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Book Reviews

Hayyim Angel

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Rabbi Dr. Marc D. Angel, *Sephardim Sephardism and Jewish Peoplehood* (Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals: 2022), 266 pages.[1]

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 halakha. A vision that properly represents the

universalistic aspect of God as Creator of the entire cosmos, where Israel has a vital 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 halakha, 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 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 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 valuable 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 the rich diversity of Jewish 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, 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 halakha 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.

Pesah: Insights from the Past, Present, and Future (The Habura, 2022)[2]

It has been delightful becoming acquainted with The Habura, a recently founded England-based organization that has been promoting thoughtful Torah learning since 2020. It is headed by Rabbi Joseph Dweck, Senior Rabbi of the Spanish and Portuguese Community of the United Kingdom (see www.TheHabura.com).

The Habura promotes the inclusion of Sephardic voices and ideas in Jewish discourse, coupled with an openness to the broad wisdom of the Jewish people and the world. In this regard, their work strongly dovetails ours at the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Their recently published *Pesah* volume contains an array of 20 essays. The first two are by Sephardic visionaries of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Rabbis Benjamin Artom (1835–1879, Hakham of the Spanish and Portuguese Community of the United Kingdom) and Ben Zion Uziel (1880–1953, first Sephardic Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel). The rest of the book is divided between contemporary rabbis and scholars, and younger scholars who participate

in the learning of The Habura.

The essays span a variety of topics pertaining to Pesah in the areas of Jewish thought, faith, halakha, and custom. The authors stress the need for different communities to remain faithful to their interpretive traditions. Too much of the observant Jewish world has capitulated to a stringency-seeking approach that ignores dissenting opinions and fosters conformity. The essays in this volume seek to rectify this outlook. Sephardim, Ashkenazim, and other communities should be true to their halakhic traditions and customs, and learn from one another instead of striving for conformity with the most restricted common denominators.

In this brief review, I will summarize three of the essays I personally found most enlightening.

Rabbi Dr. Samuel Lebens addresses a surprising formula early in the *maggid* section of the Haggadah: “If the Holy One, blessed be God, had not taken us out of Egypt, then we, our children, and our children’s children would have remained slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt.” On its surface, this claim seems unsustainable. After all, there *is* no Pharaoh today. Are we really to think we would be slaves to Pharaoh?

No. We are supposed to *pretend* that we otherwise would still be slaves. This theme at the outset of the *maggid* relates to the statement toward the end of *maggid*, “In every generation, people are obligated to regard themselves as if they had come out of Egypt.” We must imagine that we ourselves were redeemed from Egypt, and we therefore experience the slavery and redemption in our Seder.

Lebens argues that in addition to elements of faith and community-building, all religions have a component that arouses the imagination. Sometimes, we imagine based on a reality. For example, we believe God really did create the cosmos. However, it is imperative to also live our lives constantly *seeing ourselves* as God’s creations (see Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch on the first of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20).

On other occasions, tradition demands that we pretend so that we live our lives in a certain way. It is insufficient to merely believe that God redeemed our

ancestors from Egypt thousands of years ago. The Haggadah then demands that we imagine ourselves to have been enslaved and redeemed. If we do not invoke our imaginations, we remain distant from the identification required to transform our identity and actions. If we internalize the religious program of the Haggadah, we become more sensitive toward the underprivileged, since we too were enslaved and redeemed.

Daniel Osen also exploits the Haggadah's directive, "In every generation, people are obligated to regard themselves as if they had come out of Egypt." He employs this concept to explain the puzzling omission of Moses in the Haggadah (Moses is mentioned once in passing in most contemporary versions of the Haggadah, but in earlier versions of the Haggadah even that reference was absent).

This phenomenon is commonly explained as a means of highlighting God's central role in the exodus. Osen adds a dimension by noting that we may experience the exodus better in our imaginations if we do not dwell on a specific historical person. This interpretation creates a direct relationship between God and the Jewish people of all generations.

Rabbi Abraham Faur uses the Pesah narrative in the Torah to reflect on alarming contemporary trends toward tyranny in secular Western culture. A basic feature of utopian societies is that one is forbidden from criticizing the ruling class. To suspend critical thinking—the great threat to tyrants—the political elite will suppress anything that promotes scrutiny.

It is specifically the family unit promoted by the Torah that enables people to oppose tyranny. Faur quotes Frederick Engels, who wrote in 2015 that Marxism attempts "to end home and religious education, to dissolve monogamy in marriage…to shift mothers into factories, to move children into daycare nurseries…and, most of all, for society and the state to rear and educate children."

Tyrants recognize that promiscuous people with weak family bonds will become submissive citizens of the state. Contemporary "woke ideology…is an intentional attempt to promote values that contradict the family structure."

Jacob brought his family to Egypt *ish u-beto*, every man arrived with a family (Exodus 1:1). Pharaoh attempted to destroy Israelite families, first by enslavement, then through the secret murder of infant boys, and then finally publicly decreeing that Israelite boys be drowned.

