

BOOK REVIEW

Searching for Authentic Judaism: A Review of *The Search Committee: A Novel* by Marc Angel

Reviewed by Alan J. Yuter

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Searching for Authentic Judaism: A Review of *The Search Committee: A Novel* by Marc Angel (Jerusalem and New York. Urim Fiction, 2008)

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The Search Committee is a novel that effectively narrates the conflicting memories, successes and failures of the culture of “*Yeshivot Lita*”—the Lithuanian *yeshivot* that provided the educational and philosophic foundations of American Orthodoxy. It is a delicately balanced work consisting of thirteen chapters, each one allowing a narrator and two passionate ideological antagonists to speak about what they believe are Judaism’s fundamental principles. The author, Marc Angel, is well qualified to write a Torah novel, being an Orthodox rabbi trained in both Jewish studies and English literature.

The culture of Lithuanian Jewish tradition excludes other interpretations of Judaism, Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike.

In the tradition of the classical epic, the story covers the momentous week when the new *Rosh Yeshiva* (seminary head) of a specific seminary, “*Yeshivas Lita*,” is selected. The choice of a fitting replacement impacts the future of Orthodoxy as well as the destiny of the yeshiva, whose name reflects the culture of Lithuanian Jewish tradition that excludes other interpretations of Judaism, Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike. Similar to Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* and Yehuda Amichai’s *Not of this Time, Not of this Place*, this short novel presents two sides of a social and theological war with an alternating narration of clashing perspectives. Just as Tolstoy and Amichai juxtapose macro and micro narratives, Angel presents a

microcosmic narrative with macrocosmic implications. Unlike Herman Melville, Angel allows each character to speak with his unique voice *en medias res*, reflecting how the many voices of the past converge into a critical moment of the present.

The story begins with the each of the two contenders for reins of the yeshiva explaining why he should direct the school and, by implication, chart the future of Orthodox Judaism. The yeshiva’s founder, R. Leibel Grossman, immigrated to New York via Berlin from Poland—the same route taken by the father and son tandem of Rabbis Moshe and Joseph B. Soloveitchik of Yeshiva University. R. Leibel’s son, R. Yosef, succeeded his father, similar to how Rav Joseph Soloveitchik succeeded his father at Yeshiva University’s Yeshivat Rabbenu Isaac Elchanan in 1941. But R. Joseph Soloveitchik studied philosophy in Berlin while this R. Yosef did not, indicating that we are reading a work of historical fiction whose characters are archetypes but not embodiments of actual historical personalities.

The “war and peace” epic pits R. Yosef Grossman’s reactionary traditionalist son, R. Shimshon, against the modernizing *wunderkind*, R. David Mercado. The former’s first name alludes to the arrogant, powerful, but ultimately blind biblical slayer of the Philistines. Grossman’s ego, high-handedness and sense of entitlement are the most conspicuous aspects of his persona. He reveals these traits in his ironic first person narration in which he knowingly pleads his case and

unknowingly broadcasts his own unworthiness. Convinced that the *Rosh Yeshiva* office naturally belongs to him by dint of his pedigree and ultra-Orthodox credentials, Grossman's tone, temper and taste resemble the Philistine giant, Goliath. His family name, Grossman, is a double *entendre*, meaning "great man" or ultra-Orthodox *gadol*—or alternatively, a gross man who is self-absorbed, one who possesses a large memory but a mere pedestrian intellect. Mercado's pedigree consists of only of own prodigious accomplishments, and his freshly framed modernity is infused with the quest to recover the best of Jewish tradition.

Torah truth resides in the most reasonable interpretation, not in the charisma of rabbinic authorities

Mercado's modern sensibility clashes with the religious, social and ideological conservatism that Shimshon Grossman regards as the essence of all that is Jewish and holy. Mercado's first name echoes the young biblical David—the least of Jesse's sons who ultimately earns the Kingship of Israel. His family name in Ladino refers to the first name of a child transferred from one family to another to avoid the angel of death—thus alluding to the frailty of the hero's origin and mission. The core presentation here is of two contending visions of Orthodox Judaism: the "tradition" policed by European culture conservatives who erect culture barriers and demand unconditional deference to Torah as they understand it vs. the new and exciting search for truth that uses modern historical and philological methodology to uncover the richness of Torah as balm for the human condition. For Grossman, Torah is by definition understood only by ideologically correct rabbis, and God's truth is ultimately unknowable to the world exclusively through them. Mercado sides with Maimonides, for whom Torah truth resides in the most reasonable interpretation rather than in the

charisma of rabbinic authorities or the entitled pious reader. So it is for Mercado that Torah is discovered by decoding the holy text.

