

Return of the Rabbi

By Lawrence J. Epstein

Thursday the Rabbi Walked Out. Harry Kemelman. (Morrow, \$8.95).

Rabbi David Small has returned in this fast-paced novel to round out those mysteries whose titles began with a day of the week.

Once again Harry Kemelman has produced a book you can't put down. Fans of the series will not want to miss this outing.

Thursday the Rabbi Walked Out is a typical Kemelman work in that the author mixes a regular mystery story with a sociological analysis of that part of the Jewish community associated with a Temple, and he discusses religious questions of interest to those Jews.

The mystery in this case involves the killing of a multi-millionaire anti - Semite. The cast of characters is varied, with several being given the means, motive, and opportunity to commit the crime.

Major characters include the victims's illegitimate son by a Jewish mother, the President

of a bank, his secretary, a leader of women's rights in the Temple, the secretary's husband and snoop mother - in - law, the drunken janitor at the Temple, some wealthy new Jews in town, and the President of the Temple.

A number of these characters emerge as the main suspects, as Rabbi Small, in conjunction with the Chief of Police, Hugh Lanigan, tries to track down the killer.

The plot is complex. Many of the characters seem to be at the scene of the crime at the time of the murder. Thus alibis become crucial in this case. The police are unsure about the order in which the objects were hit by flying bullets in the room where the corpse was found. Therefore the facts we learn about each suspect's ability to use weapons are vital.

While it is fairly easy to guess the identity of the killer, the book remains a good mystery because of Kemelman's ability to shift scenes smoothly, to create tension, and to balance his large array of characters, as well as his interest in discussing some very important topics.

Indeed, it may be said that this is Kemelman's most ambitious attempt to deal with questions crucial to the Jewish community. The three central Jewish questions handled in this book are: the relationship of a Rabbi to a congregation, the possibility of including women in a minyan, and the causes of anti - Semitism.

Readers familiar with the earlier books will recognize the first of these questions as a recurrent theme. Once again the Rabbi's job is preserved, but only after a bruising confrontation with the President of the Congregation.

Kemelman's belief in the autonomy of the Rabbi, indeed his view of the Rabbi as the great problem - solver in Jewish life, is tested here by including a current question: the place of women in the service.

Somewhat surprisingly, Rabbi Small opposes the attempt to include women in the minyan as too obviously a concern with fashion and too little a concern with Jewish law.

Interestingly, it is not the Rabbi who offers us an explanation of anti - Semitism. Instead, the reader is provided with a rather complete and somewhat complex psychological portrait of an anti - Semite. In this story he is a man who believes that Jews are better than everyone else morally and ethically. That, he claims, makes all other peoples uncomfortable and makes them hate Jews. This particular man had been rejected by a Jewish woman he loved. This sense of inferiority and rejection, Kemelman suggests, is at the root of anti - Semitism.

Rabbi Small relies less on logic in this case than on coincidental luck. Still, the Rabbi is an interesting figure, remaining cut off from those around him, staying in his own uniquely Jewish mind, a mind capable of grappling with the ultimate mystery of life and death.

Now that Kemelman has run through the week, anxious readers will speculate on the next title. Will he return to Friday? Will he switch to holidays, as in Passover, the Rabbi Came Back?

Everyone who loves the Rabbi books will be waiting to find out.

Passover Message

By Morton L. Mandel
Pres. Council of Jewish Fed.

Our Passover celebration this year comes at a time when our hearts are filled with joy and gratitude. It is most fitting that the signing of the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt should take place on the threshold of Passover.

Yet we know that real peace for Israel and the Middle East is far from a reality, and our hope is that efforts will continue by all parties to develop true peace among all nations in the Middle East.

We too will be deeply engaged in the quest for peace. This will be central to our agenda, as we here in freedom pursue our basic goal of a strengthened Jewish life in our own communities and in Jewish communities everywhere.

On Passover, Israel and world Jewry stand united as we join to celebrate a cherished vision -- of a world in which each nation, and each individual is afforded freedom, justice, understanding and respect.

Our dreams and hopes are a step closer to reality this year. For this, we can all be grateful.

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