Battling for the Soul of Orthodoxy: The Essential Teachings of Rabbi Marc D. Angel

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Rabbi Marc D. Angel has been one of the most prolific rabbinic scholars for over 50 years. He has written or edited almost 40 books and hundreds of scholarly articles and shorter pieces in various media. He served a distinguished career as Rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City, and since 2007 as the Founder and Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. He has served in many communal and rabbinic leadership capacities, as well.

The task of writing an article to encapsulate the extensive work of Rabbi Angel is reminiscent of the celebrated talmudic story of the prospective convert who demanded of Hillel to teach him the entire Torah while the prospective convert stood on one foot. Hillel responded: "What is hateful to you, do not to your neighbor: that is the whole Torah, while the rest is the commentary thereof; go and learn it" (Shabbat 31a). My goal in this essay is to present "on one foot" Rabbi Angel's central ideas and ideals which he has promoted over the course of over 50 years.

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Rabbi Angel believes that one must first establish the proper intellectual foundations for an ideal vision of Judaism, and then attempt to build a great personal religious life and Torah community from the ground up. Judaism begins with a profound and abiding belief in God, that God revealed the Torah to the people of Israel through Moses as an eternal covenant, and that there is an accompanying Oral Law to the Written Torah. Judaism also maintains that the rabbinic sages throughout the generations have had the authority to interpret texts and traditions to apply the eternal principles of halakha to an ever-changing world.

What today is known as Orthodoxy is the faithful reflection of Jewish tradition. Streams of Judaism that are not committed to divine revelation or to halakha cannot be authentic representations of classic Jewish thought.

Living a proper halakhic life creates a deep, intimate relationship with God. Interiority, humility, love of humanity, and a desire to improve society are proper manifestations of a righteous life. Authentic religion is not about showiness, disdain for others, or authoritarianism.

The aforementioned arguments are easy to establish from within traditional Jewish sources, and Rabbi Angel therefore devotes relatively little energy to defend them. The lion’s share of his work is dedicated to a different theme, namely, delineating and advocating for what he considers to be ideal Orthodoxy. Often, Rabbi Angel’s writings are scholarly efforts to analyze and present various ideas and ideals of Judaism. There also is a regular hallmark of his writings to battle passionately and courageously for the very soul of Orthodoxy. Rabbi’s Angel’s writings are suffused with calm, thoughtful, well-researched wisdom, coupled with an urgent sense that these ideas must prevail or else our community is impoverished as a result.

Ideally, all Jews should be faithful to Torah and halakha. However, even in a less-than-ideal world, we must view all Jews, regardless of level of observance, as a family. The inclusive communal model, which never fractured into various ideological movements, provides the best paradigm for promoting Jewish unity for a fragmented contemporary Jewish community. The Sephardic world, and many Ashkenazic communities, championed the this inclusive modell. Even within the halakhically observant community, the ideal is unity without conformity. There are many legitimate avenues to a Torah lifestyle.

We must try to win the hearts of all Jews to the Torah through persuasion and through exemplifying excellent religious and moral behavior, and never through authoritarianism or coercion. We should learn from everyone: the full range of rabbinic thought throughout the ages, folk wisdom, and the wisdom of the world. Judaism is a truth-seeking religion.

Rabbi Angel regularly appeals to a passage in the Jerusalem Talmud: The way of the Torah is a narrow path. To the right is fire and to the left is ice. Overzealousness leads to fiery extremism and fanaticism, whereas too much secularization or watering down of Jewish belief and observance leads to icy skepticism. The Torah way of life is balanced, harmonious, and sensible. To be fulfilled properly, it must maintain its balance on the narrow path.

A confident faith is unafraid of questions and challenges. It is unafraid of diversity of opinion, and it is unafraid of ideas that force one to rethink one's own assumptions. The rabbinic axiom, "know how to answer the heretic" (Mishnah, Avot 2:14), requires a deep knowledge of what that heretic thinks, and a thoughtful understanding of why the heretic rejects our traditions.

Judaism balances a particularistic aspect in which God has a singular relationship with the Jewish people through the Torah and halakha; and a universalistic aspect that fosters genuine respect for all humanity. Jews should live in their divinely-given Torah path, while simultaneously embracing the Torah's ideal that God is everyone's God. The Torah's teaching, that all of humanity is created in the Image of God, should foster a genuine love and respect of humanity, and a desire to engage with the world, both its people and its wisdom. As Jews, we are responsible for all other Jews. As human beings, we are responsible for yishuvo shel olam—participating in the advancement of humanity.

