

Project Witness

Book Review of Rabbi Isaac C. Avigdor's Work

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FRIDAY, AUGUST 29, 2003 ALGEMEINER JOURNAL -B4- Algemeiner Journal Friday, August 29, 2003 Book Review An Exhilarating Journey of the By Rabbi Shlomo Yaffe We live in a generation of specialists, in which there are many people who do one or two things well and have vast knowledge of their chosen scholarly pursuit, profession, or craft at their fingertips. Rarer than ever is the true polymath, an individual possessing true talent and skill in a broad range of knowledge and skills. This is as true in the realm of Judaic Scholarship and aesthetics as it is in the general community. It is therefore a rare pleasure to come across a book written by such a polymath. Rabbi Isaac C. Avigdor's "A Survivor's Thanksgiving (Shehechyanu)" is a cornucopia of artistry, scholarship, insightful memoirs, and some remarkable vignettes of people and places in prewar and Holocaust-era Jewish Eastern Europe. The book is an exhilarating journey through much of the landscape of Jewish life and lore, literally from cover to cover. The drawings on the cover are by Rabbi Avigdor himself as are the powerful images of the Holocaust drawn by our author in its aftermath. If the only contribution of Rabbi Avigdor from this book was his heroism and faith during the Holocaust, this would already be a great book. However, there is a great deal more here. There are firsthand accounts of life in the home of one of Poland's great Rabbis: Rabbi Avigdor's father Rabbi Jacob Avigdor. We discover that Rabbi Avigdor published his first work at the age of 13. His Bar Mitzvah Pilpul (a deep Talmudic discourse that Bar Mitzvah boys would compose and present in the days when a Bar Mitzvah was a profound religious rite of passage, rather than a three-ring circus) was deemed worthy of publication and was widely disseminated. After the Holocaust, he found a surviving copy in Israel! This remarkable book is a "Thanksgiving Offering" by Rabbi Avigdor upon attaining his "second Bar Mitzvah" at the age of 83. Rabbi Avigdor explains this concept beautifully in one of the very moving chapters of the book. I was charmed by the idea that, from Judaism's perspective, it appears that "life begins at 83." Indeed, the years have only improved the powerful pen of this remarkable writer. Rabbi Avigdor writes powerful pieces that brook no obstacles to devastating candor. There is a remarkable piece on Rabin's assassination and its aftermath that must have taken a huge amount of courage to write. Rabbi Avigdor, as the title of the book attests, is a survivor of the Holocaust's assault on the storied Jewry of Poland. The sections dealing with the Holocaust are stark and powerful. One is reminded of the tone of Eli Wiesel's writing. However, these accounts speak also of hope and resistance amidst death and despair. We hear of Rabbi Avigdor's miraculous escape from certain death by the splitting of a stone - several thousand years after Moses. We see him as a young teen using every bit of his considerable artistic skills to forge "Aryan" identity papers to enable Jewish girls and women to live disguised as Poles saving many lives. In the years following the Second World War, he met many of these people; they credited him with their survival. It is the belief of this reviewer that if all we saw of Rabbi Avigdor's description of postwar Hartford Jewry as seen through the lens of his long and illustrious leadership of The United Synagogues of Hartford is valuable and illuminating. The last section of the book is a chance to join Rabbi Avigdor at the height of his powers (now!) as he takes us on a breathtaking journey through the Jewish Year. Every holiday stands up and reveals some hidden treasure that we must have just missed seeing all these years. These essays bathe each holiday in a unique, relevant, and inspiring light. This unique light is that of a Rabbi, Author, and Teacher, who stands like a lighthouse: firmly planted on the mighty cliffs of prewar Polish Jewry, yet illuminating a clear path for us into the future. Rabbi Shlomo Yaffe is Rabbi at Agudas Achim Synagogue in West Hartford, CT. 60 DAYS: A Spiritual Guide to the High Holid-

Access Points

Personal Names:

- Elie Wiesel
- Jacob Avigdor

Geographic Names:

- Poland