Book Review: Mysteries of Judaism, by Israel Drazin

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Mysteries of Judaism, by Rabbi Dr.Israel Drazin
Gefen Publishing House, 2014

Reviewed by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

In this book, Rabbi Dr. Israel Drazin offers a series of essays on a variety of topics. The early chapters of this book emphasize the rabbinic contributions to Judaism's observance of holy days and festivals. While many think that our observances are based on biblical teachings, Rabbi Drazin makes the case that the Talmudic sages shaped our understanding and experiencing of these days. Especially after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, it was imperative for the rabbis to reinterpret and reframe basic elements in Judaism.

In Chapter 21, the author examines the nature of rabbinic authority. While appreciating the greatness of the ancient sages and their stress on education, Rabbi Drazin reminds readers that rabbis after all are only human. They are not infallible. Rabbi Drazin advises that people "should evaluate everything the rabbis tells them and not accept what he says simply because he is a rabbi. They should consider the sources that the rabbi uses for his decision, and then make up their own minds how to behave. As with physicians, it sometimes pays to get a second opinion." (p. 79)

Rabbi Drazin insists on a clear distinction between what the Torah text states, and what rabbis say in their homilies and midrashic statements. "Thus when people hear a sermon or read a book on ethics, they should ask themselves: 'Am I learning some true facts about life, the world, and society? Is this only the rabbi's opinion supported only by the rabbi's interpretation of Scripture or

anecdotes?…Am I being entertained or taught.’” (p. 81)

The closing chapters of the book relate to the role of women in Orthodox Judaism. Rabbi Drazin laments the injustices to women caused by the rabbinic establishment in Israel in matters of divorce. These problems—although institutionalized in Israel—are also evident in the Orthodox rabbinic courts in the diaspora. Rabbi Drazin admires Rabbi Emanuel Rackman and Rabbi David Hartman for their efforts to ameliorate the status of women in Orthodoxy. He suggests that contemporary rabbinic leadership needs to be more sensitive, creative and courageous in addressing the problems of our time.

Rabbi Dr. Drazin served for 31 years as a chaplain in the US Army and attained the rank of brigadier general. He has a PhD in Judaic studies, as well as master’s degrees in psychology and Hebrew literature. He is the author of 25 books, including a series of four books on Moses Maimonides.