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www.theaegispress.com

(858)539-9847
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AN INTERVIEW WITH DANIEL SPIRO

AUTHOR OF *MOSES THE HERETIC*

Q: *What makes this book unique?*

A: There are plenty of books about religious prophets. But this book portrays a prophet in an authentically Jewish way, and not many do. More importantly, *Moses the Heretic* doesn't dwell on the golden age of some far away Jewish past but on the contemporary world as a place where a true prophet might be able to part the seas of conflict with new approaches to peace. We're all familiar with the way Christians or Muslims speak about Jesus or Muhammad. Their devotees treat these figures as if they're close to perfect in every meaningful way. And this kind of veneration goes on in Jewish literature as well. If you read the Jewish legends about the Baal Shem Tov or Hillel, you'll read about figures who are essentially mythical. The Baal Shem Tov – the legendary founder of Hasidism who was born at the beginning of the 18th century – is commonly portrayed as someone who literally walks off a cliff and then is saved by a divine miracle. We're told that these Jewish prophets are human, but to me, they seem half-man, half-god. And that's not the spirit of Judaism that I love the most.

Moses Levine is different. We see his warts. We see his foibles. And yet we marvel at the purity of his heart, the tirelessness of his energies, and the extent of his commitment to heal our planet. I'd like to think that for a Jew, Moses will be inspiring. And even if you're not Jewish but want to understand the religion better, this book will be a highly entertaining vehicle for learning what my faith is all about.

I see Judaism as a very earth-based religion. It's less about the ideal than about the real. But there's also a utopian component. And all of this comes together in Moses Levine. He's a dreamer, he's a thinker, he's one hard worker, and yes, he has animal needs of his own. He's also scrupulously honest and reliable. In short, he's a *mensch*. Through this book, I try to show the reader what that word really means.

Q: We can read what Moses Levine or his nemesis, Rachel Horowitz, thinks about the Middle East. But what do you think? What's your opinion about the ongoing conflict between Arabs and Jews in the Middle East?

A: I think things are going to get worse before they get better, but I refuse to look at the problems of the Middle East as unsolvable. I also refuse to see the problems solely from the standpoint of what's good for the Jews.

Viscerally, I can't help but care more about Israel's welfare than that of any other Middle Eastern country. But I believe we'll never have peace in that region until more Jews sympathize with the Arab perspective and more Arabs appreciate the perspective of the Hebrew people. Hopefully, this book will move some people in those directions.

If you're asking me whether I agree more with Moses' perspective or Rachel's, I think I make that pretty clear in the book.

Q: In a world with such varied peoples—with all their various philosophies and beliefs—how can we ever manage to make compromise and to find peace? How, for example, can we get believers and atheists to speak respectfully to one another?

A: We have to commit to taking on the two scourges – apathy and dogmatism. My books are all about trying to interest people in what I call the dialogue. I want to live in a world where people are as fascinated by perspectives that they don't share as those that they do. And I want us to be able to reach out to talk to one another respectfully, rather than just assuming that anyone who doesn't agree with us is mean-spirited or an idiot.

When it comes to matters of religion, I'd like my fellow political progressives to realize that spirituality – and God -- is here to stay, and we should celebrate that. Instead of treating people of faith like they're anachronisms, we might want to take stock of all the ways that spirituality can enrich us. We don't need to be fundamentalists in order to be religious. Frankly, we don't need to buy into the traditional ideas about divinity in order to love God. I find that the more broadly we define God – the more different conceptions we accept as authentic possibilities – the more people will be intrigued by religion.

Four hundred years ago, a man like Moses Levine would have been called not just a heretic, but an atheist as well. Now, he can be accepted as a God-intoxicated man who simply conceives of God in a non-traditional way. That's what I call progress.

Q: Let me ask about your work outside of your book. Your blog is called “Empathic Rationalist.” What does that mean?

A: “Empathic rationalism” is a philosophy that I spent many, many pages explaining in my first novel, *The Creed Room*, and I hate to sum it up in just a few words. . . . But I’ll do it anyway.

At the core of Empathic Rationalism is the commitment to choose one’s beliefs and live one’s life by following the voice of reason wherever it leads – and that means never adopting a view that seems less reasonable than some other perspective simply because it makes us happy. In other words, Empathic Rationalists seek wisdom even more than their own happiness. Yet they value something else perhaps even more than wisdom, and that’s empathy. Empathic Rationalism stands for the proposition that empathy must be the rudder that steers our lives.

History teaches that without empathy, even the smartest, most intellectual minds can come up with some very ugly ideas and behavior. Empathic Rationalism is a philosophy that seeks a life of beauty, and there’s no soul more beautiful than an empathic one.

Now, there is also a third component of Empathic Rationalism, which is passion. Without it, you can possess all the rationality and empathy in the world, but you may not be able to get much accomplished.

To sum up, passion should be our sail, reason our keel, and empathy our rudder.

Q: You’re a Senior Trial Counsel with the United States Department of Justice. How did you come to write novels that have nothing to do with law?

A: I’d been writing essays for years, but as I was turning 40, I reached the point where I needed a bigger challenge. I wanted to express my philosophy of life, both in order to share my thoughts with other people and, frankly, to help think through my own ideas. I thought about writing a dry philosophy book, but that’s just not my personality. I wanted to create books that would be fun to write, equally fun to read, and accessible to anyone who enjoys thinking about the big issues. I’d like to think that *Moses the Heretic* is that kind of book.

Q: I think what most people – and certainly most professionals – would really want to know is how you’ve been able to balance writing, family life, professional obligations, and other responsibilities.

A: It’s very difficult – there’s no question about it. I feel compelled to take care of my obligations at work, because I can’t stand the idea of getting paid by the government to fight fraud and then dropping the ball.

I won’t let that happen. I also don’t want to be one of those workaholics who neglect his family. I adore my daughters, and my number one aspiration in life is to be married to the same woman for 60 years. We have 41 to go, and if we keep our health, I know we’ll get there. So how much time does that leave for writing? Or for relaxing?

Candidly, I look forward to the day when I have enough money to retire from work and devote my weekdays to reading and writing. That sounds like heaven on earth. For now, I’ll just have to deal with my guilt feelings over not having enough time to think and write about all the great questions of philosophy.

<p>For more information, please contact: Sarah Reidy • 404-849-1562 • sarah.reidy@gmail.com</p>
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