



Reflections on Judaism and Hinduism

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Abstract

This paper offers a comparative analysis of Hinduism and Judaism, largely based on references and quotes from the book *The Jewish Encounter with Hinduism—Wisdom, Spirituality, Identity* by Dr. Alon Goshen-Gottstein. It visits topics such as ethnicity, conversion, pluralism and universalism, tolerance and intolerance. The paper also questions the reasons of Jewish seekers of Hindu spirituality, doubting Dr. Goshen-Gottstein's argument that this is due to a crisis in Judaism, but rather due to prevalence of left-brain thinking over right-brain thinking in Judaism. The paper concludes with a parable that relates to one finding a treasure hidden where one least expects to find it.

Keywords Hinduism · Judaism · Theology · Interfaith

These reflections on two of the world's most important ethnic religions were inspired by a book by Alon Goshen-Gottstein (hereafter AGG) entitled *The Jewish Encounter with Hinduism—Wisdom, Spirituality, Identity* (New York, 2016). This book is a wide-ranging study of Jewish historical contact with Hinduism, an analysis of similarities and differences between the two traditions, and is replete with tentative suggestions about future contact. It is written with passion against the stimulating background of AGG's own personal spiritual journey as an Orthodox Jew who has found wisdom and inspiration among India's religions.

Though I have been stimulated by AGG's work, I have tried to point out where I differ from him about both religious traditions, since I do not always agree with his analysis and conclusions. I hope that my remarks and occasional criticisms will help enhance AGG's important contribution to greater mutual understanding of Hinduism from a Jewish perspective.

In mapping out my thoughts on the subject, I realize that all generalizations are inexact. This is true when dealing with a relatively compact religion like Judaism,

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albeit with a number of significant subdivisions, how much more so when dealing with a highly complex assembly of religious traditions incorporated into Hinduism.

Ethnicity

Let us begin with some seeming similarities between the two faiths. Both Judaism and Hinduism are ethnic religions essentially tied to a specific people or group of peoples, and to a somewhat lesser extent also tied to particular geographic domains.

AGG writes about this similarity:¹

Religious identity is not established in relation to general beliefs, but in relation to membership in particular ethnic communities, whose identities are themselves closely related to the geographic boundaries associated with these communities, whether or not these geographic boundaries are the present boundaries within which the community lives. All these lead to a further characterization that provides a common basis for Jewish and Hindu identity. Both are non-missionizing communities. Given the ethnic, territorial, and ritual dimensions of these communities and their identities, both may be characterized as non-missionary. In the broader framework of world religions, this is an important characterization. In fact,...Judaism and Hinduism end up being the only two members in this class of religions. Hinduism and Judaism thus emerge as two religions particularly close to one another, when seen in the broader context of world religions.

Firstly a small caveat. Judaism and Hinduism are not the only non-missionary ethnic religions. There are others, the most obvious examples being Shinto, the national religion of Japan, and Zoroastrianism.

The second, larger, caveat is that the ethnic dimension is rather different in Judaism from the ethnic dimension in Hinduism. Judaism, although focused on the People of Israel (i.e. Jews), does allow for conversion, and thus while not actively proselytizing does have the possibility of the inclusion of non-Jews in its ethnicity. Hinduism does not. Traditional Hindu religion in the past, and still in most of its sub-traditions today, does not allow for the possibility of conversion, as we understand the term. Though scholars maintain that whole groups were absorbed by Hinduism long ago, and assigned caste status, this is not part of Hindu self-understanding.

Conversion and Re-Conversion

In modern times, some Hindu teachers have encouraged their non-Hindu followers to commit themselves to Hindu doctrines and thus have engineered a kind of pseudo-conversion to Hinduism. This has been going on at least since the time of Swami

¹ P.57, discussing Barbara Holdrege's work *Veda and Torah: Transcending the Textuality of Scripture* (1996).

Vivekananda (1863–1902), who came from India to Chicago in 1893 to attend the Parliament of the World's Religions, and himself initiated some non-Hindu followers into the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society that he founded, although officially Vedanta Centers do not call this conversion. Like Vivekananda, those Hindu *gurus*, coming to the West and winning followers outside of the Hindu population, seem to have been influenced by their experience of Moslem and Christian missionaries in India. Certainly India has long been exposed to such missionary activity, which has always been highly resented by Hindus.

The pseudo-conversion brought about by Hindu missionizing, however, is not accepted by orthodox Hindu leaders in India. It is true that in the distant past, Jains and Buddhists, both of whose respective religions emerged from a Hindu background, did carry their message to outsiders. Their missionary work in India, however, came to an end with the Hindu revival in the late third century CE under the Gupta and Pallava dynasties. Buddhist missionaries did continue to seek converts far beyond India, but premodern Hindu preachers always restricted their message to the Hindu fold. Indeed, they even regarded the act of leaving the holy ground of India as forbidden and incurring pollution.

In the recent past, ceremonies for the re-conversion of Hindus, particularly lower-caste Hindus, who had adopted Islam, Christianity or Buddhism were developed in India. These ceremonies were specifically invented to deal with non-Hindu missionary activity. The difference between conversion and re-conversion is that while a new convert needs to have a status within the caste system, which determines his or her duties in life (*dharma*), re-converts are always officially ex-Hindus who have entered into another religious tradition. Their caste status and *dharma* need not change on their return to Hinduism, or at least they can be artificially assigned such a status, so that re-conversion is merely a symbolic ceremony.

With the modern "conversion" of individual non-Indians to a Hindu lifestyle, such as by the Hare Krishnas or by other cult groups, there is no caste status, no assigned *dharma*, no rules for contact with higher castes or pariahs, no caste rules for marriage, and no purity restrictions. Although some non-Hindus have achieved high positions as spiritual leaders of such groups, the non-Hindu members essentially still remain *mlecchas*, that is foreigners, as far as orthodox Hindus are concerned, and their groups or cults exist on the Hindu fringe.

The matter of conversion is not entirely a peripheral issue, because it means that for Judaism, the truths it maintains are in some way universal, although limited by the Jewish belief that its religion is currently restricted to ethnic or converted Jews who have been assigned a special role. The rest of mankind is meant to abide by the seven Noahide laws,² and only in eschatological time will they come to realize the ultimate truths of Jewish religious teaching.

² The prohibitions of idolatry, blasphemy, bloodshed, sexual sins, theft, and eating meat from a living animal, as well as the injunction to establish a legal system, *Tosefta Avodah Zarah* 8:4.

Maimonides on Pluralism

This idea of a limited Jewish universalism is formulated by Moses Maimonides (1136–1204), one of the most important Jewish theologians, in his comments on Christianity and Islam. These he sees as doing God’s work in the here and now, though in a partial and mistaken manner, but only in the Messianic Age will Christians and Moslems perceive the truth:

The intent of the Creator of the world is not within the power of man to comprehend, for His ways are not our ways, nor are His thoughts, our thoughts. Ultimately, all the deeds of Jesus of Nazareth and that Ishmaelite (i.e. Mohammed) who arose after him will only serve to prepare the way for the Messiah’s coming and the improvement of the entire world, motivating the nations to serve God together as the prophet states: “I will transform the peoples to a purer language that they all will call upon the name of God and serve Him with one purpose.” (Zephaniah 3:9)

How will this come about? The entire world has already become filled with the mention of the Messiah (*mashiach*), Torah, and commandments (*mitzvot*). These matters have been spread to the furthestmost islands to many stubborn-hearted nations.

When the true Messianic King will arise and prove successful, his position becoming exalted and uplifted, they will all repent and realize that their ancestors endowed them with a false heritage and their prophets and ancestors caused them to err.³

Thus Judaism, while currently not fully universal, since it does not seek the conversion of all mankind to what it regards as the true religion in the here and now, has the seeds of universalism within it. There may, of course, be elements in the above formulation of Maimonides of a reaction to the missionary outlook of both Christianity and Islam, and to their claim that if a religion is the true way, why should it not share its teaching and its truth with non-faith members through missionary activity.

Judaism and Universalism

It is obvious that the universalistic views of Judaism, of one God for all mankind, are central to its theology and to its mission of helping to direct the world to the point of Messianic redemption. This universalism is common to a number of Biblical prophets when they deal with the End of Days.

“And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.”

