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Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Book Review:

Rabbi Haim Jachter, *Bridging Traditions: Demystifying Differences Between Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews*

(OU Press-Maggid, 2021, 513 pages)

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Rabbi Haim Jachter, a *dayyan* (rabbinic judge) on the Beth Din of Elizabeth (New Jersey), and also the rabbi of the Sephardic Congregation Shaarei Orah of Teaneck, New Jersey, has written a phenomenal and valuable book.

Rabbi Jachter brings together his vast erudition, coupled with over 20 years of experience leading a diverse Sephardic congregation. He elucidates a wide array of matters of halakhah, custom, and ideology in a clear and accessible manner.

Conveying a reverence of Jewish tradition, sacred customs, and the great rabbinic leaders throughout the generations, Rabbi Jachter helps Jews of different backgrounds understand their respective traditions. He guides readers through complex halakhic issues when Sephardim and Ashkenazim live and pray together. What must Jews do to accommodate guests of varying backgrounds during the year and on Passover, when there are meaningful differences in halakhic observances? How should Ashkenazim pray when in Sephardic synagogues, and vice versa?

Often, Rabbi Jachter educates by explaining the rationales of the diverse traditions of our people. Instead of viewing different customs as strange or wrong, people will appreciate variegated traditions that have flourished in communities worldwide.

Rabbi Jachter gets to the roots of the views of Rambam (1138-1204, Spain-Egypt) and Rabbi Yosef Karo (1488-1575, Tzefat), which often form the backbone of Sephardic practice. He also traces the positions of Rabbi Moshe Isserles (Rama, 1530-1572, Poland), who generally reflects widespread Ashkenazic practice.

However, halakhic traditions did not freeze centuries ago with these seminal works. Mysticism, particularly through the influence of Rabbi Yitzhak Luria (Ari, 1534-1572, Tzefat) and his students, left its imprint on a myriad of practices. Later major Sephardic rabbis, such as Rabbi Hayyim Yosef David Azulai (Hida, 1724-1806, Livorno), Rabbi Yosef Hayyim (*Ben Ish Hai*, 1832-1909, Baghdad), and Rabbi Yaakov Hayyim Sofer (*Kaf HaHayyim*, 1870-1939, Baghdad, Jerusalem), sifted through and ruled on dominant practices.

In the 20th century, no Sephardic halakhic decisor had more influence than Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef (1920-2013), who unsurprisingly plays a dominant role in Rabbi Jachter's book. Other leading figures, such as Rabbi Shalom Messas (1909-2003) and Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu (1929-2010), offered dissenting views and Rabbi Jachter carefully explains each position.

Various communities, such as Moroccan Jewry and Yemenite Jewry, remained faithful to their own traditions and practices, despite efforts by Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef to unify Sephardic observance in Israel. Rabbi Jachter explores several examples of these distinguishing practices.

Rabbi Jachter regularly emphasizes that although the many divergences in halakhah and custom between Jewish communities must be explored and appreciated, these differences are eclipsed by the staggering unity shared by all Jewish traditions despite millennia of living apart and often with limited contact.

Bridging Traditions will benefit scholars and laypeople alike. It particularly is a must-read for rabbis and Jewish educators, who will appreciate the spiritual wealth we gain and impart to our students and communities by teaching the wholeness of the Jewish people.