. Zimmels, in his book 'Ashkenazim and Sephardim'…suggests that Ashkenazic inclination to stringency was largely the result of centuries of persecution suffered by German

Jewry.” Rabbi Angel also cites Chief Rabbi Benzion Uziel who wrote that Sephardic rabbis “felt powerful enough in their opinion and authority to annul customs that were not based on halakhic foundations. In contrast, Ashkenazic rabbis tended to strengthen customs and sought support for them even if they seemed strange and without halakhic basis.”

Among much else, Rabbi Angel discusses how understanding how to die tells us how to live. He notes that the Midrash Genesis Rabbah interprets the divine statement in Genesis “Behold it was very good” as referring to death. He explains how both nature and the Torah provide paths to God and that God’s revelation through nature may be experienced today by all people, Jews and non-Jews alike.