Tyrants also control the information released to the public, and censor or punish anything that contradicts their narrative. The new Pharaoh suddenly forgot that Joseph had saved Egypt, and instead promoted fear and hysteria against the Israelites. A person raised in Egypt would not have known that there were alternatives to the enslavement and murder of the Israelites. In contrast, a strong family might be able to think critically, because it has access to traditions and memories older than the tyrannical state.

Tyrannies often pretend to act for the best of the people, but critical-minded people see through their hypocrisy and lies. Pharaoh is a banner example of this evil: When Moses approached Pharaoh after the plague of hail, he demanded that all adults, children, and animals be released to the wilderness to serve God. Pharaoh responds, “may the Lord be with you, if I send you and your children; behold that evil is before you…the men may go and worship the Lord” (Exodus 10:10–11). Pharaoh presents the journey into the wilderness as dangerous for women and children, and therefore permits only the men to go. Pharaoh thereby postures as the protector of women and children.

Of course, the family-oriented, critical-minded Israelite women saw through Pharaoh’s outrageous pretense as a defender of human rights, since Pharaoh had decreed the murder of their sons. He could not care less about the welfare of them or their children. They followed Moses into the wilderness with their children, and sought out God’s word at Sinai.

Sukkot: Insights from the Past, Present, and Future (The Habura, 2022)[3]

The Habura's recently published *Sukkot* volume contains an array of 18 essays. The first two are by Sephardic rabbis of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Rabbis Abraham Pereira Mendes (1825–1893, Jamaica, England, and the United States) and Hayim David Halevi (1923–1998, Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv). The rest of the book is divided between contemporary rabbis and scholars, and younger upcoming scholars who participate in the learning of The Habura.

The essays span a variety of topics pertaining to Sukkot in the areas of Jewish thought, faith, halakha, and custom. In this brief review, I will summarize three essays that I found most edifying.

Rabbi Joseph Dweck explores the unusual commandment to rejoice on Sukkot (Deuteronomy 16:14). It is curious that other faith traditions viewed the changing of the seasons to autumn (in the northern hemisphere) as cause for bleaker holiday reactions. Roman Catholics observe All Soul's Day, which appears in Mexico as the *Dia de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead). This holiday translates to the more widespread Halloween. The Angel of Death is even nicknamed "The Grim Reaper," reflecting the incoming gloom of winter that follows the harvest season. How does Sukkot become such a profoundly joyous time?

A central theme of Sukkot is the fleetingness of the physical world. This realistic perspective enables us to experience joy while recognizing that it is temporary. Sigmund Freud wrote an essay entitled "On Transience," in which he asserted that life's transience helps us appreciate the preciousness and beauty of each experience.

Rabbi Dweck believes that Freud has identified the root of our joy on Sukkot and concludes, "When we can come to this understanding about the world, we can truly come to embrace and accept life on its own terms—and in doing that, we can truly know happiness."

Pursuing a different angle into the theme of joy on Sukkot, Gershon Engel explains that nowadays, we emphasize our dependence on God rather than relying on the permanence of our homes (e.g., Rabbi Yitzhak Aboab, *Menorat HaMa'or* III, 4:6). Of course, the biblical Sukkot revolved around the harvest. This

holiday was uniquely joyous in ancient Israel, as the harvests were in and farmers did not need to rush home as they would after Pesah and Shavuot.

By transferring the meaning of Sukkot from agriculture to more universal religious themes, Jews were able to preserve a sense of joy on Sukkot even after the termination of the agrarian life that had characterized our people for much of our foundational existence.

Engel quotes Benjamin Disraeli in his classic work *Tancred*, who expressed awe in the Jews for retaining their sense of joy on Sukkot while in the exile:

> The vineyards of Israel have ceased to exist, but the eternal law enjoins the children of Israel still to celebrate the vintage. A race that persists in celebrating their vintage, although they have no fruits to gather, will regain their vineyards. What sublime inexorability in the law! But what indomitable spirit in the people!

Addressing the halakhic question of wearing *tefillin* on *hol haMo'ed* (the intermediate weekdays) of Pesah and Sukkot, Yehuda J.W. Leikin observes that the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds both appear to suggest that wearing *tefillin* on the middle days of Pesah and Sukkot is normative.

The three halakhic pillars behind Rabbi Yosef Karo's *Shulhan Arukh*—Rabbi Yitzhak Alfasi (Rif), Rambam, and Rabbenu Asher (Rosh), all agree that wearing *tefillin* on *hol haMo'ed* is the proper observance. While several other leading medieval rabbinic authorities, including Rabbi Shelomo ibn Aderet (Rashba) and Rabbi Avraham ben David (Ra'avad), maintain that *tefillin* should not be worn, Rabbi Karo generally follows his three pillars of rabbinic ruling.

