

Rejoice in Your Festivals: Penetrating Insights into Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot

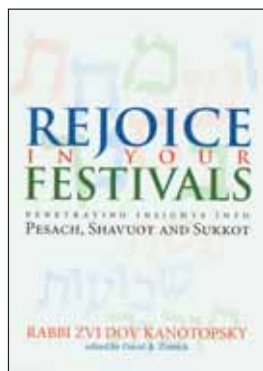
By Rabbi Zvi Dov Kanotopsky

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231 pages

Reviewed by Stephen J. Savitsky



I was delighted to hear about the recent publication of *Rejoice in Your Festivals: Penetrating Insights into Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot*, a book filled with the creative and inspiring *derashot* of Rabbi Zvi Dov (Harold) Kanotopsky. Full disclosure: Rabbi Kanotopsky was the rabbi of the Young Israel of Eastern Parkway during my formative years in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and was also my *rebbe* at Yeshiva University High School for Boys. True, I may not be the most objective reviewer, but I hope I can, at the very least, convey the profound and enduring impact the author's Torah had upon me and so many others like me.

When I was growing up in the 1950s and '60s in Crown Heights, the

neighborhood was home to many Holocaust survivors and to second- and third-generation American Jews who tried hard to keep Torah laws—some even sacrificed jobs in order to keep Shabbat. But the majority of them lacked a formal yeshiva education; many had spent their childhoods struggling to survive the Nazi hell and others who had grown up in America simply

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didn't have the luxury of attending the few *yeshivot* that were around in those days. These earnest, hard-working and God-fearing Jews comprised the bulk of Rabbi Kanotopsky's congregation. Nevertheless, Rabbi Kanotopsky's *derashot* were profound and thought provoking; he raised his congregants' level of Torah knowledge and constantly challenged them to see the Torah as relevant and exciting. I still remember walking on Friday nights to his *parashat hashavuah* class. Remarkably, I even recall the content of many of those brilliant *shiurim*, and have since used some of Rabbi Kanotopsky's ideas (giving him credit, of course) in speeches I have delivered over the years.

A *talmid muvhak* of Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik, Rabbi Kanotopsky taught at various schools at Yeshiva University for twenty-eight years. He was a sensitive and caring *rebbe*. In my senior year of high school, he even

insisted on driving me to my *bechinah* (entrance exam) at Yeshiva University to make sure I would get into the "right" *shiur*. He wanted to speak directly to Rabbi Mendel Zaks, *zt"l*, the son-in-law of the Chofetz Chaim, about me—he was that kind of person.

Reading this book, one senses the great Zionist fever that burned inside Rabbi Kanotopsky and eventually encouraged him to make *aliyah* in the prime of his life. He left for Israel in 1970, when few were doing so, leaving behind a successful rabbinic career. (After serving as the spiritual leader of the Young Israel of Eastern Parkway, Rabbi Kanotopsky was rabbi of the Young Israel of West Hempstead in Long Island.) In Israel, he served as the director of the Institute for Advanced Talmud Study at Bar-Ilan University, while also lecturing at Hebrew University and Michlalah College for Women in Jerusalem. In 1973, at the young age of fifty, Rabbi Kanotopsky passed away.

Rabbi Kanotopsky kept meticulous notes for virtually every sermon he ever gave. *Rejoice in Your Festivals* is a compilation of his sermons on the *Shalosh Regalim*, which he delivered from 1945 through 1967. The book, which is organized according to these holidays—Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot—was edited by David A. Zomick, a physicist who is also a former student of Rabbi Kanotopsky. Reading through these sermons gives one a taste of the author's deep Torah knowledge, as well as insight into life in America during this period. Each *derashah* reflects the mood of the Orthodox Jewish world as it relates to historical events unfolding at that time, such as the conclusion of World War II, the

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establishment of Medinat Yisrael, the Six-Day War, et cetera. After reading the *derashot*, one not only walks away with a keen understanding of the *chagim*, but he also begins to visualize the mindset of the people living at that time. This makes for an incredibly powerful book.