“I the Lord have...set thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the nations; to open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison-house.” “I will also give thee

³ *Yad Hilkhot Melakhim* 11:4, in an uncensored version.

for a light of the nations, that My salvation may be unto the end of the earth.” “And it shall come to pass...shall all flesh come to worship before Me, saith the Lord.” “In those days will I pour out My spirit...and...whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be delivered.” “And many nations shall...say: ‘He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths’. For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” “For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.”⁴

This idea of a universal religion for all mankind has survived down to modern times and is an integral part of the Jewish liturgy. As the second paragraph of the *Alenu* prayer has it:

Therefore let us hope in You, O Lord our God, to speedily see the glory of Your power, to transfer idols from the earth and for the false gods to be surely struck down, to rectify the world under the kingdom of God, and for all sons of flesh to call upon Your name, to turn all the wicked of the earth to You. All dwellers on earth should recognize and know that every knee should bend to You...they should all accept the yoke of Your kingdom, and You should rule over them quickly forever.... As it says: “And the Lord shall be king over all the earth, on that day the Lord will be one and His name will be one.” (Zechariah 14:9)

This prayer is usually ascribed to Rav, a third-century CE Babylonian sage, who composed prayers for recital on the Jewish New Year festival.⁵ It may well be older, however, and a very similar, though slightly variant, text of it is found among the early Jewish mystical documents of the Heikhalot tradition (Scholem 1960: 105).

The *Alenu* prayer was thought to summarize the eschatological hope of Judaism and was introduced in the Ashkenazi rite in the Middle Ages as the concluding prayer for every liturgical service as well as being used by martyrs faced by persecution or forced conversion to Christianity. There is a moving account of the martyrdom of the Jews of Blois in north-central France in 1171, who were burnt to death after Christians accused them of a blood libel:

In the morning they lit the fire. Now when the flames shot up, with one accord they let out a joyous shout and lifted their sweet voices. The Gentiles came and told us about it; and they said to us: “What is this song of yours? We never heard such a sweet song.” At first the victims’ voices were soft, but in the end they raised their voices fortissimo and together called out, “*Alenu le-shabe’ach*.”

(Spiegel 1979: 136)

Its Messianic theme has subsequently become almost an affirmation of Jewish faith, particularly in defiance of Christian persecution, and *Alenu* has been incorporated into every one of the major liturgies of Judaism, Ashkenazi and Sefardi.

⁴ Isaiah 40:5, 42:6, 49:6, 66:23; Joel 3:5 in the Jewish numbering or 2:32 in Christian Bibles; Micah 4: 1–2; Habakkuk 2:14.

⁵ See *Palestinian Talmud Rosh Hashanah* 1:3 and *Palestinian Talmud Avodah Zarah* 1:2.

All this is an image of general salvation, that is salvation for the whole world rather than merely for individuals. Jewish individuals do indeed seek personal “salvation” and a place in the World to Come (*olam haba*), but they are aware, if not as their primary focus, that Jews are working for the benefit of all mankind in some future time.

Eschatology and Universalism

The idea of an eschatological end point is common to all three Abrahamic faiths. It is central to Christian belief in the *parousia*, the Second Coming of Jesus, and to Islamic doctrines about the Day of Judgment, both being variations of Jewish teachings about the Messiah and the Messianic Age out of which they emerged. Yet it is completely absent from all the major religious traditions comprising Hinduism. The latter, by contrast, do not have such a universal eschatological dimension for all mankind, even a limited one like that of Judaism. It is precisely individuals, all individuals who make up mankind, who need to escape from the wheel of rebirth (*samsara*). The whole world is part of an eternal cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. There is no final end point towards which all mankind is progressing, only a temporary end when the long period of the four ages (*yugas*) of the world is complete and these ages begin again.

This contrast between an eschatological and a non-eschatological worldview can even be seen in the different approaches to reincarnation in the two traditions. Belief in transmigration of souls, rebirth after death, is central both to Hinduism and to Jewish mysticism, yet they approach this doctrine very differently. From the period of the *Upanishads*, Hinduism has regarded reincarnation as a curse, entailing death after death within the wheel of rebirth, and the various Hindu sub-traditions offer different ways to escape from it. By contrast, Jewish mysticism, the Kabbalah, has seen transmigration either as an opportunity to atone for sins in a past life, or in Lurianic Kabbalah as a process of rectification undertaken by individuals to fulfill a task assigned to their souls, which will eventually, and cumulatively, bring about the Messianic Age.

It is true that in the *Bhagavad Gita* Krishna, the eighth divine incarnation (*avatar*) of the god Vishnu, says that he is incarnated in a bodily form when religious duty (*dharma*) is threatened and society reaches a low ebb.

For whenever what is right appears to be languishing
 And there is rising up of what is unright
 Then I send myself forth.
 For protection of the good
 And for the destruction of evil-doers,
 To make a firm footing for the right,
 I come into being in age after age.⁶

⁶ *Bhagavad Gita* IV: 7–8, based on Franklin Edgerton’s translation. *The Bhagavad Gita* (New York, 1944), p. 23.

Unlike the Christian incarnation doctrine, however, the incarnations of Vishnu are only for the temporary righting of things, and do not have final eschatological implications. Even the last of the ten *avatars* of Vishnu, Kalki, only comes at the end of the dark age (*kali yuga*) of the world to put things right so that everything can begin once again with the Krita Age, the age of truth (*satya yuga*). Then in a purified world the ages, or cycles of time (*yugas*), start once more.

It seems to me that at the base of this difference in outlook between Abrahamic faiths and Indian religions is the Hindu notion of salvation for the individual rather than for the group. By contrast with the Abrahamic traditions, Hindu society is structured around a hierarchy of groups, of castes and sub-castes. Those Hindus within this hierarchy who are at a higher level of reincarnation, closer to the possibility of liberation or of salvation by a deity (*bhakti*), can view those at a lower level as individuals who have not yet arrived at the fullness of truth, of correct mindfulness or of devotion.

Tolerance and Intolerance

This may help to explain something of the intolerance of the Abrahamic religions, and its contrast with the relative tolerance found in many sub-traditions of Hinduism. Part of this intolerance is based on the idea that if there is one religion, which alone can support the eventual salvation of all mankind, then it must be promoted, and all alternatives, which delay or negate universal salvation, must be condemned.

If it is merely a question of promoting individual salvation, escape from rebirth through enlightenment (*moksha*), as in Vedanta or Yoga, or escape through attachment to one or several of a multitude of divine beings, as in the *bhakti* tradition, then the adherents of a particular path may be less threatened by those practicing alternative disciplines. They may regard these lesser paths as failed or only partial ways to liberation, or their adherents as devoted to lesser deities. Since, however, those who follow them do not detract from those following the “authentic” or “correct” path, they may be regarded with tolerance.

It is true that Buddhism in the past was driven out of India, partly by its Hindu rivals and partly by the advent of Islamic invaders, and that Jainism was reduced to a small minority religion by Hindu imperialism. It is also true that some animosity has existed between followers of the various Shaivite religious traditions and those who followed Vaishnavite religious traditions (Klostermaier 1989: 53ff), so their adherents would attack and kill each other at the great religious gatherings known as *kumbha melas*. Indeed, contemporary devotees of Krishna, particularly followers of the International Society For Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON aka Hari Krishnas), resent the prevalence among Western scholars of identifying the essence of Hinduism with nontheistic traditions, such as Advaita Vedanta.

Moslems and Hindus in India have continuously attacked and even massacred each other. Yet, on the whole, the many subgroups within Hinduism have coexisted in ways unknown to the Abrahamic faiths until modern times. There is an illustrative Indian parable about the six official schools of Hindu philosophy, which do indeed differ in their beliefs, in the very goals they advocate and the paths they set out. This, it is said, is like six blind men walking down a road who come upon an elephant. Each of the blind men grasps some part of the animal (the trunk, the tail, a leg, etc.) and then they set about arguing what it is that they have encountered. It is indeed one elephant, but they each only have a partial grasp. Thus, representatives of each of the six official schools of Indian philosophy do not have a full grasp of the truth when they engage in argumentation, despite their belief that they are the ones in the right, and all the others are wrong.

We cannot, however, apply such an image to the Abrahamic faiths, because they each believe that only one of the three blind men (representing Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as it were) has actually grasped the elephant, while the other two have either tripped over before coming upon the elephant and are thus describing the stony ground, or at best have simply ambled past the elephant entirely without grasping anything. These differences are crucial to understanding the varying dynamics of Judaism and Hinduism as ethnic faiths.

Men of the Spirit and Gentile Wisdom

AGG claims:

Recognition of saintliness may be broken down to recognition of exceptional personal piety, proximity to God, capacity to perform miracles, the answering of prayers, and more. None of these figure in any significant way in Jewish appreciation of other religions and their spiritual virtuosi. In fact, the opposite is more typical. Those considered saints in one tradition tend to be played down, if they are acknowledged at all. Prophets are deemed false, miracles are deemed magic, prayers are considered unanswered, etc.