In this case, however, Rabbi Karo forbids the wearing of *tefillin* on *hol haMo'ed*, and rules prohibitively because the *Zohar* strongly opposes the wearing of *tefillin* on *hol haMo'ed* (*Bet Yosef*, *Orah Hayyim* 31:2). Rabbi Karo reports that in Spain, the original practice was to wear *tefillin* on *hol haMo'ed* until they discovered the *Zohar*'s prohibition. In contrast, Rabbi Moshe Isserles (Rama) maintains that Ashkenazim should wear *tefillin*, following the ruling of Rabbenu

Asher (Rosh).

Thus, the Sephardic practice to refrain from wearing *tefillin* on *hol haMo'ed* reflects an unusual move from classical halakhic sources to kabbalah. Leikin concludes that Rabbi Yosef Karo may have been inclined to accept the kabbalistic ruling in this instance, since there also were great halakhists who also opposed wearing *tefillin* on *hol haMo'ed*.

There are many other fine essays in these Pesah and Sukkot companions, and we look forward to future volumes from The Habura.

Dennis Prager, *The Rational Bible: Genesis* (Regnery Faith, 2019)[4]

Dennis Prager is far better known as a political commentator than a Bible Scholar. Nonetheless, he is animated by his belief in the Torah and its enduring moral messages for humanity. His commentary, as the book's title suggests, is rooted in a rationalist approach to the Bible.

Whether or not one agrees with all of his politics or individual interpretations of the verses, Prager's commentary is strikingly relevant when he emphasizes the moral and theological revolution of the Torah and the vitality of its teachings to today's overly secularized Western world. Rather than serving as bastions of moral teachings and American values, universities are increasingly at the vanguard of attacks against God, the Bible, family values, Israel, and the very notion of an objective morality. Prager pinpoints several of the major differences between the Torah's morality and the dangerous shortcomings of today's secular West.

Throughout his commentary, Prager makes his case for belief in God, providence, the divine origins of the Torah, and the eternal power of the Torah's

morality. He also offers a running commentary on the Torah, bringing insights from a wide variety of scholars and thinkers, as well as from his personal experiences. In this review, we will focus exclusively on the former, as it is here that Prager's commentary makes its greatest contributions.

God's creation of the world teaches that there is ultimate purpose to human existence. Atheists reject God's existence. If all existence is random happenstance, however, there is no ultimate purpose. Additionally, the Torah posits that God is completely separate from nature. God gave human beings a special role, and the moral God demands morality from humanity. Science teaches science, but it cannot teach right from wrong, or even if there *is* a right or a wrong. Science cannot provide ultimate purpose, since it studies only the physical universe (7–8).

The world began as chaotic (*tohu va-vohu*, Genesis 1:2), and God created order through a process of distinctions. According to the Torah, the primary responsibility of humanity is to preserve God's order and distinctions. The creation narrative in Genesis distinguishes between God and the universe, humans and animals, and sacred and profane. Elsewhere in the Torah, God distinguishes between people and God, good and evil, life and death, and many others. The battle for higher civilization essentially is the struggle between biblical distinctions and the human desire to undo many of those distinctions. Prager concludes with a chilling assertion about the contemporary secular West: "As Western society abandons the Bible and the God of the Bible, it is also abandoning these distinctions. I fear for its future because Western civilization rests on these distinctions" (14).

Pagans believed that the gods inhere in nature. This belief led to the need for people to propitiate the gods and offer sacrifices. By stressing that God is outside of nature, the Torah revolutionizes the role of humanity vis-à-vis the world. People must rule and conquer the earth, meaning that the world was created for human use (1:28). People must not abuse nature or inflict unnecessary suffering on animals, but people rule the world. Among other things, this belief led to the invention of modern medicine to fight diseases. Prager warns of a relapse to the pagan worldview: "Many secular people in our time romanticize nature, perhaps not realizing—or not wanting to realize—that either humans rule over nature or nature will destroy humans" (27).

Without the values of the Bible, people lose their uniqueness as being created in God's image (1:26), and instead become insignificant parts of nature. British physicist and atheist Stephen Hawking said, "We humans [are] mere collections of fundamental particles of nature." When God is diminished and nature is elevated, human worth is reduced (104). Finally, without God, people are simply another part of nature. There cannot be any good or evil behavior for humanity, just as we would not call an earthquake evil. "Therefore, as ironic as it may sound to a secular individual, only a God-based understanding of human life allows for free will" (505–506).