Take, for example, Rabbi Kanotopsky's sermon delivered on Pesach, March 29, 1945. Note the date—Germany and Japan had not yet formerly surrendered, but it was clear to all that victory was in sight. US troops had already captured the Philippines, and the German troops were in retreat. While anticipating the end of the war and the freedom that awaited European Jewry, Rabbi Kanotopsky expresses reservations about the future, finding his fear best expressed in the Haggadah itself. "*Karev yom asher hu lo yom velo laylah*, A day is drawing nigh that is neither day nor night." Rabbi Kanotopsky goes on:

Yes, this is the picture the poet paints—and how appropriate it seems, in our day, for the period ahead, for the weeks and months that lie before us. It is not a period of a rising sun. It brings with it neither the sunlight of the day nor the dark shadows of the night. It brings with it only doubts and uncertainties.


At that tenuous time, Rabbi Kanotopsky was obviously troubled by what lay ahead, not certain what the future held for the Jewish people. Churchill was unsupportive of the creation of a Jewish state and of any significant Jewish migration to Palestine. He even refused to rescind the 1939 MacDonald White Paper that proposed the creation of a unitary Palestine state and severely limited Jewish immigration. In his *derashah*, Rabbi Kanotopsky quotes Megillat Esther: King Achashverosh asks Queen Esther, "What do you want, what is your petition? Even if it is half the kingdom it shall be fulfilled." Drawing on a *gemara*, Rabbi Kanotopsky explains that Achashverosh is really saying, "You [can] have half the kingdom but you cannot have Eretz Yisrael, you cannot have the *Beit Hamikdash*." Painting Churchill as

a modern-day Achashverosh, Rabbi Kanotopsky fears that the British prime minister will say that "the Jews can have freedom and tolerance and what they will ... but they cannot have the Bet Ha-Mikdash or the Land of Israel, which would split and destroy the British Empire." How fascinating it is to revisit history at a moment of time seen through the eyes of a great Torah scholar! Perhaps it is time, he says, not to let the Land of Israel lie in the hands of the Churchills or the Roosevelts.

Indeed, he says, it is time to follow the words of the Prophet Isaiah: "If you desire it, repent and come" (Isaiah 21:12). Urging the Jewish people to be proactive in the manner of Isaiah, Rabbi Kanotopsky writes:

We need to show the world. We need to demonstrate before the eyes of the entire world that our position is unequivocal and unbending.... The voice of Israel will not be quieted until Eretz Yisrael is restored to us.

Rabbi Kanotopsky urged his congregation to demonstrate and to lobby, to do what had to be done in order to ensure the eventual establishment of a Jewish state. Reading these passionate words more than sixty years later, I could almost envision the strong emotions that must have been felt that Pesach in the sanctuary in the Young Israel of Eastern Parkway.

This book contains thirty-eight *derashot* in total, each one a gem in its wisdom as well as in its ability to depict life in America during the formative years of American Orthodox Jewry. I strongly recommend it to anyone who enjoys probing the inner meaning of the holidays. I'm sure the thousands of congregants and *talmidim* that Rabbi Kanotopsky taught during his years as a *rav* and teacher would find the book even more meaningful. Upon hearing of the book's publication, I seized the opportunity to review it. I wanted to have the great *zechut* of revisiting with my former *rebbe*, who had a profound influence on me, and deepened my desire to spend as much time as I can in *limud haTorah*. 

God, Israel, & Shiloh: Returning to the Land

By David Rubin
Mazo Publishers
Jerusalem, 2007
185 pages

Reviewed by Ann Johnson



In the winter of 2001, David Rubin and his three-year-old son Reuven ("Ruby") were driving on Patriarch's Road from Jerusalem to their home in Shiloh, the route taken by Abraham and Sarah on their journey from Haran down into Egypt, when a hail of bullets suddenly sprayed into the car.

The car radio went dead, as did the car's engine. I saw the sparks from what appeared to be four bullets zooming past me, as the car was slowly coasting down the hill. The bullets had tracers on them so they appeared as four orange sparks whizzing past, perhaps two inches in front of my eyes. Then I felt a terrible pain, like a concentrated ton of bricks crashing into my left leg, and the blood started gushing out fiercely, like an open fire hydrant.

Remembering his toddler strapped into his car seat, Rubin frantically checked to see if he was hurt. Eyes and mouth wide open, Ruby appeared to be okay but possibly in a state of shock. It was only later that the medics discovered a bullet in the base of Ruby's brain.

Ann Johnson is the author of A United Jerusalem: the Story of Ateret Cohanim (New Jersey, 1992). She has written several articles for Jewish Action.