(Goshen-Gottstein 2016:83)

Yet, in contrast to this claim of AGG, Maimonides, in a well-known halakhic passage discussing the special religious role of the Levites, says:

Not only the tribe of Levi, but any one of the inhabitants of the world whose spirit generously motivates him and he understands with his wisdom to set himself aside and stand before God to serve Him and minister to Him and to know God, proceeding justly as God made him, removing from his neck the yoke of the many reckonings which people seek, he is sanctified as holy of

holies. God will be his portion and heritage forever and will provide what is sufficient for him in this world like He provides for the priests and the Levites.⁷

While it is perhaps not possible to build a positive approach to the whole of Hinduism on this Maimonidean claim alone, it does seem to be a reference to all true God-seekers. If Hindu *gurus* do come into this category, then their teachings, rather than their religion, may be seen as wisdom about which the Jewish sages tell us we can believe that there is wisdom among the Gentiles but not that there is Torah there. As the Midrash remarks:

Should a person tell you there is wisdom among the Gentile nations, believe it; as it is written, “Shall I not in that day, saith the Lord, destroy the wise men out of Edom, and discernment out of the mount of Esau?” (Obadiah 8). But if he tells you that there is Torah among the nations, do not believe it; because it is written, “Her king and her princes are among the nations (where) Torah is no more.”

(Lamentations 2:9)⁸

It is not clear from this Midrashic statement just what wisdom and Torah represent. It would make sense to translate Torah here simply as revelation, and thus rephrase the statement as saying that while wisdom may be found outside of Judaism, revelation cannot be found there. This will not suffice, however, as we do find Gentile prophets, such as Balaam, and other non-Jewish individuals in the Bible, to whom God reveals Himself. Perhaps we can translate Torah here as “true religious teaching” so that “wisdom” could be any speculation of a philosophical, theological, or empirical kind which, while useful, cannot represent the whole of “true religious teaching” as found in the Torah itself.

This interpretation of “wisdom” is supported by Maimonides’ ruling that pious Gentiles (*chasidei ummot ha-olam*) also partake of salvation in the World to Come (*olam haba*). The Midrash refers to “the righteous of Gentile nations as priests to the Holy One in this world;”⁹ and Maimonides formulates their acceptance¹⁰ into *olam haba* as follows:

All who observe the Seven Noahide Commandments are considered pious Gentiles (*chasidei ummot ha-olam*), provided that they are motivated by belief in the divine origin and the authenticity of Moses’ prophecy, and not by mere intellectual cogency. In the latter case they are to be considered only as wise men of the nations.¹¹

In other words, wise Gentiles may come to an understanding of true teaching through their wisdom, but they do not do so through actual faith in Torah. It is the latter that Maimonides regards as central for salvation, though the reason is

⁷ *Yad Shemitah Ve-Yovel* 13:13.

⁸ *Lamentations Rabbah* 2:13.

⁹ *Yalkut Shimoni Isaiah* 429 commenting on Psalms 132:9.

¹⁰ Basing himself on *Tosefta Sanhedrin* 13:2.

¹¹ *Yad Melakhim* 8:11; this is the best textual version of the last phrase.

somewhat obscure. On this basis we can ascribe to some Hindu *gurus* both non-Torah wisdom and insight and the sanctified status of being God seekers.

Wisdom and Bhakti

The foregoing does not help us all that much with the purely devotional side of Hinduism, since the majority of Hindus are at best God-intoxicated *bhakti* followers, not sophisticated purveyors of wisdom. For a positive approach to these, AGG relies on the views of R. Menachem Meiri (1249–1316), a major Talmudic scholar who flourished in Provence, regarding non-Jewish religions which have a moral dimension and can therefore be granted a measure of legitimacy and of Jewish acceptance. AGG writes:

At the basis of Meiri's view is the recognition that religions have purpose, structure, and fundamental commonalities as well as minimal basic conditions that afford them legitimacy.... All religions are recognized as equally valid and are to be judged in relation to their ability to guide their believers beyond their animal nature. Meiri predicates the legitimacy of other religions on their goals and achievements in the lives of believers, not on their divine origin... Meiri's views on religion might provide a framework for making sense of how one can not only recognize and legitimate other religions, but also receive the best from their religious and spiritual practices.

(Goshen-Gottstein 2016:200)

Despite the rather sympathetic approach of Meiri to non-Jewish religion, it is difficult to see how Meiri's views could exonerate Hindu devotional religion completely from sheer *avodah zarah*, literally "alien worship," specifically related to the worship of other gods through idols, rituals, legends, etc. When Meiri wrote about religions with an ethical dimension, he was thinking primarily of Christianity, in which the worship of Jesus, of icons, of the Madonna, etc., do raise problems for Jewish monotheism.

To apply his views wholesale to Hindu *bhakti* with its multiplicity of gods and idols seems rather contrived. Despite AGG's careful and profound analysis of Meiri's views, Meiri is something of "a lone voice crying in a wilderness" as far as his influence on halakhic literature on this subject is concerned. Anyway, it would be difficult for Meiri to deal with Hindu veneration of godmen, legends about gods, their activities in heaven and on earth, beliefs about divine incarnations, the practice of sacrificial rituals including animal sacrifices. Hindu idols are worshipped as actually containing a god's presence, and each temple idol may be:

offered water for washing the feet, flowers and betel...like an honored guest. In the morning he is ceremonially awakened with the sound of music, the ringing of bells and the blowing of conches. He is washed, dried and dressed. He is honored with flowers, garlands, incense and swinging lamps; he is fed, usually rice and fruit, of which he eats the subtle part, leaving the gross material food for his worshippers, or to be given to the poor...he is taken to his bedroom at

night where he joins his wife or wives. In large shrines he is fanned by attendants and entertained by dancing girls (*devadasis*).

(Basham 1990: 108)

Though some Hindus are overtly monotheistic, others may only pay lip service to the idea of one god, of whom all the myriad gods are mere symbols, since many Hindu worshippers do seem to believe in the reality of their gods and their idols. In contrast to Meiri, Maimonides expressed utter opposition with regard to religions of the type of Hindu devotional religion. Writing in a halakhic context he says:

The worshippers of false gods have composed many texts concerning their service.... The Holy One, blessed be He, has commanded us not to read those books at all, or to think about them or any matters involved with them.... This prohibits inquiring about the nature of their service even if you, yourself, do not serve them. This matter will ultimately cause you to turn to [the false god] and worship it as they do.... The worship of false gods is not the only subject to which we are forbidden to pay attention; rather, we are warned not to consider any thought which will cause us to uproot one of the fundamentals of the Torah. We should not turn our minds to these matters, think about them, or be drawn after the thoughts of our hearts... Since a person may not know the guidelines with which to evaluate [ideas that will lead him] to the truth in its fullness, he may come to heresy.¹²

In a different context, about accepting Gentiles in the Messianic Age, Maimonides writes:

They (i.e. Gentiles) are not to be allowed to originate a new religion or create commandments (*mitzvot*) for themselves based on their own decisions. They may either become righteous converts and accept all the commandments or retain their statutes without adding or detracting from them.... If a Gentile studies the Torah, makes a Sabbath, or creates a religious practice, a Jewish court should beat and punish him.¹³

Gurus Again

Leaving aside some of the intractable problems associated with *avodah zarah* and Hindu devotional religion, we are still left with a positive approach to the teachings of some Hindu holy men, teachings that may be regarded as Gentile wisdom. Can *guru* wisdom be incorporated into Judaism without, in Maimonides' words, "uprooting fundamentals of the Torah"? Here once again we face a rather different series of incompatibilities.

One of the great thinkers in the Hindu tradition of Advaita, non-dualism, is Shankara Acharya, circa eighth century CE, who based his monistic ideas on those

¹² *Yad Avodah Zarah* 2:2–3.

¹³ *Yad Melakhim* 10:9.

Upanishads which seem to teach that all the phenomenal, empirical world is a semi-illusion (*maya*), behind which is an ultimate, absolute reality known as *Brahman*. According to Shankara, this absolute, or *nirguna Brahman*—*Brahman* without any qualities or attributes—is identical to the real self (*Atman*), the inner self of individuals. We are not aware of this identity because we are in a state of ignorance (*avidya*) about the world and ourselves. Realizing this identity, not merely intellectually, brings enlightenment (*moksha*), and frees the individual from the *samsaric* reincarnations that are generated by *maya*.