It is not good for a human to be alone (2:18). People ideally were meant to marry and to live together in a community. In the secular West, there has been a dramatic decrease in marriage rates, and more people live by themselves than at any time in recorded history. Consequently, loneliness has become a major social pathology. A meta-analysis of 70 studies covering over three million people published in the journal *Perspectives on Psychological Science* concludes that "loneliness is now a major public health issue and represents a greater health risk than obesity and is as destructive to your health as smoking 15 cigarettes a day." Prager also highlights the moral benefits of participating in a religious community. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks summarizes the research of Robert Putnam: "Regular attendees at a place of worship were more likely than others to give money to charity, engage in volunteer work, donate blood, spend time with someone who is depressed, offer a seat to a stranger, help someone find a job.… Regular attendance at a house of worship is the most accurate predictor of altruism, more so than any other factor, including gender, education, income, race, region, marital status, ideology, and age" (39-41).

God expressed grave concern over Adam and Eve's eating from the Tree of Knowledge, lamenting that "man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:22). Prager frames the sin in Eden as the struggle over who determines morality. The Torah teaches that God does, but human sin is when people determine good and evil. When people usurp that right, people become god. "And it is precisely what has happened in the West since the French Enlightenment. Man has displaced God as the source of right and wrong. As Karl Marx wrote, 'Man is God.' And as Lenin, the father of modern totalitarianism, said, 'We repudiate all morality derived from non-human (i.e., God) and non-class concepts'" (59).

Human conscience alone cannot bring about a just society. Conscience can be easily manipulated when serving a cause. Conscience can be dulled when people do more and more bad. Conscience also is not usually as powerful as the natural drives—greed, envy, sex, alcohol use, and others can overpower the conscience. And finally, conscience does not always guide someone properly to do what is right. We need God to teach objective moral values (108–109). “Even Voltaire (1694–1778), a passionate atheist and the godfather of the aggressively secular French Enlightenment, acknowledged: ‘I want my lawyer, my tailor, my servants, and even my wife to believe in God because it means that I shall be cheated, and robbed, and cuckolded less often. If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him’” (239).

Those who admire the achievements of successful people likely will strive to emulate them. Those who are jealous and resentful of the success of others become destructive. Rather than improving his offering, Cain instead envied Abel’s successful sacrifice and murdered Abel. The Philistines envied Abraham and Isaac, and therefore destructively filled up Abraham’s wells and persecuted Isaac (Genesis 26). Economist George Gilder (a non-Jew) wrote about this phenomenon in his book, *The Israel Factor*. He demonstrates that a society’s reaction to Israel’s successes is a predictor of their success or failure. Those who resent the outsized achievements of Israel are likely to fail morally, economically, and socially. Those who admire Israel and seek to emulate its achievements are likely to create their own free and prosperous societies (65). Prager draws a lesson for contemporary America: “The most notable exception to this unfortunate rule of human nature has been the American people. Until almost the present day, Americans tended to react to people who had attained material success not by resenting them but by wanting to know how they could emulate them. This seems to be changing as more Americans join others in resenting the economic success of other people” (308).

The Torah describes Noah as “a righteous man, blameless in his age.” The Sages of the Talmud debate whether the Torah’s addition of “in his age” diminishes his objective righteousness, or whether it makes Noah all the more impressive for standing above his wicked society. Although both positions are valid, Prager supports the latter view, observing that few people have the moral courage to reject their environment. Prager adds a more important point: Many are tempted to judge people of the past by our contemporary moral standards, rather than in the context of their time. As a result, we would conclude that virtually nobody who lived before us was a good person. For example, many of

the founding fathers of America owned slaves, and America allowed slavery at the time of its founding. Since slavery is indeed evil, we may conclude that America's founders were wicked and America itself was a bad place. However, it is vital to judge America in 1776 "in its age," and not by the standards of our time. At that time, virtually every society practiced slavery. It was the values of America's founders and Western Bible-based civilization that led to the abolition of slavery, and the thriving of freedom-loving and freedom-spreading society (91–93).

After the flood, God concludes that God never again will destroy humanity, "since the devisings of man's mind are evil from his youth" (8:21). Prager uses this verse as a springboard to attack a modern Western belief, that people are basically good and corrupted by society. The belief emerges from the West's abandonment of the Bible, and is associated with philosophers of the French Enlightenment such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). No rational person can believe that people are basically good. All children need moral teachings to learn the most basic decency. The unjust wars, slavery, child abuse, and so many other horrors of world history down to the present should be ample evidence that people must actively build a good society. The wrongful belief that people are basically good also is dangerous. Parents and schools will not invest time and energy teaching goodness if they assume that children are naturally good. God and religion become irrelevant to teaching goodness. Society, not the individual, is blamed for evil. Those who blame society try to change society, rather than teaching individuals to be better. In contrast, "The Torah teaches that, especially in a free society, the battle for a good world is not between the individual and society but between the individual and his or her nature" (109–115).

Making good people is the single most important thing parents can do. Loving children without teaching them moral responsibility turns children into spoiled narcissists. Parents must constantly emphasize goodness, integrity, and honesty, and praise these traits as most important. Parents also must morally discipline their children, rather than ignoring that responsibility. Teaching the Bible only can help, both because the Bible is unparalleled in its moral wisdom, and it is imperative for children (and their parents) to recognize God as the source of morality (132–133).

