Book Review: Memorable Sephardi Voices

View PDF



Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Memorable Sephardi Voices, compiled by Lucien Gubbay

(London: Montefiore Endowment, 2020)

Reviewed by Rabbi Hayyim Angel

National Scholar, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals

Moderate voices often are hard to come by in any arena these days, and the sphere of traditional Judaism is no exception. At the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals (jewishideas.org), we are dedicated to promoting the rich diversity of Jewish voices throughout the ages, which open avenues of conversation that lead to a passionate, sensible, and intellectually vibrant commitment to Jewish life and growth.

Sharing many of our core values, the Montefiore Endowment in London recently has published a small volume which compiles many teachings of (primarily) Sephardic rabbis which promote a traditional Jewish vision characterized by love and moderation, rather than extremism and exclusivity.

Lucien Gubbay, the Chairman of the Montefiore Endowment, has excerpted dozens of passages from the extensive teachings of Sephardic rabbis—primarily (but not at all exclusively) from the 19th-21st centuries. These voices often are overlooked or even downright ignored in contemporary discourse, yet they have much to add in terms of practical halakhic ruling and broader perspective toward the vital religious issues of our time.

As Rabbi Dr. Abraham Levy writes in his foreword, “The differing and often more lenient legal interpretations of Sephardi rabbis and others need not always be accepted; but they should be respected and not, as often happens today, be suppressed and even deleted from reissues of standard halakhic books.”

To this value, I would add the incalculable positive significance in citing the voices of so many members of the Sephardic rabbinate—some very well-known, but others quite obscure. This volume enables the entire Jewish world to be informed of these learned perspectives. There are many legitimate traditional avenues into Jewish thought and law, and it is essential for rabbis and the wider community to be aware of these possibilities. Who knows how many more Jews would connect more strongly to tradition were they to be knowledgeable of such formidable voices presenting outlooks and rulings different from what the popular media present?

An additional beneficial feature of this anthology is the biographical information about the rabbis who are quoted. Many communities of the Sephardic Diaspora are represented.

As with any anthology drawn from a vast database of rabbinic teachings, this book reflects the religious values of the compiler and the partnering institutions. There is a conscious effort made to present compassionate, flexible, and lenient rulings of Sephardic rabbis. Tellingly, Gubbay prefaces his book on the inner title page with two statements found in the book:

“Flexible and progressive halachic rulings will ensure the continuation of Judaism in perpetuity.”

“Leniency in halachic ruling is a better principle than stressing what is forbidden.”

Although there is some effort to cast these perspectives as characteristic of the Sephardic world, Gubbay admits that there are more extreme voices in the Sephardic world, and more moderate voices in the Ashkenazic world as well. One of the great contributions of this volume is the addition of so many moderate Sephardic voices to the panoply of contemporary opinions. When more extreme voices garner headlines, and this phenomenon is coupled with the suppression and ignoring of the more moderate voices, we are impoverished as individuals and as a community.

Some of the foremost points stressed in this anthology are:

- Diversity in opinion is a built-in feature of Torah learning. Different people bring their own unique perspectives, and we never should demand or expect conformity.

- Although we accept tradition and recognize the limitations of human wisdom and understanding, it is vital to critically examine issues rather than blindly accepting everything. We must evaluate each issue in light of the primary sources, rather than automatically deferring to decisions made by previous generations of rabbis.

- The volume presents lenient rulings on a wide array of critical contemporary issues. While of course there are dissenting and more restrictive opinions, it is critical to present these permissive voices as well.

- There are less restrictive roads to welcome converts into Judaism. Once someone converts halakhically, there is no annulling the conversion.

- There are several rulings allowing women greater participation in several areas of religious life.

- Torah scholarship must be fundamentally linked to ethical behavior, or it falsifies the Torah.

- Torah scholars must deeply respect all Jews, including those unlearned in Torah. Additionally, we are one Jewish community, and must remain united and inclusive even when many contemporary Jews are not fully observant of the Torah and Jewish Law.

- Jews must love and respect non-Jews who live ethically. This is a religious-moral principle, rather than simply a concession to living in harmony among others.

- There is value to the study of secular subjects, both for having the wherewithal to find a profession, and also because there is educational value to this study.

This enlightening volume should be in the hands of rabbis, educators, and interested laypeople worldwide. These precious voices should be incorporated into discourse in communities and schools. The more Jews are exposed to the treasures of our tradition, the more they are enabled to religiously connect and find their own individual paths into tradition.