Although critical of aspects of mundane Hindu religious practice, Shankara was not entirely against devotional religion, and even composed some devotional poetry. He saw the worship of gods as a lower stage on the path to self-realization. Indeed, one of the central ideas of Advaita is also expressed in the idea of the dance of the god Shiva: the dance creates an illusion but the reality behind the dance is a changeless essence.

One of the problems of integrating such teachings into Judaism is the Jewish idea of an essential gap between the self and God, which is at the heart of Jewish theology. Believing that the real self is identical to the god-like self of all reality is not so strange in a Hindu context, with its many claims of divine incarnation and belief that certain people, usually *gurus*, are indeed divine godmen. To Judaism it is heretical to maintain anything like an actual incarnation of the divine in a human being, let alone identification of the inner self of man with the infinite divine Absolute (*Ein Sof*). The Christian affirmation of the incarnation of God the Father in the man Jesus became a main feature of the parting of the ways between Judaism and Christianity. Not so much the crucifixion but the incarnation was a “stumbling block to the Jews.”¹⁴

Though there are many accounts of Jewish individuals who possessed the holy spirit (*ruach hakodesh*), this was usually understood as a matter of divine inspiration. R. Chaim of Volozhin (1749–1821), a leading theologian of non-Chasidic Kabbalah, maintained in his discussion of idolatry that it is prohibited to actually worship any aspect of holiness within a person. He wrote:

Even to make oneself subservient and to devote oneself through whatever form of worship to that aspect of the holy spirit in any person, whether the person is a prophet or possessed of the holy spirit, this is also called true idolatry (*avodah zarah*).¹⁵

Chasidic writers did indeed question this statement¹⁶ because there is a strong element of worship of holy men, of the *tzaddik* of a community, in the Chasidic tradition. Even within Chasidism, however, there is reluctance to accept claims about the actual god-like nature of a holy man. There may seem to be a marked difference between a monistic view of the *Atman-Brahman* kind and a simple belief in the divinity of an individual but, as Zaehner (1960) has pointed out, the position of

¹⁴ Cf. 1 Corinthians 1:23.

¹⁵ *Nefesh Ha-Chayim* 3:9.

¹⁶ See, for instance, Gedaliah Koenig, *Chayei Nefesh*, n.d. n.p.

Advaita is basically incompatible with monotheism and even had a deleterious effect on some Moslem mystics who were influenced by it. Thus the Sufi mystic Al Hal-laj (ninth–tenth-century, Persia), who seems to have incorporated Advaita elements into his ideology and proclaimed himself divine (*ana l-haqq*, “I am the truth”), faced persecution and death at the hands of Orthodox Moslems for heresy. Zaehner, himself a Roman Catholic, favored the more qualified non-dualism of Ramanuja, in which a personalized god is separate from man, as most convergent with Abrahamic theism.

The Divine Within

Judaism has various ways of expressing the idea that human and divine worlds do coalesce without straying into heresy. It does this usually by some symbolic language about the indwelling of the divine presence (the *Shekhinah*) in the world or in the community or in the individual, but never allows this imagery to entirely overcome the gap between the human and divine worlds. An example of this is found in the following teaching, cited by the Babylonian Talmud, which enables us to note the differences between Jewish and somewhat parallel Hindu teachings.

Did not R. Eleazar say: “Let a person always consider himself as if the Holy One, blessed be He, dwells within him”? As it is said, “The Holy One in the midst of thee.”

(Hosea 11:9)¹⁷

Now considering that this is a radical statement of R. Eleazar, even if understood without any ontological or theological implications, it is interesting that the Talmud simply looks for some practical consequences for it. It seeks to relate this teaching to the issue of whether a person who undertakes extra fasting should be called holy seeing that he humiliates God, as it were the divine ever present in man, through his fasting.

A Hindu sage making an assertion about the presence of the divine within man might surely say, in the best Advaita-*Upanishadic* tradition, “that is you” (*tat twam asi*)—the divine within is the real you, the real self of yourself and the cosmos. For Judaism expressions of divine immanence are always more symbolic statements than accounts of ontological or empirical reality. God cannot be identified with any particular item, certainly not with any particular individual, because this is regarded as idolatry. God can act through men but cannot be limited to any particular man. As an often-repeated Midrashic teaching about the use of the divine name *Makom*, “place,” expresses it:

He is the place of the world but the world is not His place.¹⁸

¹⁷ *Taanit* 11a–b, Tosefot’s version of the text as explained by the Bach.

¹⁸ *Genesis Rabbah* 68:9 based on Genesis 28:11.

In other words, God is omnipresent yet not limited, He is both immanent and transcendent, and can be found anywhere but not restricted to any particulars in the world.

There is a further dimension about identifying men as god, not specifically for Advaita, but in general for Hindu beliefs about godmen. If a particular *guru* is indeed god, whatever this actually means, then he or she, like the Pope speaking ex cathedra, cannot be in error. This has led to abuse within Hinduism, since one cannot query the teachings or behavior of godmen. AGG recognizes the problem, but perhaps too easily includes all spiritual teachers in the same category, those who claim to be god and those who only claim to be inspired:

Even if we postulate that for every true teacher there are a hundred impostors, and that for every *guru* who is a model there are many fallen *gurus*, this does not change the fundamental theological challenge. It only makes the question of discernment more urgent and calls us to cultivate spiritual tools for recognizing true from false spirituality. Those tools would have to be applied in relation to our own great teachers too and would therefore not be a means of distinguishing one religion from another, but rather the higher from the lower, or the authentic from inauthentic forms of the spiritual life, as these manifest in all religions. The same intellectual honesty that calls us to apply criteria to help us discern and recognize true spiritual teachers within Judaism also calls us...to recognize the authentic spiritual lives of saints outside Judaism and, in the present context, within the spiritual framework of the religious life of India.

(Goshen-Gottstein 2016: 84)

For a godman, the usual rules of assessment of spirituality, however, do not apply. Charisma may be present and felt, but how can a would-be disciple use ordinary criteria to form a judgment of authenticity of a god? Can we assume that ethical rules may be invoked to assess someone who is to be regarded as divine, or who has achieved enlightenment, and thus transcends everyday values? We shall return to this question later in greater detail.

***Jivan Mukti* and Antinomianism**

This brings us to one of the other problems for a Jewish assessment of Advaita, that is the status and position of the liberated individual, the *jivan mukta*, and in a wider context the *guru* who is god. The logical consequence of *moksha*, enlightenment or liberation, is that all ties with action (*karma*), duty (*dharma*), and rebirth (*samsara*) cease to exist. For the Advaitin, once one has fully realized the *Atman-Brahman* equation, there is nothing that binds one to the world of ignorance (*avidya*), and to the semi-illusory reality (*maya*) that it generates. Therefore, none of the moral or religious restrictions of the mundane world should apply to the liberated individual.

One of the main texts of the Vaishnavite tradition of Hinduism, the *Bhagavad Gita*, is structured around this very problem of the value of action (*karma*) for the liberated individual. Krishna, an incarnation of the god Vishnu, tries to persuade

Arjuna, a member of the warrior caste, to continue with his warrior *dharma* even after the inner realization of liberation. The Gita's message is based precisely on countering the devaluation of action by enlightenment, as found in Vedantic and Yogic philosophies. It uses arguments about setting an example for others, as yet unliberated, by continuing to act; or as a form of *imitatio dei* since Krishna, a liberated god, does continue to act; or for the welfare of society and the maintenance of the world order (cf. *Bhagavad Gita* III: 17–26). The very existence of this sacred text, promulgating *karma-yoga*, liberation through action, is indicative of the problems of post-liberation moral, religious, and social action in Indian society.

There is a story told about Shankara (788–820 CE), one of the founders of the Advaita tradition, that deals with this issue. One time after he had been instructing a rajah that the phenomenal world was *maya*, a semi-illusion, and about the need for *moksha* to escape from *samsara*, the rajah decided to test his teacher. So on the next occasion that Shankara paid him a visit he arranged to have a wild elephant released on the path leading up to the palace that Shankara would be taking. Seeing the elephant charging down the path, Shankara climbed the nearest tree to escape. When he eventually arrived at the palace, the rajah asked him whether indeed everything was a semi-illusion, *maya*. Shankara replied that it was. The rajah then asked him why he had to escape from an illusory elephant. Shankara after a moment's reflection replied that his climbing the tree to escape was also illusory.

It is true that for Shankara the phenomenal world of *maya* is not entirely an illusion but only semi-illusory. Thus when he gives examples to illustrate this idea, he talks of mistaking a coil of rope for a snake and then realizing there is no need to be afraid because it is only a rope. The rope is real but the reaction of fear is mistaken, i.e. an illusion. So there is a rope but it's not a snake, and our reaction to the world is generated by *avidya* (ignorance), which is at the core of *maya*.