Dennis Prager, *The Rational Bible: Exodus* (Regnery Faith, 2018)[5]

The God of the Torah is the most important idea of human history. Among its revolutionary contributions: The God of the Torah brings universal morality to the world. Good and evil are not merely societal opinions, but objectively real. God and morality give humanity hope for a better world. People have infinite worth and dignity and can elevate their lives in holiness. We aspire to universal brotherhood and human equality. There is a non-physical reality outside of nature, giving ultimate purpose to the universe. Human beings have free will and can and should make moral choices (93–97). These transformative ideas offer humanity the chance for redemption.

Belief in one God is emphatically not identical to belief in the God of the Torah. The God of the Torah judges the moral behavior of every human being by the same moral standard. “A god in whose name believers cut innocent people’s throats, behead them, burn them alive, and rape girls and women—as is being done at the time of this writing by Islamist terrorists in the name of ‘the one God’—cannot be the same god as the God of the Torah, the God who gave the Ten Commandments, who commanded His people to ‘Love the stranger,’ and demanded holy and ethical conduct at all times. Likewise, those Christians who in the Middle Ages slaughtered entire Jewish communities in the name of Christ also clearly did not believe in the God of the Bible…” (132–135).

Prager maintains that without the God of the Torah, there is no way of demonstrating that murder is objectively wrong. The twentieth-century atheist philosopher Bertrand Russel admitted that he could think of no better argument against wanton cruelty than, “I don’t like it.” We need God to declare murder as an absolute wrong, and not rely on empty arguments such as “I don’t like it,” or “I think it is wrong.” A common contemporary argument posits that murder is wrong on utilitarian grounds: We don’t murder others because we don’t want others to murder us. However, this argument is an abject failure. Most murderers do not want to be murdered. They murder nonetheless because they think they can get away with it. For suicide terrorists who do not mind being killed in return, the argument becomes entirely irrelevant. Finally, evil ideologies can overrule the utilitarian argument. For example, Hitler insisted that the Nazi extermination of Jews was for the betterment of the human species. Prager concludes, “In sum, it is unlikely there has been even one would-be murderer in history who decided not to murder because of the argument, ‘We don’t murder others because we don’t want others to murder us’” (258–260).

Prager cites Thucydides' fifth-century bce *History of the Peloponnesian War*. Athens and Sparta were at war, and Athens pressured the island of Melos to support their war efforts. The Melians wanted to remain neutral, so Athens threatened Melos with destruction. "Is this your idea of fair play?" the Melians asked. The Athenians answered, "So far as right and wrong are concerned, there is no difference between the two. The strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept." Athens went on to besiege and destroy Melos, murdering the men and selling the women and children into slavery. Prager notes that 2400 years later, the nineteenth-century atheist Friedrich Nietzche wrote with contempt of those who sympathized with the Melians' moral appeals. The God of the Torah repudiates this idea (322–323).

The Torah constantly emphasizes the significance of remembering our past. Remembering teaches us gratitude and wisdom. Remembering also connects us to the past and reminds us that we are part of an ongoing people and ideal. Pharaoh's first act is to forget Joseph (Exodus 1:8). He therefore has no gratitude to Israel and instead wickedly enslaves them and decrees the murder of their baby boys. The Torah treats memory as an essential component of identity and morality. Prager extends this lesson to modern times. "Nations, too, are their memories. A nation that doesn't remember its past…ceases to be the nation it was. This may be happening now in a number of Western European nations that teach their young people to consider themselves 'world citizens' or Europeans rather than members of a specific nation. It is also happening in the United States, where the level of ignorance of the American past among young Americans is unprecedented" (5–6).

In our society, intelligence and knowledge are valued far more than wisdom. One terribly mistaken believer in secular education as a replacement of religion for moral values was Sigmund Freud, who naively wrote in 1927, "Civilization has little to fear from educated people and brain-workers. In them, the replacement of religious motives for civilized behavior by other secular motives, would proceed unobtrusively" (*The Future of an Illusion*). Knowledge and intelligence are useful for technology and science. However, societies need wisdom far more than intelligence or knowledge. Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, North Korea, and Iran all had or have intelligence and knowledge, but abused them for evil purposes. While the failure of German Christianity during the Holocaust (with a few notable heroic exceptions) is almost universally acknowledged, the moral failure of secular education and secular intellectuals in Germany is almost universally ignored (46, 136–138, 229–230).

The commandment to honor one's parents is the guarantor for the civilization to endure. Parents transmit culture, religion, and ethics. The breakdown of the family ensures the breakdown of the civilization. A standard feature of totalitarian regimes is to shift children's loyalty from their parents to the state or ideology. Strong families serve as bulwarks against totalitarianism (258).

