Book Review: Sephardim Sephardism and Jewish Peoplehood

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Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Book Review

Rabbi Dr. Marc D. Angel, *Sephardim Sephardism and Jewish Peoplehood* (Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals: 2022), 266 pages.

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Imagine an authentic vision of Judaism fully rooted in tradition. A vision that properly represents the particularistic covenant between God and Israel through the Torah and halakhah. A vision that properly represents the universalistic aspect of God as Creator of the entire cosmos, where Israel has a role to play in the community of nations. A vision that learns from the best of traditional Jewish thinkers—Ashkenazic, Sephardic, and beyond, so that we may broaden our discourse in discussing complex contemporary issues. A vision that learns from the best of human wisdom. A vision that embraces the classical Jewish values of questioning, critical-mindedness, and diversity. A vision that demands that Jewish communal institutions be faithful to halakhah, while incorporating all Jews, regardless of background or level of observance. A vision entirely true to the axioms of Judaism, while being humble enough to recognize that the rest of humanity may pursue its own religious worldviews.

For over half of a century, Rabbi Marc D. Angel has taught that we can realize this vision. After a long and distinguished career as Rabbi at Congregation Shearith Israel in New York, he founded the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals in 2007 to promote his religious worldview to a much wider audience.

All but one of the essays in this volume have been published previously in various books and journals. This collection reflects many of Rabbi Angel's "greatest hits" in representing his grand religious worldview, his Sephardic role models, and the central tenets of the ideology that animate us at the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Jewish diversity is celebrated by Jewish tradition, which mandates the blessing *Barukh Hakham HaRazim*, the one who understands the root and inner thoughts of each individual, upon seeing throngs of Jews (Berakhot 58a). In contrast, the Talmud ascribes forced societal tyranny and conformity to the wicked City of Sodom, which used the notorious Procrustean bed on its visitors to ensure conformity (Sanhedrin 109b).

Teaching Sephardic thinkers, customs, and history to all Jews is vital on many levels. Halakhic decisors must consider the learned opinions of both Sephardic and Ashkenazic responsa before reaching conclusions on today's complex halakhic questions. Educators must be informed of Sephardic traditions and convey them as part of the wholeness of the Jewish people. Rabbis and teachers cannot be expected to know every custom or legal opinion throughout Jewish tradition, but certainly can be held to the standard of teaching an openness to diversity and willingness to learn new ideas and customs. On the negative side, Rabbi Angel cites several painful personal experiences from when he was a student, where several rabbis and teachers negated the validity of long-standing Sephardic practices and traditions.

When people shut down other valid opinions, Judaism itself is harmed and the Jewish community suffers. Overly dogmatic, authoritarian, or superstitious worldviews likewise compromise the grand religious tradition of the Torah which instills a pursuit of truth, embraces debate, teaches openness, critical-mindedness, and humility, and grows closer to God through arguments for the sake of Heaven.

Many of Rabbi Angel's articles were previously published in our own journal, *Conversations*, or in other publications largely of the Orthodox world. However, his reach extends far beyond that. One essay, entitled "Sephardim, Sephardism, and Jewish Peoplehood," was published in a collection of essays by the Central Conference of American Rabbis of the Reform Movement. Rabbi Angel expresses the need for all Jews to highlight the strengths of their respective communities and come together under the Sephardic communal model where institutions are committed to halakhah while people represent the range of observances. He even dares to dream that

> The day will surely come when all Jews—of whatever background—will come to view each other as "us"—as one people with a shared history and shared destiny…I think that not only will ethnic divisions become increasingly irrelevant, but the division of Jews into religious "streams" will also decline. A century from now, I don't think it will be important for Jews to identify as Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, Renewal

or any other subdivision (16).

Another essay, entitled “Theological Unity,” is based on the remarks of Rabbi Angel at a conference at the United Nations on “Religious Pluralism and Tolerance” under the sponsorship of the Kingdom of Bahrain. We are part of one humanity, all created in God’s Image, who have much to learn and appreciate from one another.

Through over 53 years in the rabbinate, Rabbi Angel has consistently advocated these principles and has articulated models of how the entire Jewish community can benefit from this worldview. This new collection of essays is a wonderful entry point into Rabbi Angel’s vision—and with that an entry point into several of the great luminaries and ideas that Judaism ever has produced.

We thank all of our members and supporters at the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, for helping us promote and realize this vision in schools and communities worldwide.