In Advaita, the way of knowledge transcends the way of action, and ultimately *dharma*, which is part of the latter, is only a necessary stage on the path to becoming an unattached holy man (a *sanyassin*) who seeks to leave *maya* behind. *Dharma* itself ties one to the world of *maya*, and increases ignorance (*avidya*) of the real, as Shankara says in his commentary on the *Gita* (4:21). The *jivan-mukta*, the enlightened man of Advaita, has come to *Brahman* knowledge, which is Being-Consciousness-Bliss, and has left behind the mundane world with all its complex details. *Brahman* of course is without qualities; it is *neti neti* ("not this, not this"), according to the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (4.5.15). All the properties ascribed to it in sacred scripture (*shruti*) are for meditation purposes alone, according to Shankara in his commentary to *Vedanta Sutras* (3.2.15).

Shankara does not say anything about the attitude of the *jivan-mukta* to the rest of the world, although as R.C. Zaehner says, there is a lack of logic in such an enlightened Advaitin preaching a truth to the unenlightened, which says more for his heart than for his head.

For what logic can there possibly be in seeking to free from illusion a person who, from the point of view of the would-be liberator is by definition illusory?

(Zaehner 1957:164)

The problem of the relationship of the enlightened individual to the unenlightened world is one that within early Buddhism led to the split between the Hinayana and Mahayana traditions. According to the former, the enlightened individual (the *arhat*) who has achieved *nibbana* is no more concerned with the world of desires and suffering, while according to the latter, compassion for the suffering world turns him into someone who holds back from complete enlightenment (a *bodhisattva*) in order to teach the truth and care for others.

Gaudapada, a more strictly monistic Advaitin who preceded Shankara, took an ultra-consistent view when he wrote in his commentary to the *Mandukya Upanishad*:

Having attained to non-duality, one should behave in the world like an insensible object. The ascetic...should accept whatever comes to him.

(Zaehner 1957: 155)

For Gaudapada, from the point of view of liberation:

There is no destruction, no creation, none in bondage, none endeavoring for release, none desirous of liberation, none liberated, this is the absolute truth.

(Sen 1961: 83)

From a Jewish perspective, including that of some of the more extreme Jewish mystics, the mundane world created by God retains its religious and moral significance for humans, and preserves its sanctified status, even after they come to a realization of the ultimate reality of the deity.

Divine Grace and Antinomianism

A similar problem exists for some of the more devotional *bhakti* schools. They maintain that salvation comes not through human action but only from god's grace and love, for in this age of darkness (*kali yuga*) there is only salvation by *bhakti*. Some devotees call this manner of salvation the "cat-young method," for it is like the way a mother cat grasps its kitten by the neck and carries it to safety. So god carries the devotee to liberation without the devotee's efforts. This is how salvation is depicted by most of the South Indian Shaivite schools, but then having been saved by divine grace, what is the relationship of the *bhakta* to the rest of the world? There are other followers of *bhakti* who favor a contrasting image of salvation in which the devotee is more active. This is known as the "monkey-young method," common in certain North Indian *bhakti* traditions, which depicts the young monkey as clinging to its mother when being carried to safety, i.e. that attachment is needed by the individual devotee on the way to salvation (Otto 1930: 56–57). Once saved, however, the same problem of the relationship of the devotee to the world and to others emerges.

In the hymns of some of the *bhakti* saints, both in North and South India, the theme of the uselessness of all rites, duties, and rituals is a recurrent one. The god-intoxicated weaver Kabir (fifteenth century), whose songs are also popular among Moslems and Sikhs, sings:

O brother, when I was forgetful, my true *guru* showed me the way. The I (i.e. myself) left off all rites and ceremonies.¹⁹

Or as Appar (seventh century), a Shaivite *bhakti* devotee, puts it:

Why chant the Vedas, hear the Shashtras' lore?
 Why daily teach the books of righteousness?
 Why the Vedangas six say o'er and o'er?
 Release is theirs and theirs alone, whose heart
 From thinking of its Lord shall ne'er depart.²⁰

We can contrast this with Kabbalistic and Chasidic imagery of a devotional kind. In Judaism, most spiritual accounts tell of a journey towards God, a journey of perfection of self which has no limits, no point of arrival, no final enlightenment. This is how R. Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935) describes it:

The foundation of the pure service of God is that there should be implanted in man the inner desire to be always progressing and perfecting himself, and to recognize in truth that the goal of success is that a man is always bound to the desire for increasing perfection. For behold the aim of life is drawing near to God, and He, may He be blessed, is infinite in His perfection. Therefore all of the elevated status of man is that at all time he increases his level in drawing near to God. This desire has no end point, and a man can never say with regard to this that it is sufficient. For every level that he achieves in self-perfection will awaken in him the realization of how to achieve further levels.²¹

Apart from this image of the spiritual life as a journey, with stations on the way but no terminus, there are Jewish accounts of what might be considered more of an achieved state of enlightenment through devotion (*devekut*). Thus R. Meshulam Faivish Heller of Zbarazh (died circa 1795), a pupil of the early Chasidic masters, comments on a Talmudic remark about Ulla, a Palestinian sage who lived in the second half of the third century CE. Concerning Ulla, the Babylonian Talmud says:

Ulla, on his return from the college, used to kiss his sisters on their bosoms; others say it was on their hands. (*Shabbat* 13a)

About this somewhat “shocking” statement, R. Meshulam Faivish Heller writes:

If a person has stripped himself of physicality then he is established within himself, separating himself from himself, and he, in his very inwardness, is attached to the Creator, may His name be blessed, with great yearning, while externally he is performing physical activities in the world like eating and sexual relations and the like. Inside he is like an angel, separated from physical-

¹⁹ *100 Poems of Kabir*, translated by Rabindranath Tagore (London, 1915), number 65 p. 68.

²⁰ Cited by Zaehner, *Hinduism* (1962: 172); see also J.E. Carpenter (1921: 353–354 and 375).

²¹ *Eyn Ayah* (Jerusalem 1995), vol.1 p. 140, commenting on *Berakhot* 32a.

ity while on the outside he seems like an animal in the eyes of those that see him.²²

This view of what we may call a Jewish *jivan-mukta* maintains that although the enlightened *chasid* has to continue acting in the external world, some of his actions may seem coarse and lacking in decency, because he is now completely separated from the desires of the external world. Such was Ulla kissing his sisters' breasts or hands, yet for Ulla there was no sexual element involved. On the inside he was so completely attached to God that none of the outer activities that he undertook made any impression.

Naturally, R. Meshulam Faivish does not claim much of an antinomian base for Ulla's actions, for clearly a sage of Ulla's status would maintain all the laws, rituals, and ceremonies of traditional Judaism. Yet what may have seemed coarse behavior in an ordinary Jew, or for someone at a lesser level than Ulla, was not a problem for him even though the Talmud questions his actions by quoting Ulla's own views on avoiding temptation.

What is central to much of Jewish teaching is the sanctification of the mundane world created by God and within which the divine is to be found. This is true for the Jewish mystic and for the spiritual seeker, as well as for the ordinary layperson. While the latter may only find the divine through the rituals and practices which have been handed down through the traditions he or she follows, the former bring greater insight into their lives, enabling them to reveal the divine in everyday activities as well as those prescribed by the religion.

This revealing of God in the world involves the sanctification of everyday existence. It is here that there is a fundamental disagreement between the more world-affirming attitude of Judaism and those varieties of Christianity which are more "world-negating," as well as with the monistic teachings of Hindu sages like Shankara. Although Jewish men of the spirit have been known to isolate themselves for a limited time from the world and its pleasures, there is nothing like the Christian monastic tradition in Judaism nor like the isolation of Hindu holy men who devote their lives to meditating at burning *ghats*, in forests or on mountains.

Devekut and Zen

We can bring out this contrast between Judaism and some aspects of Hinduism, with regard to an affirmation or sanctification of the world, by looking at another tradition having its origins in India but having jettisoned much of the Hindu framework, namely Buddhism in its Chinese and Japanese forms. What was said above about Judaism's attitude to the mundane world seems similar to the lessons that emerge from some Zen Buddhist stories. Thus there is a Zen story about two Zen Buddhist monks on a journey who come to a stream and find a geisha girl waiting there to cross over (Reps 1975: 28). One of the monks offers to carry

²² *Derekh Emet*, p.19, n.d. n.p.

her and takes her on his shoulders to the other side of the stream. They walk on for a while and the other monk suddenly asks: "How could you do that? We are monks and must not touch women. How could you lift her and carry her across the stream?" The first monk replies: "I see you are still carrying her, I put her down some time ago!"