Pharaoh initiated the ruthless slavery, but the entire Egyptian society went along with him. The same can be said of Nazi Germany, where most Germans were not as evil as Hitler. These and so many other similar stories teach that you do not need a great number of truly evil people to carry out massive evil. You need only: 1) Ordinary people who allow themselves to be indoctrinated by the truly evil people; 2) People who benefit from the evil; and 3) A paucity of courageous good people. Prager laments, "I am convinced courage is the rarest of all good traits" (9).

The heroic midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, may not have been Israelites. Their inspiring morality lies in their fear of God (1:15–21). Fear of God is a necessary ingredient to build a society of moral individuals. Of course there are individual good atheists as there were good pagans. And there are numerous people who practice religion who are wicked. However, a universal moral code from a universal God who judges all humanity is the only way to build a moral society (10–11).

Dennis Prager, *The Rational Bible: Deuteronomy* (Regnery Faith, 2022)[6]

In Deuteronomy 1:13, Moses selected judges who were "wise, discerning, and experienced." All three traits pertain to wisdom, not goodness. Of course, judges also must be good people, but that trait alone is insufficient for leadership. A good society is unattainable without wisdom. Prager observes that "there have always been people who were personally good—individuals who have good intentions and even a kindly disposition—who enabled evil to prevail."

On a personal level, parents who spoil their children without teaching them right from wrong may be good people, but they lack wisdom. On a global level,

communism is the best example of good intentions without wisdom. Communism has killed approximately 100 million people, and enslaved a billion more. Their tyrannical leaders, and some of their supporters, are truly evil people. But many millions of their supporters sincerely believed that communism would build a better world for the future. However, they lacked moral and economic wisdom, thereby supporting and enabling the evil tyrants to obtain and retain power (6–10).

The world's freest society, the United States of America, is both a democracy and theocracy. Theocracy without democracy leads to an unfree society. Democracy without God leads to moral and intellectual chaos. George Washington stated, "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports…reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle." In a similar vein, John Adams remarked that "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." Prager observes that it is no accident that the two mottoes of the United States are "Liberty" and "In God We Trust" (283–285).

The Book of Deuteronomy repeatedly warns against following false gods. Prager enumerates several of today's "false gods" (71–84). One of the most corrosive elements to the fabric of our increasingly secular society is the elimination of God and the Bible, and replacing its wisdom with an overvaluation of education and intelligence.

Prager quotes Professor Steven Pinker of Harvard University, who observes that "universities are becoming laughingstocks of intolerance." Well-educated people disproportionately supported the Nazi party, as well as communism. The same is true for those today who hold anti-American and Israeli sentiments.

In 2015 Prager participated in a debate at the prestigious Oxford Union at Oxford University on the subject of whether Israel or Hamas is a greater obstacle for peace in the Middle East. That this debate could even occur is truly terrifying, given the terrorist organization Hamas' genocidal charter. Yet, the debate went on, and the majority of the over 400 elite students in attendance voted that Israel is the greater obstacle to peace, as this is what they are taught.

The Book of Deuteronomy promises national reward for righteous behavior, and national calamity for wicked behavior and unfaithfulness to God. To the modern mind, such promises often appear to reflect a low-level religious system. Prager defends the Torah's discourse on several grounds (142–143).

First, the Torah could have omitted all reference to reward and punishment. This idealistic system is simply untrue to human reality. When people are rewarded for competent work, they work harder and more competently. This is why the capitalistic free market economy was the only system that enabled people to lift themselves out of poverty. Some are seduced by the Marxist socialist ideal of people being rewarded "according to their needs," rather than for the excellence of their work. This ideology, however, eliminates the incentive to work hard. Further, who determines the "needs" of individuals? Generally not the individual, but the state. This is the road to tyranny and totalitarianism. Prager concludes, "And who doesn't want to live in a just world? Only the unjust."

The Torah could have shifted focus to reward in the afterlife, but its entire agenda is to build a great society in this world.

Finally, the Torah could have demanded faithfulness based on love of God. However, that argument would work only for the religiously elite few.

Therefore, the Torah's stress on this-worldly reward and punishment is the most effective means of promoting a universally righteous society.

A central theme in Deuteronomy is gratitude. God blesses Israel with a beautiful, bountiful land. The religious hazard of that blessing is that Israel may in turn become spoiled and arrogant, considering their prosperity as their own achievement. Prager comments that "gratitude is the mother of both happiness and goodness." The easiest way to undermine gratitude is to take something or someone for granted. Most people appreciate what they had only once they have lost it. Parents spoil their children when they give them everything, as children come to expect everything. Saying "thank you" is not merely polite etiquette; these words inculcate gratitude and appreciation. Jewish law has blessings for everything, including eating and even relieving oneself in the bathroom. These blessings, when taken seriously, infuse gratitude and happiness into the most mundane moments (154–156).

