Reviews of Rabbi M. Angel's Recent Books

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Irene Lancaster is a Judaic Scholar who writes a regular column for "Christian Today". These reviews appear in Christian Today, June 12, 2026.

Optimism, Pessimism and the Third Way

Reviews by Irene Lancaster

Rabbi Marc Angel of New York has recently brought out a book on Rabbi Uziel (1880-1953), Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel under the British Mandate and then under the new-born State. Rabbi Uziel worked with the great Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Kook and then with Chief Rabbi Herzog, formerly of Ireland! The book is called ‘Loving Truth and Peace.’

I’ve always been interested in Chief Rabbi Uziel, having lived on Uziel St in Jerusalem during 1983-4, when studying at religious seminary in that very street. And fellow students were also Sephardi, just like Rabbi Uziel.

Rabbi Uziel was an encourager. He encouraged everyone: the observant and the non-observant; completely lapsed Jews, as well as prospective converts.

In his legal rulings on how a Jewish state should be run while incorporating religious norms, Rabbi Uziel tended to follow ‘paths of peace.’ His vision for the Jewish State included minority groups as full citizens with ample room to observe their own holy days, festivals, and customs. This was at a time when many Jews feared Islam and Christianity, and with good reason. But Rabbi Uziel saw the bigger picture. He was unique. In other words, he didn’t wish to impose: his was a ‘live and let live’ religion which wholeheartedly embraced others.

At the same time, Rabbi Angel has also published a series of essays on readings for Shabbat. This book is aptly named ‘Angel for Shabbat’.

In what other book can you read about my former colleague, Professor Norman Geras, of Manchester University, a politics expert and prize-winning blogger, in the context of Moses having to stand up to Pharaoh (Exodus 9:13)?

As Rabbi Angel states (p 132), Professor Geras wrote about "'the contract of mutual indifference'. His basic thesis was that when people become indifferent to the injustices perpetrated against others, the general morality of society declines ... Mutual indifference is the sign of a morally defective society/world. It is not only degrading to the victims of injustice, it is degrading to the perpetrators themselves.”

That is why G-d told Moses to "stand [tall] before Pharaoh."

Or another gem on page 214, which is entitled ‘Sacred Space’ and deals with reasons for synagogue attendance. Why do people go to Shul? This is asked in the context of the building of the Mishkan (Tabernacle), precursor of the Temple (Exodus 39).

For some people the Shul acts as a ‘hospital’. They come at times of crisis, illness and death. They attend only at time of need. Otherwise they avoid Shul.

Then we have the Shul as ‘museum’. These people visit for Shul’s ‘nostalgic qualities’. They enjoy the ‘old relics’ and attend on high holy days ‘as a social/cultural obligation’. It is ‘a building that houses old things and old memories.’

Next is the ‘entertainment hall’ Shul. People "have a good time there. They meet friends; they hear nice music; they listen to a sermon; they enjoy the refreshments ... They want the synagogue to entertain them, to come up with new melodies and new programmes."

Last but not least we have the Shul as ‘Sacred Space’.

"This refers to those who are seeking communion with the eternal, ineffable G-d. They come to synagogue often and in a spirit of yearning. When they enter the sanctuary, they feel the power of the sacred space. They sit humbly, quietly, thoughtfully. They absorb the atmosphere; they savor their words of prayer; they lose themselves in meditation. They have not come to synagogue because of a crisis; nor to experience the museum-like qualities; nor to be entertained. They

have come for something far different: they have come to commune with G-d, to understand themselves, and transcend themselves."

This is the meaning of the building of the Mishkan - the space which G-d indwells. What a marvellous description of the meaning of Shul for so many people.

I must confess however that I find that the presence of like-minded people, together with the wonderful singing and kiddush refreshments, not to mention the rabbi's sermon - always short and to-the-point - all help contribute to the meaning of the Shul I attend, so that the Sacred Space grows as we sit there allowing a special quality to enter in.

And finally, on June 13 diaspora communities read the story of the 'spies' in 'Shelach Lecha' (Numbers 13-15). Rabbi Angel discusses this story from every angle on pages 307-16. This reading is especially dear to me because I was asked to speak on this very subject at a Jerusalem synagogue some years ago.

Rabbi Angel contrasts the optimism of Caleb and Joshua with the pessimism of the 10 other leaders chosen by Moses to spy out the Promised Land.

On their return from spying out the Land the spies made the mistake of speaking publicly about their misgivings without first consulting in private with Moses. Moses would have provided a realistic plan of action which would included both points of view, the pessimistic and the optimistic. Not entering the Land was, after all, not an option for the children of Israel.

Rabbi Angel comments: 'This is true for government officials, for journalists, for opinion makers - for everyone. Responsible leadership entails careful analysis, concern for how one's words and deeds will affect the public, an honest and realistic plan of action that can gain public support and confidence.'

And then the piece de resistance:

"In Israel's War of Independence in 1948, David Ben Gurion called a meeting of his military experts to address a serious crisis. Reinforcements were desperately needed in the north but there seemed to be no way to get the troops there. The experts told Ben Gurion that it was impossible to move troops to the north since the enemies' positions were too strong. Ben Gurion replied: 'We do not need experts to tell us that something is impossible. Anyone can say this. We need experts who can tell us how to accomplish the impossible!' Upon further deliberation, the experts came up with a plan - and they succeeded in doing the 'impossible.' They found a way of getting the needed troops to the north and

ensuring a victory for Israel in the battles there.

"In the many crises which face us - individually as well as communally - it is tempting to give in to pessimism and judge things to be hopeless or impossible. It is also tempting to ignore the real dangers before us and to be unrealistically optimistic about chances of success. It is vital, though, that we maintain clearheaded realism - facing problems honestly, being neither fearful nor foolhardy.

"It is the realists who are best suited to achieve the 'impossible.'"

The book is full of such gems, in which Rabbi Angel brings the Shabbat readings to life and renders them relevant for today.

‘Angel for Shabbat’ and ‘Loving Truth and Peace’ are published by Da’at Press (based in London) in conjunction with the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. Both books are highly recommended.

Loving Truth and Peace: https://www.daat.press/product-page/loving-truth-and-peace-rabbi-benzion-uziel

Angel for Shabbat: https://www.daat.press/product-page/angel-for-shabbat-rabbi-marc-angel