In other words, liberation is something inner, not determined solely by obeying a code of right actions, but the code is still respected. A similar idea, in a somewhat different context, is brought out by the Zen saying that ordinary people eat when they are hungry, drink when they are thirsty, and sleep when they are tired. They then become religious. After that they fast instead of eating and drinking and stay awake at night meditating instead of sleeping. When they experience enlightenment (*satori*), they eat when they are hungry, drink when they are thirsty, and sleep when they are tired. In other words, enlightenment does not have to affect the outer self but is an inner state.

Of course, the parallels with Zen do not take account of the theistic base of Judaism, which is why *devekut* differs radically from the *jivan-mukti* state of an Advaita Vedantin who has attained *moksha*. If anything, *devekut* is closer to the teachings about *moksha* of Ramanuja (twelfth century), a Vedantin who founded the Qualified Non-Dualistic School (Vishishtadvaita) of Vedanta. As previously mentioned for Ramanuja, the true *Brahman* is a god with qualities or attributes, *saguna Brahman*, a personal god to whom the devotee can and must relate; in Ramanuja's case it is the god Vishnu.

According to Qualified Non-Dualism, the self (*Atman*) and god (*saguna Brahman* or Vishnu) are distinct, and liberation involves escaping from *samsara* by realizing one's total dependence on god, abandonment of self, trusting in god's love, and thus coming close in consciousness to god in a kind of unity, aided by divine grace but dependent on *bhakti*. Because the world, the body of god, is real, the liberated soul continues to exist in a real world.

Jewish "*moksha*" as expressed by R. Meshulam Faivish is also very similar to the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita*, referred to previously, on the necessity of two types of *yoga*: firstly *karma-yoga*, doing your duty while being free internally from any worries about the consequences of your actions, and secondly *bhakti-yoga*, focusing all your actions on god with the consciousness of *imitatio dei*.

The main difference between Jewish teachings about devotion, *devekut*, and the *bhakti* traditions within India is not so much the ideology of the *Gita* or of Ramanuja, but what we may call the over-divinization of the world. The Hindu *bhakti* devotee inhabits a religious world of sacred rivers, sacred mountaintops, sacred places, sacred cows, sacred images, etc. All of this when taken literally conflicts with a Jewish view of a sanctified world in which God is revealed but elements of which are not, as such, divine.

Assessing the Guru

Let us revert once again to AGG's remarks about *gurus* and Jewish spiritual masters.

The same intellectual honesty that calls us to apply criteria to help us discern and recognize true spiritual teachers within Judaism also calls us...to recognize the authentic spiritual lives of saints outside Judaism and, in the present context, within the spiritual framework of the religious life of India.

(Goshen-Gottstein 2016)

AGG believes that the same possibilities exist for a critical approach by a would-be disciple to a charismatic Hindu *guru*, whether a godman, someone who claims to be enlightened, or an individual possessed of a great-soul (*mahatma*), as exist for a critical approach to a charismatic Jewish “*guru*.” We will try to make it clear that there are significant differences between our ability to apply such criticism in the case of Jewish sages and in the case of Hindu sages.

Neither of the two examples we have given of Jewish quasi-enlightenment would mean that a follower of someone described by R. Meshulam Faivish Heller or R. A.I. Kook would be expected to forgo his critical faculties if he became a disciple. He might be mildly shocked by the behavior of an Ulla, but the strong halakhic context within which a Jewish “saint” works creates a series of red lines the crossing of which would indeed reveal the “holy” charismatic master as a fraud.

Indeed, even in the Chasidic world where the bond between the saintly man (the *tzaddik*) and his followers (the *chasidim*) is strongest, there are examples of such red lines. The most famous case of such a split between a disciple and the *tzaddik* to whom he was once devoted is the one which took place in Poland in 1840. At that time, R. Mordecai Joseph Leiner (d. 1854), a devoted follower of R. Menachem Mendel of Kotsk (1787–1859), broke away from his master altogether. The story behind this break was hushed up in Chasidic circles, but a version which has survived is that one Friday night, R. Menachem Mendel, who lived as a recluse in a room attached to his synagogue, came from his room, blew out the Sabbath candles and declared, “There is no judgment and no Judge.” For R. Mordecai Joseph this was a critical red line that his master had crossed, and he was not prepared to continue anymore as his disciple.

Within Hinduism there are no culturally supported red lines usable in assessing a *guru*. One of the problems is precisely that a *guru* may tell his would-be non-Hindu disciple that in order to begin to follow his or her teaching, the latter must put aside his critical faculties. For the use of such critical faculties is part of the very problem which a person with a Western mentality faces, preventing progress on the path to enlightenment or god-consciousness.

This is not to say that Jewish “holy” men are not guilty of abusing their followers sexually, of making them pay exorbitantly to become followers, of brainwashing them, of dominating them, etc., all of which take place in both religious traditions. Nor is it to say that there are not genuine, authentic charismatic Hindu *gurus* and Jewish holy men whose whole purpose is to help their disciples on their spiritual journey. The main difference is that with Hindus there may be the assumption of absolute authority by some *gurus*, the discouragement of a critical outlook, regarded as a Western hang-up, the *guru* regarded as god to whom one needs to surrender, reverence for the *guru* as an exemplar and inspiration, the possibilities of exploitation by the *guru* of naïve followers who know little about the Hindu tradition,

elements of a personality cult which surround some *gurus*, etc. All of the above do exist within the Hindu tradition, and most are rare or nonexistent in Judaism.

Discipleship and Independence

One further thought relates to whether it is always detrimental for a disciple if the *guru* is indeed a fraud. In the recent past a number of Hindu teachers have been accused of being grossly flawed, or even fraudulent. Yet they have continued to maintain disciples who have remained attached despite the exposure of weaknesses and hypocrisy. Those disciples, having gained insight and understanding from the time spent with their *guru*, may well see the accusations as a test of faith.

Obviously, for some ex-disciples the realization that their own spiritual master has feet of clay and weaknesses, which turn him into a hypocrite and worse, is traumatic. Yet for a minority of these ex-disciples the fall of their *guru* into the abyss is the trigger for their own independence, if they can overcome the trauma. It enables them to break the often stifling bonds of attachment to their master, which restrict their own spiritual growth.

This idea is that the individual disciple needs to avoid spiritual suffocation, because of the great respect for one's religious teachers found in the Abrahamic faiths and in those of India. It may be one interpretation of the Zen *koan*, "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him," ascribed to the Chan master Linji Yixuan (ninth century). It would seem to be the theme of Herman Hesse's novel *Siddharta* and also fits the last words of the Buddha, "Be a light unto yourself." As the Canadian poet Leonard Cohen expresses it in the refrain of his poem "Anthem":

Ring the bells that still can ring.
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

Although Cohen seems to have in mind the Kabbalistic idea that there was a breaking of the vessels (*shevirat hakelim*) holding the divine light at the creation, it can also serve to symbolize the spiritual light which may illuminate a disciple following the break-up of an over-dependent relationship with a master.

One does occasionally hear of spiritual teachers who encourage disciples not to lose their own insight and individuality while imbibing the master's teachings. Perhaps the most extreme case of this was Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986) who, although he had many disciples, refused to allow people to treat him as a *guru*, saying, "The moment you follow someone you cease to follow Truth." But even this anti-*guru* master has been dogged by accusations of hypocrisy because of revelations of his sexual antics and their contrast with his advice on celibacy.

Despite the value of independence in following a spiritual path, there is no doubt that both in Hinduism and in Judaism there is a strong tradition of adhering to the teaching of one's master. Though the Talmud is full of disagreement and argumentation between the sages, it seems that some of them were so attached to their masters that they refused to put forward their own ideas. Thus, it is said of R. Yochanan ben

Zakkai (first century CE, Palestinian sage), one of the greatest sages of his era, that he never in his life said anything which he had not heard from his master, and his disciple R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus did exactly the same (*Sukkah* 28a). Later scholars have doubted the possibility of this lack of creativity in mature disciples. For how could a sage only transmit teachings which he had actually learnt from his teacher, and report them literally as he heard them? In the case of R. Eliezer, however, we have accounts of him refusing to answer some questions because he claimed that he had never heard the answer from his teacher (*Mishnah Nega'im* 9:3, 11:7; *Yoma* 66b).