Judaism is broad, and contemporary society needs its broadness to address the complex religious and communal realities of today. We also need to represent the profound sophistication and wisdom of Jewish tradition at its best to appeal to well-educated Jews.

There are two fundamental approaches to applying halakha to real life. One approach begins with a study of the classical rabbinic texts, reaching a scholarly conclusion, and then applying that conclusion to the individual or community. The other approach begins with the human reality and then studies the classical rabbinic texts for principles to apply to that reality. Rabbi Angel strongly favors the latter approach. For example, when addressing the question of saying Psalms of Praise (Hallel) on Yom HaAtzmaut (Israel's Independence Day), we must begin

by acknowledging the religious reality of the miracle of the State of Israel. Only then do we turn to the halakhic books.

Ideal rabbis must be scholars and teachers of Torah, but also must be involved with the community. There needs to be a symbiotic relationship between local rabbis who know the particular needs of their communities, and rabbinic decisors who are experts in halakhic texts. Community rabbis must have the humility to consult halakhic experts, and they also must take responsibility to make decisions armed with that expert knowledge for their local communities. The Torah gives guidance for every aspect of life, and rabbinic leadership should offer that guidance to the community. Orthodoxy can exert its greatest influence when its representatives are involved in all communal matters.

The greatest role models behind Rabbi Angel's religious worldview are Rambam in the medieval period; and Rabbis Benzion Uziel, Haim David Halevy, and Joseph Soloveitchik in the twentieth century. On the communal leadership level, Rabbi Angel also admires two of his predecessors who led Congregation Shearith Israel: Dr. Henry Pereira Mendes and Dr. David de Sola Pool. These exceptional rabbis embodied the ideas and ideals of Judaism at the intellectual, communal, and personal levels.

We do not need to reinvent Judaism or Orthodoxy. We must find its most compelling elements from within our classical sources and promote them. The best of Judaism has the power to attract and inspire many Jews, and they in turn can create the positive model society to inspire humanity.

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Within the contemporary Orthodox world, there are powerful threats to Rabbi Angel's comprehensive vision. There are significant and growing strains within Orthodoxy that are overly fundamentalist. They teach Tanakh and the Talmud at a hyper-literal level, and ignore science, reason, and even the diversity of sacred Jewish texts that present other opinions. Some promote superstition. Some promote isolationism from less observant Jews, non-Jews, and any ideas that are foreign to the specific narrow ideas they espouse. Some overemphasize the particularistic elements of Judaism while ignoring the universalistic elements.

When Judaism is presented as isolationist and anti-reason, it distorts Jewish teaching and creates a cult-like religious group that cares only about its idea of God and the members of its small circle. This approach also alienates many intelligent, educated Jews who are made to feel that tradition and intellectual honesty are at odds with one another. In fact, they are completely intertwined.

Rabbi Angel frequently criticizes the attempt in certain segments of the Orthodox community to stifle legitimate diversity of opinion. One dimension of this problem is the phenomenon of self-selected “gedolim” (great rabbinic sages), who maintain that they alone possess the truth of Torah, and therefore all other opinions are invalid and irrelevant. The vitality of Judaism relies on debate and conversations. A healthy Judaism allows ideas to be debated, accepted, or rejected, but never stifled or ignored.

This problem also extends to the proper balance between local rabbis and halakhic scholars who spend their time in yeshivot. The insistence of many today that halakha must derive from sacred texts first and then applied to real-life situations undermines the ideal symbiotic relationship between local rabbis and halakhic decisors. Suddenly, halakhic experts are required not only to share their knowledge with the community rabbis, but also to decide policy for individual communities. As noted above, Rabbi Angel insists that proper halakha must begin with the human reality and then turn to the classical rabbinic texts. Community rabbis must consult halakhic experts for the range of halakhic opinion, and then take responsibility for making the proper decision for their communities.