In Deuteronomy 12:20, the Torah permits “secular slaughter” away from the Temple, enabling Israelites to eat meat outside of a sacrificial context. Prager uses this commandment to launch into a discussion regarding animal rights activism gone awry in the secular world. There is an increasingly prevalent value of people and animals being of equal worth. Prager quotes a 2003 PETA ad campaign, which appallingly equated barbequing chickens with the cremation of Jews in the Nazi death camps. They entitled their ad campaign, “Holocaust on your Plate.” It was a Jew at PETA who created that ad campaign, and he doubled down on his assertion that chickens and humans are of equal value when he was challenged.

In Deuteronomy 19:13, the Torah insists that we show no pity for murderers. The Torah understands that if we see the condemned, we naturally will have pity, and consider withholding the capital punishment. However, such pity ignores the true victims, namely, the person who was murdered and his or her family. In a debate on American television with the leader of an anti-capital punishment vigil being held in front of the prison where a murderer was about to be executed, Prager “asked the activist if he and his supporters had ever held a vigil in support of a murder victim’s family. I received no response” (303–304).

We should lead the world in morality, but not promote a morality so far beyond realism that we subject ourselves to mortal danger. Prager quotes Rabbi Irving (“Yitz”) Greenberg reflecting on the modern State of Israel, surrounded by vicious enemies committed to Israel’s destruction: “If we Jews are five percent better than the rest of the world, we can be a ‘light unto the nations.’ If we are twenty-five percent better than the rest of the world, we can bring the Messiah. If we are fifty percent better than the rest of the world, we’ll all be dead” (316).

Through these and so many other religious-moral teachings, the Torah was a revolution in world history, and continues to bring relevant, and sorely needed, teaching to the modern world.

The Koren Tanakh of the Land of Israel: Exodus

edited by David Arnovitz *et al.* (Koren Publishers, 2019), 305 pages. [7]

Koren Publishers has embarked on an impressive new project, a popular companion to the Torah presenting contemporary research on archaeology, Egyptology, flora and fauna, geology, the languages and realia of the ancient Near East, and other areas that elucidate aspects of the biblical text. It is presented in a similar engaging manner to the Hebrew series, *Olam haTanakh*, and like that Hebrew work was composed by a team of scholars who specialize in a variety of fields of scholarship. There are brief articles and glossy photographs, maps, and illustrations that bring these areas to light. Living up to the standard that the community has come to expect from Koren publications, the volume is an impressive work of graphic design, with a high aesthetic sense. Unlike *Olam haTanakh*, which also offers a running commentary on biblical books, *The Koren Tanakh of the Land of Israel* discusses specifically those background areas that may enhance our understanding of the text within its real-world setting.

This series is written from an Orthodox perspective. Its authors believe that God revealed the Torah to Moses, and they utilize contemporary scholarship as a tool for understanding God's word. The articles generally are presented judiciously, rather than reaching conclusions that exceed the biblical and archaeological evidence. The volume does not purport to be original scholarship, but rather synthesizes contemporary academic scholarship in an accessible and Orthodox-friendly manner.

Here are a few brief examples of how the authors highlight elements of the background of the narrative and laws:

- In Exodus 1:16, Pharaoh orders the midwives Shifra and Puah to "look at the birthstool" (*u-re'iten al ha-ovnayim*). In ancient Egypt and elsewhere in the ancient Near East, women used birth bricks to support their feet while they squatted. In Egypt, they used four bricks made of black Nile mud (9).

- God redeems Israel from Egypt “by a mighty and an outstretched arm” (*be-yad hazaka uvizroa netuya*; e.g., Deuteronomy 4:34; 5:15; 26:8; Jeremiah 32:21; Psalm 136:12). This terminology appears almost exclusively in Tanakh regarding God and the Exodus. The authors quote Egyptologist James Hoffmeier, who suggests that these terms are related to contemporaneous Egyptian military terms referring to Pharaoh’s military might (*khepesh*=arm-power; *per‘*=one whose arm is extended). God specifically employs this terminology in the Torah to convey the message that God will defeat Pharaoh militarily (22).

- The Egyptian Book of the Dead relates how after a person dies, his or her heart is weighed on a scale. If the heart was light, the person was considered righteous and would merit afterlife. In contrast, a heavy heart meant that the person was a sinner, and his or her heart would be devoured by a monster who lurked under the scale. Perhaps the Torah’s references to Pharaoh’s heart being heavy convey the additional notion that in Egypt, a heavy heart brought destruction onto its owner (41).

- Pharaohs were responsible for *Maat*, loosely translated as the cosmic order (Maat also was the name of a goddess in charge of maintaining that cosmic order). When the world turned to chaos during the plagues, Pharaoh would have been held responsible (37–38).