One may argue that the role of the Hindu *guru* is only an extension of the roles of religious teachers found in Judaism. What I have tried to argue is that there is a difference in kind, rather than merely in degree, between the *guru* as godman (who therefore cannot do wrong) and the rabbi, kabbalist, or Chasidic master who may live a holy life but in theory can sin and indeed be mistaken.

Theological Encounter

The passages from Maimonides about non-contact with other religions, quoted above, raise questions about the whole nature of encounter and dialogue of Jews with other faiths and are part of the background to the views of R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903–1993) involving the limitation of interfaith meeting (or “confrontation”) to non-theological topics.

It is important that the religious or theological *logos* should not be employed as the medium of communication between two faith communities.... The confrontation should occur not at a theological, but at a mundane human level.²³

Needless to say, AGG does not agree with either Maimonides or Soloveitchik on this issue, but neither does he deal with their problematic stance. The reasoning against theological dialogue with other faiths is not merely its negative influence on Jewish belief but also, perhaps, the feeling that if one believes in one’s own faith system, revealed, intuited or experienced, then that belief should be enough. If the sacred texts do not contain the whole theological truth, they are somehow deficient. That is perhaps why R. Abraham Maimonides (1186–1237), the son of Moses Maimonides and leader of Egyptian Jewry, when he incorporated Sufi practices and teachings into Judaism, claimed they were really once part of Jewish life—a claim that AGG does not take seriously.

The above negative attitude towards learning from other faiths, or accepting knowledge from sources outside their own religious tradition, would seem to be the view of many ultra-Orthodox rabbis today, even to the point of rejecting secular knowledge where it clashes with a more literal interpretation of their tradition.

²³ *Confrontation*, first published in *Tradition* 1964. Reprinted in *A Treasury of Tradition* (New York, 1967), p.72.

There was a controversy in the years 2004–2005 around the publications of a young Orthodox scholar, R. Natan Slifkin, who maintained that the scientific views of the Talmudic rabbis reflected the outdated science of the first few centuries of the Common Era. His books were banned by a number of ultra-Orthodox rabbis, who maintained that current scientific views were heretical and not to be believed in. R. Moshe Sternbuch wrote in 2005:

...the accepted view of the age of the universe cannot be disregarded. This required acceptance of the traditional age of the universe is all the more obvious since every man and woman and child knows that the world was created 5765 years ago... Consequently a person who casts doubts on this accepted tradition...must be carefully investigated. This is because it is possible that he might have doubts concerning the foundation principles of faith... Furthermore having scientific writings in your house, that are incompatible with the Torah, violates the prohibition (Deuteronomy 4:26), “Do not bring disgusting things in your house,”...and it is obligated to get rid of them.²⁴

In the ultra-Orthodox camp, many of the current views of scientists are regarded as contrary to traditional Jewish belief, even to the point of rejection by some rabbis of the Copernican theory of the earth moving round the sun. Such an ultra-Orthodox outlook would negate the value of AGG’s whole project in relation to inter-faith encounter, as indeed would the conservative views of some Hindu leaders. Among the latter are those who maintain that a work like the *Mahabharata* shows that ancient Hindus already had ballistic missiles, indeed far in advance of scientific knowledge of today, or those who share the view of Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824–1883), the Hindu reformer and founder of the Arya Samaj, who claimed that all knowledge and truth are actually contained in the Vedas.

AGG does discuss the issue of who really speaks for Judaism and who really speaks for Hinduism, but he has to bypass the ultra-Orthodox in the Jewish religion as well as many conservative subgroups in Hinduism. He says:

Each tradition has its specialists, those who are in charge of explaining the tradition, of making sense of it, and also of sharing and teaching this understanding. If we consider Judaism, do we turn to the layman (the practicing or nonpracticing layman?) or to the religious teacher, rabbi, or scholar, for an authoritative view of what Judaism is? The answer seems obvious. Why, then, should not the same apply to Hinduism? Granted, there are differences among Hindu teachers, but there are similarly differences between Jewish teachers as well.

(Goshen-Gottstein 2016:46)

If one takes Orthodox Judaism as the standard form of Judaism, which is what AGG does, then, excluding the ultra-Orthodox, there is little comparison between the relatively small differences found among various types of Orthodox rabbis and

²⁴ <http://www.zootorah.com/controversy/RavSternbuch.English.pdf>.

Jewish lay people with the much greater variety of views of traditional Hindu sages and religious lay people. A better comparison with Hinduism would be the three Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Could we then ask from whom would one inquire for an authoritative view of the beliefs of the Abrahamic faith, a rabbi, a priest, or a sheikh? Clearly that would not be a sensible question.

The differences within Hinduism are so vast that there is no comparison with the differences among Orthodox Jews, whether clergy or laity. Orthodox Judaism is a semi-hierarchical structure and Hinduism is not. AGG is quite within his rights to focus on one or several types of Hindu teaching and practice. In his case this ultimately means a focus on those who represent a basically Vedantist worldview, whether monist or theist, and for Judaism on those Orthodox rabbis and scholars with an open-minded outlook. There is nothing wrong with this as long as we recognize its limitations.

Crisis in Judaism

The current encounter between Judaism and Hinduism is fed, according to AGG, by a crisis in contemporary Judaism leading not only to his own, and other Orthodox Jews', personal interest in Indian religion but to the involvement of many young Jews (particularly Israelis) with Hinduism. About this crisis he writes:

Turning to India for spirituality, posing the questions from within Judaism, and seeking the answers from Hindu sources, and vice versa, may be taken as a sign of crisis. This is the crisis of God and the ability to find Him within Judaism. Judaism is a religion that centers around God, but that has lost touch, to a large extent, with the living God.... The amount of attention paid to proper performance of detail and to excellence in performance and learning in general is completely disproportionate with any instruction that would relate to the interior aspects of the religious and spiritual life...

The exile of God, His hiding, the difficulty in finding or accessing Him—regardless of how we conceptualize the crisis—seem to me to be at the heart of the crisis of Jewish spirituality... Hinduism, as encountered through various teachers and religious groups, offers God at the center and a systematic path to reach knowledge and awareness of God. I submit this is what draws Jewish seekers to Hinduism and that this is indeed what Hinduism may have to offer Judaism. God realization thus lies at the heart of the Jewish encounter with Hinduism...

Let me try to make the same point in another way. I have clocked hundreds of hours listening to spiritual teachers from the Hindu tradition. God is the focus of all their teachings... I have also clocked thousands of hours with Jewish teachers. They, by contrast, almost never speak of God. They will speak of God's things, but not of God Himself, as though He was beyond their knowledge and personal experience...

The difference in approach may indeed be attributed to a fundamental difference between a religion that thinks in terms of history and its process and a

religion that thinks in terms of metaphysics and personal salvation. The former cannot announce having arrived at the goal outside historical processes. The latter can declare a state of human perfection to be the goal and the consequent end of the need for religious practice.

(Goshen-Gottstein 2016: 69–71)

A somewhat similar claim was made recently by R. Nathan Lopes Cardozo, in his book *Jewish Law as Rebellion*. Writing about how the proper application of *halachah*, Jewish law, has been perverted, he says:

When trying to understand Halacha's failure to inspire many Jews in modern times, we need to recognize that...it has...paradoxically, exiled God.

Halacha has been disconnected from a conscious awareness of God. Today, halachic living ignores Him. When living our "religious" lives we are more concerned about the specifics of Halacha than we are about our existential relationship with God.

(Cardozo 2018: 107)

Support for AGG's position on the "exile of God" is also found in the analysis of contemporary Judaism by Haym Soloveitchik, in his essay *Rupture and Reconstruction*. At its conclusion he writes:

I think it safe to say that the perception of God as a *daily, natural* force is no longer present to a significant degree in any sector of modern Jewry, even the most religious. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that individual Divine Providence, though passionately believed as a theological principle—and I do not for a moment question the depth of that conviction—is no longer experienced as a simple reality. With the shrinkage of God's palpable hand in human affairs has come a marked loss of His immediate presence, with its primal fear and nurturing comfort. With this distancing, the religious world has been irrevocably separated from the spirituality of its fathers, indeed, from the religious mood of intimate anthropomorphism that had cut across all the religious divides of the Old World.

It is this rupture in the traditional religious sensibilities that underlies much of the transformation of contemporary Orthodoxy. Zealous to continue traditional Judaism unimpaired, religious Jews seek to ground their new emerging spirituality less on a now unattainable intimacy with Him, than on an intimacy with His Will, avidly eliciting Its intricate demands and saturating their daily lives with Its exactions. Having lost the touch of His presence, they seek now solace in the pressure of His yoke.