Another harmful restriction of opinion in many Orthodox circles is the frequent suppression of Sephardic voices of the past 500 years, generally through ignorance—whether willful or not. This bizarre reality is disrespectful to the sacred customs of Sephardic communities and causes pain to Sephardic yeshiva students who often feel excluded from “Jewish” experience. However, the harm on the communal level is far greater. The plethora of complex issues facing the contemporary Jewish community, including conversion to Judaism, the tragic agunah problem (a woman who is trapped in a dead marriage because her husband refuses to grant a religious writ of divorce, a get), issues pertaining to the modern State of Israel, the role of women, family values, contemporary modesty, and so many other issues, must be addressed with the full rabbinic toolbox. By stifling dissent and diversity, by ignoring the views of many Sephardic rabbis, and by adopting very restrictive positions, the Jewish community suffers irreparable damage.

Although advocates of more extremist, isolationist, restrictive, superstitious, and fundamentalist forms of Judaism cause harm on the intellectual and communal level, there is another culprit behind the flaws of the Orthodox community. Too many rabbis and laypeople remain silent or even tacitly support the more extreme views. Those who understand the ideas and ideals of the Torah must courageously stand up and promote the ideal vision of Judaism. The community must play a vital role by supporting institutions that promote these ideals.

Rabbi Angel quotes Rabbi Benzion Uziel, who in 1919 reminded his rabbinic colleagues that humility is praiseworthy, but it must never lead to shying away from the needs of the hour. Inertia cloaked in false humility is an abdication of one's responsibility as a leader. By writing articles with titles such as "On Torah Education and Mis-Education," "Reclaiming Orthodox Judaism," and "Re-Imagining Orthodox Judaism," Rabbi Angel draws his battle lines and appeals to the broader community to recognize the importance of standing up for these ideal values.

In his essay, "Reclaiming Orthodox Judaism," Rabbi Angel offers a remarkable analysis of a celebrated talmudic passage, the story of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza (Gittin 55b–56a). After a misunderstanding over a party invitation, Bar Kamtza was furious with the rabbis present who had remained silent at his humiliation. To retaliate, Bar Kamtza accused the Jews of rebellion to the Roman Emperor, suggesting that they would reject his sacrificial offering. The Emperor sent an offering, but Bar Kamtza made a slight blemish on the animal that would technically render the sacrifice invalid. When the rabbis discovered the blemish, most maintained that they should sacrifice the animal anyway, so as not to offend the Emperor. One rabbi named Zechariah ben Avkulas objected, since the law prohibits such a sacrifice. The rabbis then suggested killing Bar Kamtza so he could not inform on them to the Roman authorities. Again, Rabbi Zechariah objected, since Bar Kamtza had not committed a capital crime. As a consequence, Bar Kamtza returned to the Emperor, who was enraged against the Jewish community and destroyed the Temple. The story ends with a condemnation of the hardline position of Rabbi Zechariah: "Rabbi Yohanan thereupon remarked: Through the scrupulousness of Rabbi Zechariah ben Avkulas our House has been destroyed, our Temple burnt and we ourselves exiled from our land."

Rabbi Angel agrees with Rabbi Yohanan, that the hardline stand of Rabbi Zechariah was a disaster. Rabbi Zechariah placed book knowledge ahead of an obvious reality, namely, the Jewish community would be in dire peril if the rabbis rejected the sacrifice from the Emperor and allowed Bar Kamtza to inform against

them. Clearly, the needs of the hour required the position of the majority, to make an emergency ruling to allow the sacrifice so that they could maintain the good favor of the Roman government.

However, continues Rabbi Angel, Rabbi Zechariah is not the true villain of this narrative. The ultimate failure should be ascribed to the majority of rabbis. Why did they not overrule the hardline position of this one rabbi? Evidently, they did not want to seem less religious, less committed to the sacred texts of the Torah. They had to take a risk by applying halakha to a dire reality. The cowardly majority allowed the forceful insistence of Rabbi Zechariah to win the day—and therefore are complicit in the destruction of the Second Temple.

Rabbi Angel's analysis thereby sets out two of his central messages. First, when hardline halakhic analysis follows book knowledge prior to evaluating a living reality, halakha can be distorted and it may cause harm to the community. Second, and in many ways more importantly, those whose judgment is sound must courageously stand up against the hardline position. When the majority of reasonable voices remain silent, voices of extremism prevail and the entire Jewish community loses.

In his essay, "Re-Imagining Orthodox Judaism," Rabbi Angel writes that "If enough of us share these ideals; if enough of us are willing to work to promote these ideals; if we can impact on synagogues, schools, and yeshivot—then perhaps these ideals will actually be realized in our community." Rabbi Angel is right. The rest is up to us to support and build on this foundation.