The second sequence of confessions presents the wives of the contending rabbis. Mrs. Grossman shares her husband sense of entitlement, talent and "modesty," which she understands as a badge of attire that allows her to proudly broadcast her membership in ultra-Orthodox society. Such modesty does not preclude her speaking negatively about the person of Mrs. Mercado, who acquired a secular education, studies poetry and is a partner, not an extension, of her husband. Mrs. Grossman calls attention to Mrs. Mercado's "immodesty"—her non-affiliation with *haredi* religion—because she refuses to wear a wig, a practice not uncommon among the wives of the leading 20th century rabbis of Lithuania, including Dr. Tanya Soloveitchik. (Mrs. Mercado believes that expensive aristocratic wigs are immodest in the extreme.) Mrs. Grossman is also scandalized by Mrs. Mercado's rumored lack of pedigree, with the reader alone aware that she is a convert, like the Biblical Ruth whose descendant was King David. According to Talmudic law, women's wigs may not be worn outside of a courtyard on the Sabbath, nor may converts be slighted (T.B. *Shabbat* 64b). Thus to the knowledgeable reader, Mrs. Grossman is depicted as adhering to social Orthodoxy but ignoring *halakhic* Orthodoxy.

The third sequence of narratives portrays faculty member Hazkel Gottlieb favoring Mercado. Gottlieb believes that current Orthodoxy is "off the path" of truth while the freshness of Mercado's perspective empowers the Torah to address contemporary realities. On the other hand, Mr. Shabsai Velt claims to know both men but is committed to the tradition of social *status*. And because modern values are evil, he rejects even well-intentioned modernizers like Mercado. This reflects the well known and often harsh debate tearing at the fabric of Orthodoxy today. According to

“Culture Orthodoxy,” as understood by R. Moses Sofer (*Hatam Sofer*), “the new is forbidden by Torah.” But according to “Halakhah Orthodoxy” of *Mishna Eduyot* 2:2 and *Bet yosef* 1:1, only acts that are explicitly forbidden are forbidden by Torah.

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In the fourth narrative sequence, two of the yeshiva’s students contrast the conflicting Orthodox Judaisms from their own needs and existential conditions. Shammai Abelson’s name reminds the reader that the able son, Grossman, should emerge as the *rosh yeshiva*. Like his namesake in the *Mishna*, Shammai is aristocratic, hard and autocratic. While recognizing Mercado’s talents, Abelson views Grossman to be the more “authentic” of the two. Mercado is likeable and talented, but his innovations put at risk the traditions of social inertia and Orthodoxy’s elites. (This is naturally contrasted with the dialect of Judaism’s classical library, where it is the disinterested principle rather than the familiar expectation that is normative.) Chaim Boruch Haber is a devoted follower of Mercado and his innovative, engaging approach. For him, only Mercado’s interpretation of Jewish tradition is ethical, critical, and anthropological—and applicable to everyday life. Ultimately it was only Mercado’s approach that convinced Haber to remain in the yeshiva and Torah life.

The final narrative juxtaposes the guilt ridden, affluent and assimilated Kalman Rabinowitz (now Clyde Robinson) and the Modern

Orthodox widow, Esther Neuhaus [“New House”]. Driven by shame for his secular life and his children’s abandoning Judaism altogether, Robinson is a *gelt*-giver, but his largesse is only to soothe his guilt, an offering to assuage his own agony. He wants the Judaism that he rejected to remain unchanged as compensation for his own changes, both his business success and his Jewish failure. Neuhaus’ family follows the German “*Torah Im Derekh Erets*” ideology and hence she objects to Yeshivas Lita’s cultural ethic. Yeshivas Lita also imposes its style, (mis)pronunciations and biases upon all those it controls. More significantly, by creating elite learners who are incompetent as earners forces otherwise pious men to marry for wealth, not love, the yeshiva in turn yields a population of parasitic pietists. According to Maimonides, only a select few may enjoy a life of uninterrupted learning. Others who learn but refuse to work and are committed to live off charity forfeit their portion in the world-to-come. Ironically, it is the non-observant Robinson who prefers low-brow uninformed traditionalism, while the old-moneyed, refined Orthodox Esther Neuhaus prefers the modern Mercado.

Angel’s thin novel exposes the thick culture pulsating in contemporary Orthodoxy’s conflict of cultures and ideals. The future of Yeshivas Lita, the future of Torah life and Orthodoxy in the 21st century hangs in the balance. While Mercado probes for future possibilities, Grossman reifies—indeed defies—the past that validates his status and legitimates his claims. Angel’s work is a plea that all Jewish voices consistent with the Orthodox canon be rediscovered and revived, not a polemic against religious and cultural conservatism. His novel is a literary prayer for the symphony of diverse Jewish voices to be heard.