(Soloveitchik 1994, 130)

Let us agree that we can call this a crisis, but it seems to me that it is broader than merely the role of God in contemporary Judaism. I would argue that it has to do with the prevalence of left-brain thinking over right-brain thinking in Jewish religion. The late R. Jonathan Sacks, emeritus British chief rabbi, argued in a recent work, *The Great Partnership: God Science and the Search for Meaning* (Sacks 2011), that science is dominated by left-brain thinking, theory-laden, analytical, logical and

detailed, while religion is dominated by right-brain thinking, intuitive, creative and inspired by the search for meaning.

Whether or not the left-brain/right-brain contrast really represents such a simple physiological difference, a claim that has been queried, is irrelevant for our purposes. What is relevant is the contrast between two different approaches to the world represented by the image of the two sides of the brain, however it is actually generated. One of the weaknesses of Sacks' book is that religion itself has left- and right-brain elements.

Left- and Right-Brain Conflicts

I would like to argue that throughout its history, conflicting binary elements and revolutionary movements within Judaism can all be analyzed in terms of the contrast between the two sides of the brain; or they have at least all been partly inspired by a right-brain perspective battling against a more dominant, and a more authoritarian, left-brain establishment. One can see elements of a right-brain outlook in the clash between prophetic and priestly religion in Biblical times, in the secession of Christianity, in esoteric groups eventually forming the Kabbalah, in the Shabbatean heterodoxy, in the Chasidic rebellion, and in the innovations of Reform. Of course, with time these right-brain movements within Judaism themselves developed strong elements of left-brain attitudes as they survived to become mini-establishments of their own and lost their charisma.

There are certainly left-brain components within Hinduism, found in Vedic orthodoxy, Purva Mimamsa, the *Dharma Shashtras*, etc., but unlike Judaism the right-brain, meaning-seeking, movements are able to coexist side by side with these because of a weak sense of Hindu orthodoxy. Even Buddhism, which emerged from Hindu background to become a totally distinct religion, is still represented within Hinduism by the belief that Gautama Buddha was one of the *avatars* of Vishnu. One cannot imagine Orthodox Judaism retaining Jesus as a traditional Jewish figure, albeit with some radical views, acknowledging that his followers mistakenly regarded him as divine. Though a case can be made for the essential Jewishness of Jesus,²⁵ and sectarian groups, like Jews for Jesus and Messianic Jews, do regard him in this way, Jewish Orthodoxy has no room for the right-brain views of Jesus as he is depicted in the Synoptic Gospels.

The crisis that AGG identifies within Judaism is of a religion dominated by a left-brain outlook, which is both its strength and its weakness. Its strength because by casting Jewish religion into a tight, detailed structure focused primarily on law and ritual (*halachah*), traditional Judaism was able to survive many hundreds of years of exile. Jews in the Diaspora were faced by an environment alien to Jewish core values. The faiths that dominated that Diaspora, Christianity and Islam, were antagonistic to Jewish belief and practice and often destructive of the continuity of Jews as

²⁵ As has been done by Geza Vermes in works like *Jesus the Jew* (Vermes 1973) and *Jesus and the World of Judaism* (Vermes 1981).

a separate ethnic-cum-religious minority group. Those Jews, who survived as Jews, did so because they were united by an often inward-looking, tightly knit *halachic* framework.

Hinduism faced many challenges but never that of minority status in exile, nor perhaps martyrdom. It had to deal with colonization and with powerful inroads made by Islamic and Christian missionizing, but in most parts of India it was always the majority religion. Its right-brain elements therefore did not undermine the left-brain ones which gave it identity, albeit a much looser identity than was preserved by Judaism for Jews.

Despite the end of Judaism as a purely Diaspora religion in the mid-twentieth century, with the founding of the State of Israel, the *halachic* structures which were developed over millennia in the Diaspora have continued to dominate in Israel, having a life of their own. That is why God currently appears in Judaism dressed in mainly left-brain clothing, a form of clothing which perhaps may smother a spiritual seeker. For many Jews, the whole structure of Jewish law and regulations, the *halachah*, which is based ultimately on divine dictate, is not too overbearing. It points beyond itself, if occasionally rather weakly, to God. For others, however, spirituality seems to be lost in the details of a secure, if complex, edifice of prescriptions. The right-brained quest for meaning, inspiration, and intuitive understanding may seem absent or secondary, and the divine spirit may seem lost in an over-fortified body of Jewish traditionalism.

There are currently attempts to reintroduce right-brain elements into the left-brain establishment of Orthodox Judaism. Some of them, like the Jewish Renewal Movement of R. Zalman Schachter-Shalomi (1924–2014), do try to incorporate ideas from non-Jewish faiths, such as meditation from Hinduism. Schachter became involved with the spiritual practices of many faiths and has tried to incorporate them into traditional Judaism in a New Age mode. Jewish Renewal, however, has moved away from some of the *halachic* boundaries set by Orthodoxy and may therefore be of limited influence.

More central has been the impact of R. Shlomo Carlebach (1925–1994) on Jewish spirituality, but this is largely through a musical renewal rather than a rethinking of the theology or of ideas directly about God.²⁶ The eschatological emphasis of Lubavitch may also be regarded as a right-brain revolution within Orthodoxy and has had some success in attracting Jewish seekers of spirituality in India to its ranks. The cult that has grown up around the figure of the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, R. Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994), also resembles attitudes towards a *guru* in the Hindu tradition, and some of his more extreme followers tend to regard him not merely as a Messianic figure but as an actual *avatar*. Criticism of Lubavitch Messianism has come from within Orthodox circles as perhaps verging on the heretical.

AGG's attempt at a renewal of Orthodox Judaism through the inspiration provided by contact with Hindu sages is far more nuanced than any of the above. Perhaps because of this, it may be only effective on the consciousness of intellectuals or

²⁶ It is interesting that R. Shlomo became a kind of musical spiritual *guru*, and recent revelations about his sexual antics have led to problems of acceptance of his music by the religious establishment.

of seekers of a more divinely focused faith. Yet AGG is hopeful it will play a more extended role. He writes:

In many ways, spirituality is the most universal dimension of religion and one that translates most readily across traditions. Thus, if Jewish seekers find something lacking in their tradition and then discover it in a Hindu context, it is only a step away to rediscover that same quality within Judaism, at least if these seekers are thus motivated. The recognition that spirituality plays an important role in the present encounter is in many ways good news. Not only is Hinduism less threatening; it can actually be considered as having a positive message or contribution to make to the lives of Jews who have explored Hinduism, maybe even to the public life of Judaism itself.

(Goshen-Gottstein 2016: 208)

A Narrative for Jewish Seekers

AGG is troubled by accounts of Jewish seekers who become enamored with Indian religion, rather than finding spiritual satisfaction with aspects of their own faith. So he tries to map out in detail the different ways in which the two faiths can interact from the Jewish side.

One can add to his analysis of what is happening to young Jews in their encounter with Hindu spirituality through the use of a Chasidic parable, found in the writings of two Chasidic Masters, R. Nachman of Breslov (1772–1811) and R. Simchah Bunim of Przysucha (1765–1827). In this parable, a Jewish tailor living in a small village (*shtetl*) in Eastern Europe has a recurring dream that in the big city of Prague there is a treasure buried in the center of the town under a bridge. Unable to shake off this dream, he eventually sells most of his worldly possessions and journeys to the city of his dreams, finds the bridge, and starts digging for the treasure. He is, of course, arrested and brought before the chief of police, to whom he tells his story of searching for treasure.

The chief of police calls him a foolish Jew and tells him that he, the chief of police of Prague, himself has dreams that in a certain little village there is a treasure buried under the stove of a poor Jewish tailor. He remarks sarcastically that he would not think for one moment of following his dreams and of journeying to dig in such a place. He then tells the tailor to be off and go back home. So, the tailor returns home and searches under his stove where, sure enough, he finds a treasure.

Who is the chief of police in the parable? For R. Nachman he is the Chasidic Master to whom the *chasid* comes to find his real self, while for R. Simchah Bunim, who received a Western education when young, the chief of police is the world outside Judaism that enables the Jew to discover his own Jewish identity. In our case this chief of police may well be a Hindu *guru*. Obviously some Jewish “tailors” of our parable return home to find the sought-after spiritual treasure in their own habitat inspired by their encounter with Hinduism. Some stay in the city, attracted by the brighter spiritual lights of Hinduism, and never return to their Jewish *shtetl*. Some come back having found nothing, and some never set off to follow their dreams but

may, if they are lucky, gain insight by reading Alon Goshen-Gottstein's *The Jewish Encounter with Hinduism*.

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