- In Egyptian temples, the innermost compartment was the holy of holies. The room was maintained in complete darkness. A statue of the deity was kept in a cabinet, and no one but the High Priest was allowed to open the cabinet and touch it, or even to enter. On religious festivals, they took the statue out on a boat, kept in its cabinet and protected by a curtain so that no one could look at the statue. This insight from Egyptology is brought to deepen our understanding of why Moshe “hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God” at the burning bush (3:6). “It might have been only natural,” the Koren

commentary suggests, “for Moshe, with his Egyptian background, to cover his face before God. Egyptians were in awe and feared their gods, and it would have been his instinctive reaction to hide as soon as he realized he was encountering the Divine” (19).

- The obscure *orot tehashim* (Exodus 35:7) used in the Tabernacle are likely best explained as deriving from an Egyptian word that refers to a certain type of Egyptian leather (195).

The authors generally present accurate readings of the biblical text and judiciously apply the relevant contemporaneous materials. Occasionally, however, they make excessive efforts to draw parallels between the Torah and its ancient setting. One such example is the discussion of the plague of darkness:

> Then the Lord said to Moses, “Hold out your arm toward the sky that there may be darkness upon the land of Egypt, a darkness that can be touched.” Moses held out his arm toward the sky and thick darkness descended upon all the land of Egypt for three days. People could not see one another, and for three days no one could get up from where he was; but all the Israelites enjoyed light in their dwellings. Pharaoh then summoned Moses and said, “Go, worship the Lord! Only your flocks and your herds shall be left behind; even your children may go with you.” But Moses said, “You yourself must provide us with sacrifices and burnt offerings to offer up to the Lord our God; our own livestock, too, shall go along with us—not a hoof shall remain behind: for we must select from it for the worship of the Lord our God; and we shall not know with what we are to worship the Lord until we arrive there.” But the Lord stiffened Pharaoh’s heart and he would not agree to let them go. Pharaoh said to him, “Be gone from me! Take care not to see me again, for the moment you look upon my face you shall die.” And Moses replied, “You have spoken rightly. I shall not see your face again!” (Exodus 10:21–29).

The authors ask: The plague of darkness is depicted in the Torah as the one that nearly cracked Pharaoh's stubbornness. But why should this particular plague, which inflicted no damage, be so effective? The authors respond that the Egyptian sun god was the head of the Egyptian pantheon. In their mythology, the sun god rode a boat (called a barque) each day from east to west. He was born each morning, was in his prime at noon, and entered the Netherworld in the evening as an old man. During the night, he made his way through the Netherworld in order to be reborn in the morning, but a hostile chaos serpent named Apophis tried to stop him. When the sun rose in the morning, Egyptians could rest assured that the sun god had made it. Egyptians feared that if the sun did not rise in the morning, the world would descend into chaos. Therefore, the plague of darkness would have been particularly horrifying to Pharaoh and the Egyptians.

One may ask two questions against this explanation. First, does the Torah present the plague of darkness as the one that nearly cracked Pharaoh's stubbornness? All Pharaoh says is, "Go, worship the Lord! Only your flocks and your herds shall be left behind; even your children may go with you." This response is not substantially different from his reactions to several other plagues. Contrast that brief reaction with Pharaoh's remarkable admission of error during the earlier plague of hail:

> Thereupon Pharaoh sent for Moses and Aaron and said to them, "I stand guilty this time. The Lord is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong. Plead with the Lord that there may be an end of God's thunder and of hail. I will let you go; you need stay no longer" (Exodus 9:27–28).

Or Pharaoh's response to the plague of locusts:

> Pharaoh hurriedly summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "I stand guilty before the Lord your God and before you. Forgive my offense just this once, and plead with the Lord your God that He but remove this death from me" (Exodus 10:16–17).

No less significantly, the Torah does not mention the sun or its failure to rise in its account of the plague. It appears more likely that the Egyptians faced a massive *hamsin* with thick dust blocking out all sunlight and preventing motion.

Overall, this new series is a welcome contribution to the growing body of Orthodox writings that draw the best from contemporary scholarship in the service of understanding Tanakh. The series also successfully presents the material in an accessible manner that will benefit people of all backgrounds. The high-quality scholarship, coupled with the engaging presentation, will make this series a valuable companion for learning Torah. We look forward to the publication of future volumes of the set as well.

Notes

[1] This review appeared originally on December 7, 2022, at https://www.jewishideas.org/article/book-review-sephardim-sephardism-and-jewish-peoplehood.

[2]This review appeared originally on April 6, 2022, at https://www.jewishideas.org/article/book-review-haburas-passover-volume.

[3] This review appeared originally on October 21, 2022, at https://www.jewishideas.org/article/book-review-sukkot-companion-habura.

[4] This review appeared originally on March 28, 2022, at https://www.jewishideas.org/article/review-dennis-prager-genesis.

[5] This review appeared originally on April 3, 2022, at https://www.jewishideas.org/article/review-dennis-prager-exodus.

[6]This review appeared originally on October 28, 2022, at https://www.jewishideas.org/article/book-review-dennis-prager-deuteronomy.

[7] This review appeared originally on January 15, 2020, at https://traditiononline.org/11255-2/.